

Hello My Love

The first time he laid eyes on her Jack Paulson was jolted alert, as if someone had shaken him awake from a deep sleep and his eyes had suddenly re-adjusted to the light of day. Beth Fuller had just arrived at the party with Alice Nelson, who was the girlfriend of Jack's buddy, Bill Marshall. Beth had walked slowly into the living room alongside Alice. It was the summer of 1965 and the party was at the apartment of Tom and Marcia Rollins, who had married in June right after graduating from Oberlin College.

Now fully focused on Beth, Jack's heart seemed to skip a beat as he began to study her, as he casually sipped from the bottle of Budweiser beer in his left hand. He sensed, more than being clearly aware, that he was somehow attracted to this young woman, as if some magnetic force was emanating from her and drawing his attention – a mental picture of a moth being attracted to a light bulb raced across his mind's eye. Instantly he decided he didn't like that image and his mind played back a scene from that old movie, From Here to Eternity, where Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr rolled around in the surf in a heated embrace. Unconsciously, Jack smiled inwardly at the sensual thought of he and this newly arrived female taking the place of those two lovers in that movie. "Ha!" He thought to himself, "Jumping the gun a little, aren't you?"

Jack had to shake his head as if he were clearing away the cobwebs of that romantic daydream. What was this strange attraction he was feeling? Never before had he experienced this sense of instant attraction. Studying her more closely with a curious eye, looking for a clue, he wondered why he was feeling this way – she was attractive alright, but it wasn't as if she was all *that* physically attractive. He had certainly dated girls that were better "lookers".

With difficulty Jack tore his attention away from Beth to see if any of the other guys were paying attention to Beth. As he scanned the room, he looked over the eight other men in the room. Most were single guys, some with dates, some stag like Jack, and none seemed to take more than a casual interest in Beth, although they certainly saw her arrive. After all Beth arrived with Alice, who was one of the most popular gals among this group of college students and recent grads. Bill Marshall had already greeted Alice with a hug and a quick kiss and after apparently being introduced to Beth only had eyes for Alice. Several couples, including the Rollins, were newly married and assembled in one area of the room within earshot of Jack. The married group was carrying on conversations, as often happens with the men talking to each other and the women likewise. Their exchange covered topics ranging from married life, searching for or furnishing a home or apartment, music, sports, jobs, movies – just about everything that people tended to gloss over at parties, while avoiding anything of deep philosophical, psychological, political or religious content so as not to come across as offensive or excessively opinionated to others.

Just as Jack was about to conclude his scan of the guys, he noticed one of the married men, host Tom Rollins, was furtively eyeing Beth with what appeared to be a look of interest. Rollins was stealing glances while nodding to the sports banter of two of the other married guys, who were having a friendly dispute over which football team was the greatest of all time. It was then that Jack decided that there really must be something

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special about this Beth Fuller – if a married guy like Rollins showed an interest in her then that gave Jack the assurance that in some way he was justified in his own sense of attraction. He wasn't just being delusional. Before marrying Marcia, Tom Rollins was a real cock hound in high school and college. Everyone thought that Marcia was a rare beauty, having been Homecoming Queen at Oberlin College.

Yet Jack still could not fathom why he felt this magnetic pull toward this young woman. He was puzzling over this when Bill and Alice brought Beth over to introduce her to him.

“Jack, there you are, old friend.” Bill announced with a smile as he and Jack enthusiastically pumped hands. In 1965, the majority of guys didn't hug as freely as they do today. “We'd like you to meet a gal who works with Alice at Benson & Sloane. Beth, this here is my oldest buddy, Jack Paulson.”

“Beth Fuller is in the word processing pool with me and she and I just hit it off since Beth started two weeks ago. Beth went to the Gregg Computer Academy. And I told Beth that you just graduated from the University of Delaware with Bill, and you were co-captains of the football team in high school”, added Alice breathlessly with that big, warm, ingratiating smile she always seemed to flash to everyone.

“Hello, Jack. Alice has told me a lot about you. She assures me that you are a really nice guy and it's obvious that you and Bill are really good friends - it is a pleasure to meet you,” Beth said with a smile as she reached out her hand to Jack in greeting, while searching his eyes with a hint of a question.

“Uh, yes, ah, and it is a pleasure to meet you, Beth”, Jack responded clumsily, as he reached to shake her hand being careful not to squeeze too hard. He was suddenly aware of heat emanating up from his neck to his face as he turned flush with some embarrassment at recalling his thoughts about making love to her on the beach.

Seeing the red face that suddenly overtook Jack, Alice adeptly announced to Beth, “Let's go find the powder room, Beth”.

