

The first time I saw her she was jogging in the park. I was sitting on a bench, reading the paper like I do every morning. I didn't pay much attention to her, except to note the resemblance.

The next time was in the supermarket. I'd stopped by to replenish my supply of instants—coffee, creamer, sweetener—and this time I got a better look at her. At first I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me. At seventy-six, it wouldn't be the first time that had happened.

Two nights later I was in Vincenzo's Ristorante, which has been my favorite Italian joint for maybe forty years—and there she was again. Not only that, but this time she was wearing my favorite blue dress. Oh, the skirt was a little shorter, and there was something different about the sleeves, but it was the dress, all right.

It didn't make any sense. She hadn't looked like this in more than four decades. She'd been dead for seven years, and if she was going to come back from the grave, why the hell hadn't she come directly to me? After all, we'd spent close to half a century together.

I walked by her, ostensibly on my way to the men's room, and the smell hit me while I was still five feet away from her. It was the same perfume she'd worn every day of our lives together.

But she was sixty-eight when she'd died, and now she looked exactly the way she looked the very first time I saw her. I tried to smile at her as I passed her table. She looked right through me.

I got to the men's room, rinsed my face off, and took a look in the mirror, just to make sure I was still seventy-six years old and hadn't dreamed the last half century. It was me, all right: not much hair on the top, in need of a trim on the sides, one eye half-shut from the mini-stroke I denied having except in increasingly rare moments of honesty, a tiny scab on my chin where I'd cut myself shaving. (I can't stand those new-fangled electric razors, though since they've been around as long as I have, I guess they're not really so new-fangled after all.)

It wasn't much of a face on good days, and now it had just seen a woman who was the spitting image of Deirdre.

When I came out she was still there, sitting alone, picking at her dessert.

"Excuse me," I said, walking up to her table. "Do you mind if I join you for a moment?"

She looked at me as if I was half-crazy. Then she looked around, making sure that the place was crowded in case she had to call for help, decided I looked harmless enough, and finally she nodded tersely.

"Thank you," I said. "I just want to say that you look exactly like someone I used to know, even down to the dress and the perfume."

She kept staring at me, but didn't answer.

"I should introduce myself," I said, extending my hand. "My name is Walter Silverman."

"What do you want?" she asked, ignoring my hand.

"The truth?" I said. "I just wanted a closer look at you. You remind me so much of this other person." She looked dubious. "It's not a pick-up line," I continued. "Hell, I'm old enough to be your grandfather, and the staff will tell you I've been coming here for forty years and haven't molested any customers yet. I'm just taken by the resemblance to someone I cared for very much."

Her face softened. "I'm sorry if I was rude," she said, and I was struck by how much the voice sounded like *her* voice. "My name is Deirdre."

It was my turn to stare.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"I'm fine," I said. "But the woman you look like was also named Deirdre."

Another stare.

"Let me show you," I said, pulling out my wallet. I took my Deirdre's photo out and handed it to her.

"It's uncanny," she said, studying the picture. "We even sort of wear our hair the same way. When was this taken?"

"Forty-seven years ago."

"Is she dead?"

I nodded.

"Your wife?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry," she said. "She was a beautiful woman." Then, "I hope that doesn't sound conceited, since we look so much alike."

"Not at all. She *was* beautiful. And like I say, she even used the same perfume."

"That's very weird," she said. "Now I understand why you wanted to talk to me."

"It was like . . . like I'd suddenly stumbled back half a century in time," I said. "You're even wearing Deedee's favorite color."

"What did you say?"

"That you're wearing her—"

"No. I meant what you just called her."

"Deedee?" I asked. "That was my pet name for her."

"My friends call *me* Deedee," she said. "Isn't that odd?"

"May I call you that?" I said. "If we ever meet again, I mean?"

"Sure," she said with a shrug. "Tell me about yourself, Walter. Are you retired?"

"For the past dozen years," I said.

"Got any kids or grandkids?"

"No."

"If you don't work and you don't have family, what do you do with your time?" she asked.

“I read, I watch DVDs, I take walks, I Google a zillion things of interest on the computer.” I paused awkwardly. “I hope it doesn’t sound crazy, but mostly I just pass the time until I can be with Deedee again.”

