

The Man Who Has No Roots

Mickey Colichio had once thought he had life by the tail, until everything about the house of cards that he had convinced himself was the perfect underpinning, upon which he had come to believe would always be there, gradually evaporated. Everything about which he had congratulated himself as his deserved rewards for his hard work and dedication had been eradicated through life's unexpected setbacks. Now at the age of 60, with the lure of retirement tugging at his innermost thoughts, he finds himself seemingly adrift with little, if any, attachment to any person or place – in effect rootless. Can he ever find what he has been missing, a person, and a place where he can lay down roots?

The alarm was buzzing. Mickey Colichio drowsily rolled over to hit the snooze bar. Suddenly a thought made him wake up from his hazy slumber. “Where am I?” He groggily wondered. He was trying to get his bearings, as he had been on the road for the past ten months, bouncing back and forth between consulting jobs for two central Illinois companies in cities seventy-five miles apart. He was juggling two contracts working under his S-Corp, Project Management Methodology Company, Inc. (PMMC, Inc.). On top of that he had been making semimonthly 4-day weekend flights to his Panther Valley home in Allamuchy Township, NJ to check its status and pick up his on-hold mail. So it was logical that he would be confused as to which bed and bedroom he was in upon being aroused from a night's sleep from an intruding wake-up alarm.

Mickey stretched and then rolled out of bed. When his eyes were able to focus, minus his eye glasses, he quickly recognized that he was in his home bedroom and that it was Sunday morning. He opened his daily devotional book and read the prayers and lessons, and then offered up his ritual prayers for God, country, former friends, and what little family he still had, although with a certain sense of loss. He had to shower, shave, do the bathroom routine, grab a quick breakfast and get on the road. He had packed his travel duffle bag and laptop bag the night before; he just needed to add his shaving kit and 1-week medicine tray (additional prescriptions and supplements were packed in his travel bag).

After eating a bowl of raisin bran and filling his travel mug with hot coffee, Mickey locked the house, jumped into the rental car, jumped onto I-80 and headed to Newark International Airport. An hour later he parked the car in the off-airport Hertz car rental return and jumped on the shuttle bus to his departure terminal. At Terminal A he quickly passed through security, hustled to his departure gate and checked in at the counter. He already had his A32 Early boarding assigned seat.

Within what seemed a short time, the call for boarding of A Ticketed passengers was announced and so Mickey lined up with the handful of other passengers. The line made its way past the ticket taker, down the gangplank and Mickey located his seat. He put his carry on in the overhead and his laptop under the seat in front of him – no need for a coat as it was a hot July day.

Once he was settled into the outside row seat and his fellow passenger, a somewhat attractive woman he took to be in her fifties, was buckled into the window seat, Mickey took out his new Galaxy cell phone. They shared a smile and introduced one another by first name. He then checked his calendar to refresh his mind on this week's scheduled meetings with the managers and staff of the two companies.

Despite an almost full flight, no one passed by who requested to take the middle seat. When the plane doors were closed and secured, Mickey sighed with a bit of relief at not to be crowded in and trying to take turns at who gets to take ownership of the arm rest between the seats. He looked over at the woman in the window seat and was pleased to see the easy smile she pointed his way, as if she too

felt the relief he did about the ability to spread out a bit more. Or, it occurred to him, was she smiling in recognition of his body language indicating an obvious sense of relief.

After the mandatory safety announcements by the flight attendant and the plane had lifted up into the sky, he reached down to his laptop bag and pulled out his laptop. Once the laptop had powered up and loaded all of his software applications, Mickey started to make notes about the week's scheduled meetings, first with WDB, Inc., a company, who sold their signature resource management software application product to other companies. He spent a few minutes on a meeting involving continuing the Agile project management methodology introduction, for which that company's CIO had hired Mickey to introduce, train his IT staff, and oversee the transition and implementation.

Mickey's challenge for WBD included how to deal with a supervisor who was being very negative toward the changeover to the new methodology and the necessary change in business processes. He decided he would have a one-on-one discussion with the supervisor to re-explain why it was important for the supervisor to be on-board and ask for the supervisor's support in achieving his CIO's objectives. "If that doesn't work, I will be obliged to escalate the matter to the CIO", he silently said to himself.

For the second company, Mickey refreshed his mind on his meeting schedule over the next two weeks, before his next flight back home to New Jersey. "Should be nothing to get anxious about with Illinois Contractor's Insurance Co.", he assured himself, but always aware that surprises can never be ruled out.

With that decision made, Mickey sat back, closed his eyes, and attempted to empty his mind from work issues. As he started to relax and begin to slide into a half sleep, a very different thought started to gradually surface from his sub-conscious. At first it seemed unclear, like seeing the sun gradually emerge from behind a cloud.

Then the thought started to materialize in the form of a silent question directed at him from what he later concluded was his sub-conscious mind. At first the question seemed rather nebulous. "Where are you going?" it asked him. The logical side of his brain wanted to counter silently as well with, "why am I asking myself that (more a demand than question) – that is rather nonsensical; of course I am on my way to Midway and from there to my hotel in central Illinois".

That other voice quickly responded with another silent question, this one more substantive, "No, where is your *LIFE* taking you?"

"Now why the hell does that pop into my thought?" He questioned with a bit of annoyance. He was now really annoyed and torn between dismissing those thoughts to try and get some needed rest vs. allowing himself to consider that last question, not so much from a logical perspective, but from more of a curious exploratory emotional perspective.

So he shook his head as a way of shoving the question back into its sub-conscious, locked away safe. His eyes still closed, he forced himself to again focus on the tasks ahead of him at the two contract jobs. "That's what is paying for my bills and for the lifestyle I enjoy", he silently smiled in an attempt to convince himself that was all that mattered.

He was in a half sleep when the announcement came over the intercom that the plane was making its final descent into Midway airport. That got his attention and he sat up straight and rubbed the tiredness out of his eyes. He looked over at the passenger next to him and realized that he had not said a word to her since they first sat down and buckled their seatbelts. "What was her name, he quizzed himself; Marie? Marge? Ah yes, Marion", he remembered.