As the women walked away down the hall leading from the living room toward the bathroom, Bill clapped Jack on the back and asked a bit gleefully, “So what do you think, big guy? About Beth I mean. She's a pretty gal and has a nice shape and 'tho I only met her a couple of times, she seems pretty smart – intelligent I'd say.”

Not wanting to let on that he was truly taken with this Beth Jack shrugged his shoulders and responded, “Well, she's OK I guess.”

“You're not fooling me, old pal! I saw the look on your face when you were introduced”, Bill stated in a low voice gently chiding his long time friend.” And I heard you stammer in reply to her opening attempt to start a conversation – something I never saw you do before with a gal,” Bill continued in that confidential tone.

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Jack gave Bill a little embarrassed smile and with a tilt of his head toward his right shoulder and back, he answered in a like confidential voice, “OK, OK! I noticed her when she first came into the room and there was something about her that kind of clicked with me.”

“What do you mean ‘clicked with you’? Does that mean what I think it means - that you’re attracted to her?” Bill asked, still keeping the dialogue at a level that no one within three feet could hear, what with all the other noise of banter and laughter around the room. “She might be good in bed, if you get my drift – a good lay”, Bill quietly sniggered.

Jack thought for a second before answering. “I’m not sure what it is about her – how can I be? I’ve only just met her. I don’t know. It’s just...maybe the way she carries herself – like she has some poise, or self-confidence or something. Maybe it’s something else...I just don’t know. But I do know that I want to get to know her and then I’ll find out one way or another...I mean I’ll know for sure if the initial attraction is for real, or just a – a whatever.”

Bill looked over toward the hallway and seeing the girls returning, he whispered to Jack, “Well here’s your chance, buddy. They’re coming back. Let’s see the old Jack’s babe magic put to the test on Beth.” Then he laughed.

“What are you laughing at Bill?” asked Alice as the two gals reached the guys. “Did Jack just tell a joke?” Then looking at Jack she added, “Now, Jack if it is a clean joke, then let Beth and me in on it.”

Bill came to the rescue by responding, “Oh, it was nothing. Jack and I were just talking about something that happened on our trip home from college.”

“So what’s to laugh about with that?” asked Beth, while Alice nodded.

Jack could see that Bill’s hesitation meant that he was trying to come up with a likely story, so Jack returned the favor, “We had to make a pit stop on the New Jersey Turnpike. After we went to the men’s room I went back to the car while Bill went to get a coke and he forgot where the car was parked. After what seemed like a half hour, Bill finally showed up looking like a lost puppy.”

Alice looked at Bill with a smile of compassion, gently touched his forearm and said, “That’s my Bill!” Then she took Bill’s hand, looked up at him with a coy look and a wink and adroitly led him away claiming, “I’m thirsty, Bill, let’s get us a drink.” They ambled off to the makeshift bar and left Beth and Jack to get better acquainted.

“So, Jack, what did you get your degree in?” asked Beth, looking up at Jack with a look in her eyes that revealed a genuine interest, and Jack knew instantly that she clearly wasn’t making an idle or pleasing inquiry just for the sake of conversation.

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Looking into those deep, soft brown eyes, Jack felt as if he was being drawn into a warm, cozy, safe place. It was like he was on a gentle downhill slide into a world he had never known before – a land of enchanted forests, sunset mountains and the whisper of a gurgling brook off in the distance. In his mind he had a fleeting image of standing with his arm around Beth, on the edge of that forest with both of them enjoying the scene as the sun set over the rim of the mountains. He knew then that this creature had mesmerized him – that she held for him a haven that made him feel weak in the knees and all warm and peaceful inside.

Normally he would have answered such an inquiry from any other gal with an air of feigned authority, deliberately attempting to make an impression that he was among the elite males in this locality of planet earth. But to Beth he could do nothing less than to respond in all sincerity and with a modesty that surprised him, “My degree is in electrical engineering, Beth. And I just learned that I have been fortunate to land a job with Kiernan Engineering, here in Spring Lake.”

“I’m not familiar with what Kiernan does”, Beth replied. “What sort of work will you be doing there, residential, commercial, or industrial?”

Jack smiled broadly for the first time, as he was pleasantly impressed that Beth knew there was a difference in targeted business services by electrical engineering firms. Then he became a bit more animated and self-assured. “Kiernan provides engineering services for commercial and industrial customers; nothing in the residential arena”, Jack answered. He continued, “I hope to be working on designing electrical systems for the industrial market...well, I mean I hope to do that eventually. They told me that initially I’d be working on revising existing electrical system blueprints - kind of like an apprentice, but just until I can get acclimated to their processes.”