He had learned that it was easier to remember someone's name you just met by first repeating the name out loud during the introduction, and then visually attaching & mentally assigning a

descriptive attribute, such as the song title “Big, Bad, John” to a large fellow with the name John, who appeared to have a strong, muscular frame. So, when they had shared introductions, he pictured her as “Maid Marion” from the Robin Hood story he had once read as a child, and the film he saw later on.

He looked over and smiled. She smiled back at him and politely said, “I didn’t want to disturb you with idle chatter – you seemed so engrossed in something and then I saw you were trying to get some rest”.

He smiled at her again, this time more broadly and replied, “Oh, just thinking about what I have to accomplish when I get back to my two clients”. He purposely used the word ‘clients’ to make it sound more impressive – at least he thought so. It was then that he took a good look at her. She had auburn hair, pulled back and tied in a ponytail, hazel eyes that seemed to sparkle, the more so when she smiled with her full, soft lips that were only ever so slightly tinted with a pale red luster. Probably blotted her lipstick when the snack was served, he thought.

After the plane landed, taxied to the assigned gate, and the pilot’s triggered Bing signaled to the passengers that it was safe to unbuckle and stand up, Mickey quickly got out of the seat and stood in the aisle to get a good position to access the overhead compartment.

He opened the overhead and pulled out his two carry-ons, duffle bag and laptop bag he had put up there after he removed it from under the seat in front of his, when he had finished his work on it. He put them on his seat. Then as if it were an afterthought, he asked the woman in the window seat which bag was hers in the overhead. “It’s the blue one with the gold name tag,” she responded again, with what he now began to think was quite a nice, warm smile.

When it was their aisle’s turn to move toward the plane’s exit door, Mickey smiled and said, “Enjoy your time in Chicago”. He didn’t know why he said it just like that, since they had not discussed each other’s reasons for arriving in Chicago. The woman said, “You, too.”

The next two weeks for Mickey were a little more hectic and intense than he ever imagined. First, there was the issue with the supervisor at WBD. It did not go well, despite what he felt was going the extra mile to convince that supervisor to accept the changes that WBD’s CIO was hanging his career on; i.e. to bring about a dramatic increase in the company’s bottom line, while raising WBD’s position vis-à-vis their prime competition. Regretfully Mickey felt he had no choice but to escalate the situation to the CIO, the result of which was the dismissal of that supervisor. That did not ingratiate Mickey with the rest of the Information Processing staff that he was commissioned to train and oversee their progress.

But it was the surprise at the Illinois Contractor’s Insurance Co. that shook him up more so, and gave him a sense of letdown he had rarely tasted before. In short, he lost the contract! The explanation as to the why seemed somewhat disingenuous. He was called into the President’s office, without so much as an inkling of what was to occur, and told that the company had re-assessed their direction and had decided they no longer needed Mickey’s “valued expertise”. That happened just yesterday and Mickey was still licking his wounds.

Finally, the time came for Mickey to take his semimonthly 4-day weekend trip back home to his townhome in New Jersey. He tried to get a sense of understanding about what he was feeling, as he made the two hour car trip back from Bloomington to Midway, where he can get direct flights to Newark International. He could not seem to make headway on what seemed to be gnawing at his mind and giving him agita. So he turned up the volume on Sirius/XM tuned to the Sixties on Six channel. A

Beatles song was playing and as he sang along, the thing that was troubling him receded to the back of his mind.

After parking the car (he had decided to keep his personal car in Illinois, since he spent more time there, and rented a car for his trips home), he grabbed his duffle and laptop bags and got the parking lot's shuttle to the Southwest Terminal at Midway. After making his way through the AFS checkpoint, he found a seat at the gate assigned for his homebound flight. What caught his attention was the look from a woman seated across from him. That smile! He recognized that the woman looking at him behind that smile was Marion, with whom he had sat two weeks ago on the flight to Midway.

As he acknowledged her, she nodded in return, and that smile that had come to intrigue Mickey, widened almost imperceptibly. Mickey nodded back, and he didn't know what impelled him, but he got up and walked over and stuck out his hand, saying, "Hello, Marion, isn't it?"

"Why, yes, and forgive me, but your name is Mickey, is that right?" Mickey nodded and tried to hold back his nervousness with a forced smile. "Are you on the next flight to Newark?" Marion asked.

Again, Mickey nodded, and (he thought) a bit belatedly said, "Yes, are you?" When Marion nodded 'Yes', again with that smile, he asked, "What boarding sequence do you have?"

Marion took her boarding pass out of her Ann Taylor business suit jacket pocket, turned it over to apparently reconfirm it to herself and said, "A60", the last one in the A class boarding.

Mickey nodded and said, "Hmm! I have A30". Then after some hesitation and feeling a little uncomfortable just standing there, he offered, "Well, would you like to share a seat row together again?"

After a very brief time of consideration (that seemed longer than it really was to Mickey), Marion nodded (this time without that smile) and announced affirmatively, "Yes, that would be nice. Will you hold the row for me? There will be a few people boarding between us."

"Of course", Mickey replied and added, "It's always nice to sit with someone familiar".

"Yes, I agree", Marion responded and added with a slight laugh. "Perhaps we can share a bit about ourselves, that is if you do not need to rest, or need to do work?"

Mickey laughed in return and said, "Not in this direction. I am headed home for a long weekend of R and R." Then he went back to where he had been seated, picked up his bags and plopped down in an open seat next to Marion. They made some small talk about the Chicago weather, about the places to visit in Chicagoland, and about what they liked about flying Southwest and about the TFS security implemented after 9/11.

Time arrived to line up for the flight and they took their bags and went to their respective stations, awaiting the start of boarding, while their plane that had arrived from Kansas City was emptying the last of the arriving passengers. When Mickey got on board, as was his custom, he took the aisle seat, after storing his carry-ons in the overhead. Fortunately it was not a full flight, only nearly so, and when a young couple asked to take the window and middle seats, Mickey told them with a false response of regret that he was holding the seats for family that would be boarding imminently.

Within a few minutes, Marion made her way down the aisle to row 15, where Mickey was sitting and waving to her. He got out of his seat to let her in. Again she sat in the window seat, then changed her mind and moved to the middle seat. At Mickey's look of surprise, she partially turned toward him, tilted her head to the right, gave a confiding smile, and shrugged her shoulders. Then she said, "Well, I thought it would be nice to be able to talk someone familiar and not have to do so across another passenger."

Just then a mid-sized woman passenger stopped in the aisle and requested to take the window seat. Mickey and Marion slid out to let the woman in. Marion looked over at Mickey, winked and nodded, as if to say, "I was right".

In the course of the two hour flight, after takeoff, they discovered some common things about one another. Mickey learned that Marion was a Systems Analyst, working for an insurance company in the Chicago area, but on her way to a second interview with PSA (Payroll Systems Administrators), a payroll company in Roseland, NJ. That was why she had been on the flight from Newark two weeks before. "I am reasonably confident that this will lead to an offer, as long as I have as good an interview as the first one," she told him.

"Assuming you get the offer, what are your plans? Do you have a place to live?" Mickey asked.

Marion lost the smile and responded thoughtfully, "Yes, when I was there last time, I checked out some townhomes that are available to buy, but for this trip I will initially stay in a motel for a day or two, then make a deposit on a townhome before flying back to Chicago to pack and arrange for a mover to move my furniture and belongings. I think I can be moved in within a couple weeks and start work at PSA then."

Mickey was impressed with the confidence Marion displayed and the way she evidently planned out everything and told her so. He then went on to share more about where his career had taken him, as an employee and later as a consultant. He let on about losing the contract at the Illinois Contractor's Insurance Co. Marion said she was sorry and that he must be disappointed about that. "Will that be a financial hindrance for you?" she asked.

Mickey shook his head and responded, "Nah, I am quite comfortable financially. But I want to continue working – I am not ready for a rocking chair just yet. Fact is, work is what I do – just about all I do." Immediately something inside of him cringed at his response.

Marion just looked at him quizzically, but said nothing for several minutes, as she sensed something in his reply, and was hesitant to dig deeper. But curiosity got the upper hand, and she heard herself asking, "Well, what about hobbies? From what little I learned about you today, you have been a very successful consultant and have much experience working in Europe and the Far East, as well as various places in the U.S. From my experience, successful businessmen usually have hobbies that interest them and help them relax."

"Well, I do like to play golf and read", Mickey offered.

"There, see? You are not as one-sided as you led me to believe", Marion playfully jabbed him, laughing warmly. Mickey chuckled as well.

Just then the pilot announced that they were about to get ready for the descent, and the flight attendants began making the rounds to pick up the left over plastic glasses, cups, and papers. Both Mickey and Marion became lost in their own thoughts about the arrival and what they had to do once on the ground. But as an afterthought, Mickey reached into his pocket, took out one of his business cards he always traveled with, and handed it to Marion, saying somewhat sheepishly, "Ah, in the event I can be of assistance once you relocate to Jersey, here, take my business card."

Initially Marion seemed rather surprised, but quickly reacted by saying, "Thank you! That is kind of you". After a few seconds, that seemed a lot longer to Mickey, Marion reached into her purse, extracted a piece of paper and a pen, and then wrote something on the paper. She handed it to Mickey and said, "I don't have a business card as yet for PSA, but here is my cell phone number, where you can reach me". Mickey took the paper, thanking her, and read what she had written: Marion Powers; the cell phone number was a Chicagoland 312 area code. He nodded his head and offered his hand. They shook hands, and then, as if neither wanted to make their time together to seem more than a casual familiarity, they turned their minds back to after flight things to do.

After the plane landed at Terminal A at Newark International Airport, Marion followed Mickey out through the ramp to the Terminal. They stopped to shake hands and say goodbye and good luck to

one another. Then Marion headed to the Baggage pickup, while Mickey went outside the terminal, called the parking lot for the shuttle pickup, and waited. While waiting he revisited some of the things about his conversations with Marion. Now Mickey considered he was no stranger to holding professional conversations with plenty of the women with whom he had worked, but he was aware that he rarely indulged in casual conversations with women he came across in non-business situations. “Hmm!” He thought to himself, “always room to learn. And anyway Marion seemed rather nice and we do have some professional endeavors in common”.

After arriving home and unpacking, as it was now around 9:00 PM, Mickey decided to take a Healthy Choice meal from the fridge and pop it into the microwave. He opened a bottle of Malbec wine, poured himself a glass, turned on the TV and watched a rerun of the Seinfeld Show. When the meal was cooked, he put it on a tray table and continued to watch TV while eating. An hour later he washed up, brushed his teeth and downed his nighttime prescriptions and supplements. Sleep came fittingly that Friday night.

When the alarm buzzed at 6:00 AM Saturday morning, Mickey reached over and turned it off. He was still tired from a restless night’s sleep. He woke up again at 8:11 AM, went to the bathroom and did his business. Then after breakfast of Bacon and Eggs (over easy) and an English muffin, he went to the room he used as an office and spent a couple hours sending out resumes to contract jobs on several internet job sites on which he registered to receive weekly emails.

By the time he finished the job search it was nearly 12:30 PM. He then proceeded to brush his teeth and take the morning meds and supplements. Next he went into the bedroom to get dressed. “Time for a bit of lunch and a few beers”, he said to himself. Living alone for so many years, he had gotten into the habit of speaking out loud to himself. “No one here, but this old fart”, he added.