Beth smiled back at Jack and nodded her understanding. Then she said, “Gosh, Jack that sounds interesting and I can tell you seem to be enthused about getting started. When *do* you start?”

Now more seriously, with a hint of nervous anticipation in his voice, Jack replied, “Two weeks from this coming Monday. The upside is that I will be starting my career after four years of cracking the books; and even better getting paid for it.”

“That *is* good”, Beth said. “So, what is the downside, or isn’t there any?”

That brought a smile by Jack and he relaxed somewhat, “Well, I suppose the only downside is that it will be a short summer for me. You know, living here in Spring Lake I just love to hang out on the beach. We have one of the world’s best beaches...at least that is what I read somewhere. Ah, but you live here, so I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know, I guess.”

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“Actually, Jack, I haven’t been to the beach yet, although I imagine it is everything you and others have told me”, Beth responded. Then seeing Jack’s brow wrinkled in a questioning look she added, “You see, my family moved here just before I finished at Gregg in Pittsburgh. My dad picked me up at the Academy three weeks ago. I interviewed with Benson & Sloane two days after arriving here and started work the next Monday. So, I haven’t had the opportunity to get to the beach, and to tell the truth I first need to shop for a new bathing suit. Alice said she would go with me tomorrow. Hopefully I can find something I like in my size.”

It hadn’t dawned on Jack that Beth was new to New Jersey, let alone Spring Lake – he had been too wrapped up in his own reaction to this fair creature to consider it. He had not even thought to ask her about where Gregg Computer Academy was located. He just assumed it was somewhere along the Jersey Shore. Ah, but not quite true he reprimanded himself – it just never entered his mind, so engrossed was he with Beth.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Beth, I shouldn’t have assumed you were a Jersey girl”, Jack said seeking her forgiveness for his lack of curiosity.

“That’s OK, Jack you couldn’t have known”, Beth responded, gently letting him off the hook.

Jack hesitated a few seconds pondering how to broach the next thing he wanted to say. Finally, fearing that he might lose his nerve or that Beth might open a different line of discourse, he nearly blurted out, “Beth, how about, uh, would you like to go to the beach with me sometime? I mean I have a season pass and I could borrow one of my parent’s passes.”

Beth pursed her lips and looked at Jack as if pondering her answer. Jack shifted his weight uncomfortably from one leg to the other – it was only a split-second, but to Jack it seemed like an eternity.

“Yes, Jack, I think I’d like that. It will make shopping for that bathing suit tomorrow all the more...uh, interesting,” Beth answered. She had wanted to say something like “urgent”, not “interesting”, but thought that would give away too much of how she was feeling toward Jack. Yet she chided herself for coming across too indifferently – what the heck would Jack think! She wondered why she couldn’t be more flirtatious like other girls.

With a sense of relief that Beth had said yes, Jack decided to jump in with both feet. “Um, if you do find a bathing suit you like, would Sunday be too soon?” Then to explain away his seeming urgency, he quickly added, “It’s supposed to be great beach weather Sunday.”

Beth smiled, liking this Jack more and more and sensing – no knowing suddenly – that he liked her too. “I think Sunday is probably good, but after church and oh, yeah, assuming I have that new bathing suit to wear.” And she laughed sweetly.

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Jack was elated, but tried not to show it – he wanted Beth to think he was cool, a big man on campus, or BMOC as the college crowd was wont to say. Yet he felt like jumping up and clicking his heels together like he had seen someone do in one of those dance movies from the forties – Fred Astaire? Gene Kelly? He couldn't remember. Then Jack snapped to attention, as he realized that he had not gotten Beth's address and phone number. "Beth, uh, I'll need your phone number to call you tomorrow night to firm up our plans for Sunday; and I'll need your address so I can pick you up Sunday."

"Oh, yes, that would be useful, wouldn't it", Beth answered rhetorically, smiling again. "Do you have something to write on?"

Jack smiled back at her and replied, "What sort of engineer would I be if I didn't carry a pen or mechanical pencil?" Then producing the mechanical pencil from his shirt pocket he looked at Beth and said, "Well, I have half of what we need. Now we just need something to write on."

"Well, I think I can help there", Beth said, gently laughing; "Let me search in my purse for something." Beth clicked open the small evening purse she was carrying and within a second she handed Jack a small piece of paper folded in half. Jack cautiously wrote down Beth's phone number and address, then slipped the piece of paper in his wallet and put the pencil back in his shirt pocket, careful to first retract the lead.