Leaving the house, he drove to his favorite pub, The Watering Hole. As he entered the pub, he recognized an old friend, one of the few early on friends with whom he was still in touch, although less so the past six months that he had taken the contracts in Illinois. He walked up to the bar to where his friend was sitting, having a beer and talking with their favorite barmaid, Megan. Mickey clapped his friend on the back and said, “Hey, ‘Ham’, glad to see you – it’s been a couple of weeks”. ‘Ham’ was the nickname for Russ Hamilton.

Ham turned around, smiled, and said, “‘Mick’, glad you got home OK from Chicago. Want a beer?” Mickey nodded and said “Sure”. “Give Mick a Miller Lite”, Ham asked Megan, who was already opening a bottle for him. Then Mick ordered a Hot Dog with mustard and relish, along with a side of onion rings, sat down next to Ham and they toasted each other by clicking the bottles together.

After about a half hour of having a few more beers, some small talk and Mickey eating his lunch (Ham had just been finishing his roast beef sandwich when Mickey came in), Ham said to Mickey, “So Mick, what’s happening with those jobs out in Illinois?”

Mickey summarized for Ham the results of his last two weeks, including his disappointment over losing the one contract. As a welcome home gesture, Megan poured two Yeager Bombs for the two friends.

As the beer and the shots started to take effect, Mickey suddenly felt the need to unload to Ham what had been burdening him, by stating, “You know Ham, while on the plane ride back from Chicago, it occurred to me like a new revelation, that outside of my work I don’t have any purpose in life – all I have is whatever sense of accomplishment I get from work. In a sense I don’t have any roots – no place

that makes me really want to come “home” and more importantly no woman there waiting for me, comforting me, loving me and wanting me to love and comfort her.”

“At my age companionship is supposed to be the next phase in the lives of two people who have shared years of love with one another, and grown closer to one another. I believe God intended for a man and a woman to meet, discover mutual interests, fall in love through a physical, sexual attraction, become lovers, and then over the years their love grows into a deeper, more mature partnership. Then in their senior years, after having shared so much and become so familiar with one another, a kind of warm, cuddly, mutually reliant, more spiritual bond forms between them. It’s often referred to as companionship, but I believe God has intended this progression to plant and grow into a man and a woman the feeling of being rooted. Like that bible verse about God intending them to become as one. This is so that a man has a need for a home, a place where he longs to be, with a partner he longs to share his life and essence with.”

Then, to emphasize the point he was making, he looked over at Ham and said, “Ham I think that you and Penny are a great example of what I am trying to say. I envy you! You have a wonderful wife in Penny, and so you have the kind of roots I feel I am lacking.”

“Damn!” Ham looked over at Mickey and continued, “I guess I never thought of it that way. But I guess you’re right.” Then after mentally digesting all that Mickey had been postulating, Ham, challenged him, “But how do you account for homosexuality? How does what you say apply to them?”

“Well,” after Mickey considered the question Ham had posed, he answered, “I don’t pretend to know what causes that, but it seems feasible to me that two men can have that feeling of being rooted together, and two women as well. As for me, I can only think and believe that God intended *me* to be rooted with a woman.”

Then Ham looked over at Mickey, with a quizzical look and said, “Damn it Mick, you had a lovely wife for 20 years, until Nancy unfortunately died suddenly from uterine cancer. And you have two beautiful children, who you ought to go see while you are home.”

Mickey practically slammed his beer bottle down on the bar and responded rather angrily, “They have never forgiven me for when Nancy died, because I was on a business trip to Hong Kong and could not get home until the funeral. The last time I took Sarah and Timmy out for dinner to introduce them to Julie, they barely said a word to me and were even colder to Julie!”

“Julie was that woman you had a romance with for a few short years after Nancy died”, Ham recalled. Mickey nodded and took another sip of his Miller Lite. The alcohol was beginning to affect him.

While they had been conversing, drinking and intermittently sharing small talk with Megan, music had been being piped over the Pub’s speakers from Pandora. Just then the Neil Diamond song came on, “Solitary Man”...

“...Then Sue came along
Loved me strong
That's what I thought
Me and Sue
But that died too

Don't know that I will
But until I can find me
The girl who'll stay

And won't play games behind me
I'll be what I am
A solitary man
Solitary man..."

As the song continued to bore into Mickey's alcohol-absorbed conscious thoughts and emotions, he declared solemnly, yet emphatically, to Ham and Megan, who had just put a fresh beer in front of him, "That is my theme song! A Solitary Man!"

Awaking the next day to that disturbing alarm, Mickey knew instantly that he was in his Panther Valley townhome, because he would not be having a hangover out in Illinois. He remembered that Ham had followed him to see that he got home OK, and that he needed to get his ass in gear to drive to the airport in Newark. After taking a couple of Tylenols along with his morning meds and supplements, he had a quick bowl of Raisin Bran and OJ. After dressing, he got into his car and drove to EWR, where he returned the rental car, and caught the shuttle. Then in the terminal awaiting his mid-afternoon flight to Chicago Midway, he didn't understand why, but he suddenly thought about Marion. Before he could lose the thoughts of Marion, he reached into his carry on laptop bag and located the piece of paper with her phone number. After procrastinating a few minutes, he dialed the number and was a bit unnerved when Marion answered.

"Umm, Hi Marion, this is Mickey, your flight companion the other day." After some small talk, and finding out that she had received the job offer, he finally got the courage to ask her for a date, after she returned to Chicago on Tuesday. He tried to hide the sigh of relief he let out when Marion responded that she would be delighted. He realized it would mean a two hour drive to Marion's home next Friday evening after work, for their dinner date. Marion lived in a condo on the west side of Joliet, a few minutes east of I-55.

The first date went pretty much as expected, with both of them somewhat tentative and reluctant to be too open with one another about their back history, while still trying to find a comfortable way of exploring each other's likes, dislikes, common interests, and while probing politely and sensitively into each one's personal history. Mickey wore tan slacks, a white golf shirt and a pale green sport jacket. Marion was dressed in a powder blue chiffon dress with a string of pearls necklace. Her auburn hair was combed down and came down just over her shoulders. The pearl necklace dipped down toward her cleavage that was just barely visible under the cut of the dress. Up until now on both flights she had always wore her hair tied back.

Marion opened the conversation while they were seated awaiting the main course at Barolo Ristorante, an authentic Italian ristorante in Joliet. Over a glass of Pinot Grigio, she started by saying, "I'm sure you are wondering at least somewhat about who I am and where I've been", looking at Mickey with a look that said she was feeling him out for a positive reaction. When Mickey looked back with an expectation suggesting she continue, Marion felt like, here goes, and proceeded to relate that she had been previously married for 7 years, that she had had one miscarriage and consequently no children. Beyond that she had learned that her husband, whom she named as Phil, had cheated on her and when confronted, he asked for a divorce.

“Oh shit! That must have been a really bad time for you!” Was all Mickey could bring himself to say, but he knew as soon as he said it how hollow that response must seem to her.

Marion did not seem to take offense at Mickey’s reply, and went on to tell him how she had recovered with the help of counseling, and moved on with her life to where she had become a successful Systems Analyst.

Mickey took a sip of his Malbec, knowing it was his turn to open up about his past. As he related his story, he knew instinctively that he sounded like someone just reading from a script. But he charged on, nearly spewing out about his marriage, children, his wife’s death from uterine cancer, and just barely touching on his feeling of guilt about not being there the day his wife died. He did not feel ready to get into his estrangement from his children.

Marion nodded and looked at Mickey with a sense of sympathy, but in the back of her mind knowing that there must be more that he did not reveal.

As the meal progressed, they kept to light conversation, and when it was time to take Marion home, Mickey walked her to her door, gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek. As he prepared to go, he asked, “When do you think you will be taking that job offer and relocating to New Jersey to take that job at PSA?”

“Oh, I already have an offer for this condo and will be leaving in 2-3 weeks. I have a made a down payment on a condo not too long of a commute to Roseland”, Marion said with that smile that had always intrigued Mickey.

Mickey got up the courage to say, “Great! I think that calls another date before you leave. Where would you like to go?”

Marion tilted her head to the left, as she thought about Mickey’s request, and responded after a few seconds, “How about you come here and I cook us a dinner?”

“Gosh, that sounds like a great idea!” Mickey exclaimed enthusiastically

“OK, how about next Saturday evening?” Marion suggested.

“You’re on!” Mickey exclaimed. He hugged Marion again and kissed her briefly on the lips. Then wondered if he was being too extemporaneous.

As he waved good night, Marion felt somewhat elated and pleased that she had made the offer to cook dinner.

The following Saturday arrived and Mickey made the drive up to Marion’s place in Joliet. He had initially put on a sport jacket over a dark blue sport shirt and dark blue slacks, but changed his mind and put it back in his closet, thinking that tonight at Marion’s condo he could dress a little more casual. When he arrived and rang the bell, Marion opened the door and welcomed him in. The first thing Mickey noticed was that wonderful smile that had always made him feel so at ease. Then he noticed that again her hair was combed down around her shoulders and she was dressed in white slacks and a paisley blouse with an intricate green droplet-shaped vegetable motif over a white background.

“Hi”, was all Mickey was able to say at first, so taken once again with how lovely Marion looked, and the warmth that seemed to flow from her.

But he quickly recovered after Marion responded with “Hi, back at you. You’re right on time.”

“Well, I didn’t want to be too early. Traffic was lighter than usual tonight, so I drove around a bit.” Then before she could say something, he fairly blurted out, “My god, you look so lovely!”

Marion's smile widened as she noticed that Mickey had blushed a bit after his last pronouncement. In return she, too, felt a bit of a flush rise up from her neck to her cheeks. "Well, let's not stand here – come, take a seat in the living room, while I get us some wine to toast while dinner is cooking," Marion announced as she pointed him to the living room, off to the right of the entrance hall.

Marion went on through the door leading to the kitchen, while Mickey moved into the living room. At first he was going to sit in an end chair at one end of the glass cocktail table that rested on brass sculptured legs, but decided to be somewhat bold and less formal by taking a seat at one end of the tan fabric covered couch, in the hope that that might lead to more intimacy as the evening progressed.

Almost immediately, Marion appeared with two glasses of Malbec and sat next to him on the couch. Mickey looked at her with a smile and an inquisitive look, and said "What, no Pinot Grigio for you?"

Marion laughed and replied, "I confess, I took a sip of that Malbec I saw you order on our date last week, and thought it was quite OK. So, shall we toast?"

"Oh, now you've put me to the test," Mickey countered. "Ah, Ok, how about a toast to a new friendship?" he offered.

"Good, that's seems appropriate." Marion confirmed with that smile that Mickey was beginning to love.

After a sip and clinking of glasses, Marion jumped up and said, "I believe that dinner is just about ready to be served. I hope my cooking does not disappoint you", she stated with a bit of nervousness in her tone.

Dinner was quite good. Marion had laid out a salad of mixed greens with choices of several dressings, and a main course of angel hair pasta with shrimp and asparagus and carrots, cooked in olive oil with chopped onions, fresh chopped garlic and Italian seasonings. Garlic bread accompanied the meal. After the main course was removed, with Mickey helping to clear the table, scrape and rinse the dishes, and put them into the dish washer, Marion set out a platter of cannoli's and ricciarelli cookies. Marion asked if Mickey wanted espresso or tea with desert and they both washed down desert with a cup of espresso.

Mickey looked at Marion with a new found respect and declared, "I have to tell you, Marion, but you are one hell of a cook, and the desert and espresso were fabulous. But it was my understanding that you were of English and Irish nationality. How did you learn to make such delicious Italian meals?"

Marion just shrugged, smiled and replied, "Simple, my ex-husband was Italian and I felt obligated to learn how to make Italian meals. But after the divorce, I decided to change back to my maiden name, instead of Boccelli."

"Not as in the Italian opera star?" Mickey responded, wondering if that were possible.