Later that night, alone in his room, Jack took out the piece of paper and studied the phone number and address as if to burn it into his memory. He was aware of the aroma of Beth's perfume and he held the paper to his nose and inhaled as if he were breathing in the very essence of Beth and visualizing her naked body in his embrace. Then out of curiosity he unfolded the paper. "Wow", he said as he looked into the unfolded paper. Evidently, Beth had initially used the paper to blot the lipstick on her lips and then folded it over. Jack was both amused and feeling a bit like he had found a buried treasure.

Thirty-four years later, in the summer of 1999, Jack looked across the kitchen table at Beth as she was feeding their newest grandchild. They were babysitting for their daughter Jennifer, the youngest of their three children. Jennifer and son-in-law Mickey were enjoying a welcomed weekend away up in the Wisconsin Dells.

Years ago a job change had led Jack and Beth to relocate to Woodstock, IL in the northwest suburbs of Chicagoland. Yet every summer they vacationed for two weeks back in Spring Lake, generally at the Breakers Hotel just off the beach. Spring Lake and the ocean would always be in their blood Jack nodded as he reflected on that certainty. It was almost that time again, but this year it would be several weeks earlier in the summer than usual - for a special reason. Next week they would fly from O'Hare to Newark International, rent a car and drive to Spring Lake. Bill and Alice had long split up,

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remarried and no longer lived in Spring Lake, but Jack and Beth had made new friends that welcome them each summer.

The baby boy, Paul, let out an ear piercing yell of delight as Beth directed the spoon of baby food like an airplane coming in for a landing toward Paul's mouth. That brought Jack's attention back to watching Beth, looking at her with the love and fondness that came from thirty-four years of a happy marriage. Oh, sure, there had been some rough patches – a few times when each of them wondered if they would make it this far. There were times when the children were young, Beth had sacrificed her working career, and Jack was struggling to make enough money, when they found it difficult to keep the fire of romance alive. Then there was the day when they both awakened to the empty nest syndrome. It took a good bit of talking, patience and downright effort to rediscover the mutual closeness, affection and love that had cemented their marriage until then. But they soon came to appreciate one another more than ever and the love between them deepened and matured with every passing year. Jack smiled inwardly with pleasure at the thought that their sex lives were still quite satisfactory.

As Beth finished feeding little Paul, she looked over at Jack, laughed and said, "What are you smiling at, Jack? You look like the cat that got the canary."

"Just thinking about our vacation trip to Spring Lake, next week, honey", Jack answered. "You know I always look forward to our time together on the beach."

Beth wiped Paul's face clean and said, "Yes, and so do I my love. It will be our anniversary while we are there – hard to believe we could still be so much in love after all these years."

Jack raised his coffee cup in salute to Beth's statement and added, "Right. But it occurred to me that in addition to our wedding anniversary, the first day we arrive in Spring Lake this year will also mark, nearly to the day, that first date we had on the beach thirty-five years ago."

Beth smiled at Jack and her dark brown eyes misted up. "Oh, Jack, I do remember that first date. You were such a gentleman and I fell in love with you on the beach before that day ended. I knew it for sure when you drove me home and gently squeezed my hand, then kissed me before we got out of your car and you walked me to the door."

By now the mist in Beth's eyes had become pools of tears about ready to trickle down her cheeks. Jack got out of his chair and walked over to Beth. He pulled out a hanky from his back pocket and began to dab at her eyes. Beth took the hanky from him, laughed to lighten the mood as she gently pressed the hanky to absorb the tears. They both understood that they were tears of happiness.

Jack gently rested his hand on Beth's shoulder and laughingly said, "I was so nervous and afraid that I would say the wrong thing or do something to embarrass myself,

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like accidentally let out a fart or something. I was so enthralled by you that I probably came across as a bore with not much to say.”

“No, I knew you were the strong, silent type”, Beth offered with that air of certainty that Jack had always liked because it made him feel totally reassured. At times it had made him feel like more of a man than he felt he had a right to feel and gave him the confidence that he needed at just the right time – like the time in their early marriage when Beth was pregnant with their first child, Kevin. Jack had to go into his boss at Kiernan Engineering and ask for a raise. It was Beth who bucked him up by reminding him that he had helped the company retain an important client by designing a solution to the customer’s electric system that saved them thousands of dollars in yearly electric costs. He got the raise and thereafter never doubted Beth when she said anything with that sense of certainty.

Now looking down at the wife he had been married to all these years – the woman that had borne their children and made him a father and a grandfather – he too felt a tear form in each eye. He knew as never before that this was his one and only love and that he had been blessed by God from that first date thirty-five years ago.

He bent down and kissed Beth on the lips and said softly, “Hello, my love”, the very words he said to her at the altar on their wedding day.