"Oh, no! With two C's, not like Andre's surname. Besides the only thing my ex could sing was 'I'm Sorry', after each of his extra-marital affairs", Marion said, with a short laugh, but obviously not exactly happy with the memories.

"I'm sorry I brought it up" Mickey said, sensing the hurt and disappointment that was still there.

"Oh, water under the bridge! Shall we go into the living room? Would you like me to put on some music, a TV show, or a DVD?" She asked, as she stood up.

He pushed his chair back, stood, picked up his desert and cup and walked to the sink, saying, "Oh, I don't know. How about some music, but what would you prefer?" When he reached the sink,

standing next to her, as they both deposited dishes in the sink, something instinctively made him put his hands on her arms, turn her toward him and leaned over to kiss her. When she leaned into him, put her arms around his neck and reciprocated his kiss, one aspect of tension left him (the wondering about her reaction to his initiative), but was replaced by another tension (his need to explore his feelings for her more fully – there was something about this woman that seemed unlike any woman he had known before).

Marion removed her arms from around his neck, slid her hands down against his chest and pushed back just enough to look into his eyes with what can only be described as a big question in her eyes. “Oh, she whispered softly, I was not ready for that.” Then after a beat she added, “But it was rather nice. Shall we adjourn to the living room and have another glass of wine?”

Mickey took a breath, and responded, “Yes, that would be nice.” Then she offered Mickey the wine bottle to pour into each of their glasses. Mickey wondered, as he attempted to control a bit of shakiness as he poured, whether she left it to him to see how controlled he was, or whether she herself was uncertain about how well she could control the pouring, after that first kiss and embrace.

Marion asked Mickey if he had any favorite bands or singers he’d like to listen to. Mickey half-heartedly offered the Eagles, Fleetwood Mac, and Eric Clapton, just not to appear uneducated about what she might have in her collection, and then suggested that she pick something that she would like to listen to. Marion went to the media cabinet in the living room, powered up her Multi CD player and put on a Fleetwood Mac CD, followed by a Michael Bublé Cd. As they sat together on the couch, sipping their wine, there was an obvious tension, at least Mickey felt it and wondered if Marion did as well. So, neither wanted to up the ante at this point, and while half-listening to the Fleetwood Mac album, they resorted to small talk.

By the time the Bublé CD began, they had run out of small talk. The tension Mickey had started to feel after that first kiss just seemed to take hold of him, and in the silence that had ensued when they both had run out of innocuous things to converse about, Mickey looked at Marion for some sign that she, too, was feeling that tension.

There was that smile again! He put his wine glass down, now empty, reached over to take her almost empty glass, placed it on the table, bucked up his courage and moved closer to her. Marion’s smile lessened, but he could see in her eyes that she wanted him to make a move. So, he enfolded her in an embrace and began kissing her on the lips, and as she reacted positively, he advanced to kissing and caressing other areas of her body, which he soon discovered was extremely fit. What ensued was a rather heated coupling, until Marion pushed him up off of her, took a deep breath and said, “Please, we need to stop here. I am sorry, but I cannot go any further. Not now.”

Mickey, breathing heavily, despite wanting to go further, wanting almost desperately to make love to Marion, overcame his intense desire, and allowed his mind to dictate that he did not want to lose an opportunity to continue this relationship with Marion. He had come to realize she was probably the first woman since his wife that he might, just might, want to become involved with for the long term. So, he moved off of her and said rather stupidly, “Shit, I am sorry. I guess I just got carried away – it has been a long while since I have felt this way about a woman.”

Marion pulled herself up and looked into his eyes, thinking she saw a regret there, and said, “Oh, no, please don’t feel sorry. I like you a great deal and part of me would love to take this further, but I think it is just too soon, at least for me. Please don’t think that I... I am not turned on by you. Oh, what a stupid thing to say! I mean, I want to continue to see you.”

“Oh, Marion, that is exactly what I want, as well – to continue seeing you and getting to know you!”

“Good. Then maybe it is best that we say goodnight. I will be moving to New Jersey next week. I will email you my address. Hopefully we can get together on weekends when you are also home in in New Jersey.” Marion said with what seemed to Mickey as hopefulness in her eyes and the tone of her voice.

Mickey asked, “How will you email me; oh yes, I gave you my business card. Alright, I will leave now, as much as I would like nothing more than to stay and, oh well, I think you know.”

“Yes, I think I know”, was all Marion said, as she gently touched both sides of his face with her hands. Then they both stood up, moved to the front door, hugged and kissed goodnight. Driving back to his apartment in middle Illinois, Mickey’s mind was full of questions and uncertainty about why he was feeling such a nearly desperate desire for Marion. What eased his mind finally was visioning that smile of hers that had from the first time on that first flight intrigued him and he realized now spoke to him in a way that he had never experienced before, not with his wife, and not with Julie, or any of the few hurried relationships with other women after his wife’s death.

As for Marion, she stood at the door, after waving goodbye to Mickey, as he drove off and wondered – what if he had pressed her to have sex? Would she have happily given in? After all it had been a few years since she had had sex with the last of the guys she had gone to bed with after her divorce. Well, he was the second after her divorce, and while she enjoyed the sex for what it was, it was not all that satisfying when she thought about her need for permanence in her life, yeah and, for what it was worth, that perhaps myth of love, the big L.

Nearly two weeks passed before Mickey got the email from Marion with her address. He had called on her cell phone and left a voice message the previous week, with no response until this email arrived. In it Marion explained about how busy she had been moving from Joliet to her home in Mt. Arlington, NJ, about halfway from his home in Panther Valley and her job in Roseland. Mickey could not hold back his excitement, and he called Marion again.

This time she answered and after initial hellos, Marion asked when he would be back at his home in Panther Valley. Mickey told her he was eager to see her and could arrange to fly from MDW to EWR whatever weekend was Ok with her. He offered to help with anything she needed to get settled into her new condo. They agreed on the second weekend hence. Mickey was elated and quickly made his travel arrangements. Marion was also excited, but felt some reservations – she was not sure that she really wanted to get deeply involved, which is what she sensed she really wanted, and suspected that Mickey was even more eager.

When they had decided that Mickey would fly home two weekends later, Mickey suggested they go out to dinner that Saturday night to free her from all of the concern about food preparation after such a short time in her new home. Marion was quite relieved at his suggestion. Mickey made reservations at a restaurant off of Lake Hopatcong that had a decent menu and a good bar. Mickey picked up a bouquet of roses and drove to Marion’s new home. When she opened the door and they looked at one another, it seemed to both of them that the two weeks had been too long a wait. He handed her the roses and thought he saw a weakening in her knees, but that could have been a bit of fantasizing on his part. She invited him in and they hugged and kissed perfunctorily.

Mickey drove them to the restaurant, and they both ate, while catching up on their business doings for the past two weeks. They had a couple glasses of wine with dinner and then decided to forgo the bar and drive back to Marion's place. Once there and settled on the same couch she had had moved from Chicago, along with all her other furniture – the moved paid for by PSA - Marion turned on a DVD of Saturday Night Fever, featuring John Travolta and his fabulous dancing. Travolta's issues with women and his attraction to Karen Lynn Gorney, his dance partner was not lost on Mickey – he had some of those same attractions to Marion, but felt she was also attracted to him, more so than Karen in the movie.

While watching the movie, they both sipped on a brand of Malbec wine, which Marion had bought. There was a sex scene in the movie that got both Mickey and Marion thinking. Having had a couple of more glasses of wine during the movie, when the movie ended, Mickey could not stop himself from moving to Marion, embracing her, kissing her, lifting off her blouse (with her obvious permission). Then he began to move his hands all over her body, as she became more and more excited, which only acted to increase Mickey's desire. After several minutes of increasing excitement, Mickey unbuttoned Marion's slacks, while she helped him remove them, so that she was lying under him in just her panties and bra. In turn, Marion unbuttoned his shirt and he discarded it quickly.

At this point, Mickey was almost out of his mind with desire, when suddenly Marion edged her way out from under him, took him by the hand and led him to her bedroom, where they had passionate sex twice, first tentatively, then more boldly. That exhausted them both.

As they laid besides one another gathering their strength, Marion breathed out in a whisper, "Oh God, that was wonderful."

Mickey could only add, "Yes, I agree." Then after a few minutes of caching his breath, as Marion cuddled up against him, with her head on his shoulder and her arm comfortably draped around his hairy chest, for some reason Mickey felt so trusting of Marion that he felt compelled to tell her something that had been on his mind so much recently. He didn't know exactly why he felt so compelled, but a couple of stanzas from the Michael Bubl  version of the song, "You Don't Know Me" that they had listened to back in her Joliet condo, suddenly went through his mind and helped him to gain the confidence to divulge what he wanted her to know...

"You give your hand to me
Then you say hello
I can hardly speak
My heart is beating so
And anyone can tell
You think you know me well
But you don't know me

No, you don't know the one
Who dreams of you at night
And longs to kiss your lips
And longs to hold you tight
Oh I'm just a friend
That's all I've ever been
'Cause you don't know me

I never knew
The art of making love
Though my heart aches
With love for you
Afraid and shy
I've let my chance to go by
The chance that you might
Love me, too..."

So, he began with, "I want to tell you about something that has been bugging me recently"

Marion sighed, kept her eyes closed, listening to his heartbeat and whispered, "OK, go ahead, I will listen."

Mickey, exhaled and began, "I have always, I think, hid behind the belief that work gives me the feeling that I am contributing to something – that I am making a difference. After my wife died, I used the sense of contribution that work afforded me to overcome any thought that I failed her and my children. On those plane rides and in those hotels I began to question, why am I depending on work to give me a sense of purpose in life, when I should be making amends, asking forgiveness, and trying desperately to regain purpose for being a father. And with God's will, a husband or lover."

Marion, more alert now, opened her eyes, raised her head up and said, "That sounds like you are carrying around an old guilt that just maybe is no longer valid, or not something that is entirely your fault."

Mickey continued, "It may not make sense to you, but I thought I had it all set up, all set up to end in happiness – but I was wrong, *fucking* wrong! It ended in the greatest sense of failure I have ever experienced in my life! So I asked God, where do I go from here, but all I got was silence. Nothing but silence! This rattled around in my mind, but I found by pushing it aside and focusing on work, the pain would seem to ease, if not go away totally. My wife died of cancer and my children and I are estranged – they and my in-laws blame me for working overseas and not getting home until just before the funeral, and until after my wife passed away. As they see it, and I can't in any way dispute their opinions, I wasn't there before my wife passed way to comfort her, to tell her I loved her, and say goodbye. When I walked down the aisle with her, after taking the vows of 'to death do us part', I was so sure I had found my life partner, the woman with whom I'd be with until we both grew old."

Now Marion sat up, a bit dismayed at what Mickey was now disclosing, not so much at the 'What' he was saying, as he had previously mentioned much of the same things about his life with his wife and children, but at the anguish and depth of hurt with which he was telling her now.

"Mickey, why the *fuck* are you telling me this now? We just had beautiful romantic sex."

Mickey realized from her reaction that he may have divulged too much of what had been haunting him, at probably the worst time, so all he could muster was, "Sorry, I just wanted you to understand what has been on my mind."

"What!" Marion exclaimed. "Did we not just make love? And a very satisfactory love session", she added with a less loud voice.

Mickey sighed deeply, "Yes, you are right about the great sex. It was wonderful, especially since it has been so long since, for me. It is just that I think I love you and I do not want to start our relationship, which I truly want to continue, without you and me knowing everything about one another."

Marion instantly heard the 'I love you' and quickly questioned herself, "Do I feel the same? Is this the man I have always dreamed would come along? Damn it, I am not sure – we have only been together for a few weeks really, and yes, the sex was the best I can remember, but is that enough?" She could sense Mickey looking for a response, but she could only think to respond, "I honestly can't tell you this early in our relationship that I love you, but, and this is a *not* such a big but, I have come to like you very much and feel very comfortable with you. I think of you as a special person, a man who I have come to admire and hope that our relationship may continue to advance."

Mickey felt a bit disappointed with Marion's response, primarily because she was not at the same place as he was. To hide his disappointment, he said to Marion, "Funny how seemingly forgotten memories suddenly pop back into your head. I suppose these are somehow catalogued into our sub-conscious, and then some little thing happens, or what on the surface is an unexpected thought acts as a key to unlock those hidden memories, and causes them to spring back into consciousness. Sometimes it is a pleasant memory and sometimes one you wish would remain forgotten, or at least locked up in that cache of memories in your sub-conscious."

Marion raised up enough to look into Mickey's eyes and said firmly, "Mickey, I prefer to only remember the happier memories!" Then she laid her head back onto his chest.

But Mickey could not stop delving into the questions in his mind in an attempt to push aside that gnawing feeling of disappointment and his need to try and overcome the guilt he had been burdened with for so long. So he continued, "Is it worth exploring? Trying to learn/understand about our past? About what has influenced our thought processes and our beliefs and our predisposition toward what is happening today? After all it is the mold into which our being, our view of the world was formed. Are we merely a result, a consequence of a series of events that have so influenced and developed us that we have been molded into who we are now? Into how we think? Into how we perceive ourselves? Into how we perceive and interact with others? How we perceive the external world?"

Marion had to raise up again and look quizzically into his eyes and attempted to add a bit of levity to lighten his mood by saying, "Oh, Lordy, my goodness, what has turned you into a philosophy professor?" Then she chuckled, but looking at him she saw that he was still in a serious mood. So, after a minute of silence, Marion made a decision that she hoped would bring Mickey back down to earth and not so serious-minded. She had another reason for what she was about to do – she had so enjoyed their initial sex together and realized how hungry she had been for sex and romance with a good man.

Marion moved over on top of Mickey and started to kiss him on the lips, and inserting her tongue into his mouth, while rubbing up and down on him, until she could feel him fully aroused. Their desire for each other quickly brought them to the height of passion and this time the sex was more urgent than the first time. Mickey was grunting and breathing heavily, while Marion was at first moaning, then yelling out as she attained orgasm just a few seconds after Mickey. Marion started to roll off of Mickey, but he held onto her and kept her on top of him for a little longer, until he finally let her go. "That was better than the before", she whispered in his ear.

"Oh, yes!" Mickey concurred, while his breathing and heart rate began to slow back toward normal. Within minutes they were both asleep. They awoke early on Sunday morning. Marion took a shower first, then gave Mickey a clean towel and wash cloth. While he showered, Marion fixed a breakfast of bacon and scrambled eggs, with orange juice and coffee. When Mickey came into the kitchen, they sat opposite one another and initially found it strange that neither could think of anything to say to start a conversation. Finally Mickey said, "You make a fine breakfast." Then seeing a small smile appear on her face, he jumped right in with both feet, thinking it was time to address what had

happened last night, “Ah, you know Marion, last night was really special for me.” He started to ask her if she felt the same way, but she responded before he got past the word “Did y...”

“Oh, yes, Mickey, I, too, thought it was very special and romantic”, Marion was quick to say.

“I hope we can continue to see one another”, Mickey began, then added, “and I would be so happy if you feel the same way.”

“Oh, yes, I do feel the same about continuing to date”, she said with a tone of certainty.

Then Mickey felt he needed to get out in the open what he sensed both of them were reluctant to talk about, “Oh, and as for the sex, I don’t want you to think that is all I am looking for, ah, I mean, ah...”

Again Marion interrupted by putting her finger to her lips, indicating for him to hush and not to say any more. She, got up from the table, went over to Mickey and kissed him warmly on the lips. Then she looked deeply into his blue eyes, with her hazel eyes showing the moisture of tears of joy beginning to form and whispered, “Let’s just not talk about it. It happened and was great, and if it happens again, so be it.”

Mickey got up from his chair and put his arms around her. They stood there for several minutes enjoying the warmth of the embrace, until Marion pulled back, smiled that smile that always makes Mickey want to enfold her in his arms, and exclaimed, “Oh, I just remembered! You have a flight to Chicago this afternoon and you still have to go home and pack.”

Mickey smiled back at her, feeling like he never wanted to leave Marion, but knowing he had to get back to work in Illinois the next day. “Yes, but I can’t wait until the contract is over. I think I am finally ready to retire.”

Then they walked to the front door, holding hands and said their goodbyes. Something Mickey noted in the look on Marion’s face gave him pause as he turned and heard the door close behind him. He shook it off and Drove off.

Marion watched from a window as Mickey drove off. There were thoughts in her mind that she finally allowed herself to consider. She realized she was wondering how she could grow to love this man who seemed to have so much baggage, so haunted with unwarranted past guilt. She asked herself, “how *this* can be the man I was so sure had it all together – who before last night I believed to be so positive and content with his success in his career, who seemed so capable at organizing projects and dealing with so many varied people on a professional basis. Now I find that he had been using work as a substitute for engaging in a relationship that could bring him the happiness he seems to really long for. Oh, but he is a such a good man – maybe I just need to give it some time – I do like him a lot and want to continue seeing him. But as for love, I am just not sure; just not sure.”

Meanwhile, Mickey driving home cursed himself for allowing himself to lay down his guard and open up his deepest thoughts and feelings that have been, until now, for the most part hidden in the darkness of his sub-conscious. Then he yielded to a new hope, “Just maybe if Marion is the woman I have been unconsciously in search of, she will understand and still love me for who I am, baggage and all. Then I may no longer be a man who has no roots. Oh, dear God, let it be so!”

Credits:

1. Partial lyrics to song “Solitary Man”: written by Neil Diamond.
2. Partial Lyrics to song “You Don’t Know Me”: written by Cindy Walker and Eddy Arnold.

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