“How long were you married?”

“Forty-five years,” I answered. “That photo was taken a couple of years before we were married. We had long engagements back then.”

“Did she work?” asked Deirdre. “I know a lot of women didn’t when you were young.”

“She illustrated children’s books,” I said. “She even won a couple of awards.”

Suddenly Deirdre frowned. “All right, Walter—how long have you been studying me?”

“Studying you?” I repeated, puzzled. “I saw you jogging a couple of days ago, and I watched you while I was eating. . . .”

“Do you really expect me to believe that?”

“Why wouldn’t you?” I asked.

“Because I’m an illustrator for children’s magazines.”

That was *too* many coincidences. “Say that again?”

“I illustrate children’s magazines.”

“What’s your last name?” I asked.

“Why?” she replied suspiciously.

“Just tell me,” I said, almost harshly.

“Aronson.”

“Thank God!”

“What are you talking about?”

“My Deedee’s maiden name was Kaplan,” I said. “For a minute there I thought I was going crazy. If your name was Kaplan I’d have been sure of it.”

“I’m sorry I lost my temper,” said Deirdre. “This has been just a little . . . well . . . weird.”

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” I said. “It was just, I don’t know, like seeing my Deedee all over again, young and beautiful the way I remember her.”

“Is that the way you always think of her?” she asked curiously. “The way she looked forty-five years ago?”

I pulled out another photo, taken the year before Deedee died. She was about forty pounds heavier, and her hair was white, and there were wrinkles around her eyes. I stared at it for a minute, then handed it to Deirdre.

“This is her, too,” I said. “I’d look at her, and I’d see past the pounds and the years. I think every

woman is beautiful, each in her own way, and my Deedee was the most beautiful of all.”

“It’s a shame you’re not fifty years younger,” she said. “I could go for someone who feels that way.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I said nothing.

“What did your wife die of ?” she asked at last.

“She was walking across the street, and some kid who was high on drugs came racing around the corner doing seventy miles an hour. She never knew what hit her.” I paused, remembering that awful day. “The kid got six months’ probation and lost his license. I lost Deedee.”

“Did you see it happen?”

“No, I was still inside the store, paying for the groceries. I heard it, though. Sounded like a clap of thunder.”

“That’s terrible.”

“At least she didn’t feel any pain,” I said. “I suppose there are worse ways to go. Slower ways, anyway. Most of my friends are busy discovering them.”

Now it was her turn to be at a loss for an answer. Finally she looked at her watch. “I have to go, Walter,” she said. “It’s been . . . interesting.”

“Perhaps we could meet again?” I suggested hopefully.

She gave me a look that said all her worst fears were true after all.

“I’m not asking for a date,” I continued hastily. “I’m an old man. I’d just like to talk to you again. It’d be like being with Deedee again for a few minutes.” I paused, half-expecting her to tell me that it was sick, but she didn’t say anything. “Look, I eat here all the time. What if you came back a week from today, and we just talked during dinner? My treat. I promise not to follow you home, and I’m too arthritic to play footsie under the table.”

She couldn’t repress a smile at my last remark. “All right, Walter,” she said. “I’ll be your ghost from six to seven.”

I was as nervous as a schoolboy a week later when six o’clock rolled around. I’d even worn a jacket and tie for the first time in months. (I’d also cut myself in three places while shaving, but I hoped she wouldn’t notice.)

Six o’clock came and went, and so did six ten. She finally entered the place at a quarter after, in a blouse and slacks I could have sworn belonged to Deedee.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” she said, sitting down opposite me. “I was reading and lost track of the time.”

“Let me guess,” I said. “Jane Austen?”

“How did you know?” she asked, surprised.

“She was Deedee’s favorite.”

“I didn’t say she was my favorite,” said Deirdre.

“But she is, isn’t she?” I persisted.

There was an uncomfortable pause.

“Yes,” she said at last.

We ordered our dinner—of course she had the eggplant parmesan; it was what Deedee always had—and then she pulled a couple of magazines out of her bag, one full-sized, one a digest, and showed me some illustrations she had done.

“Very good,” I said. “Especially this one of the little blonde girl and the horse. It reminds me—”

“Of something your wife did?”

I nodded. “A long time ago. I haven’t thought of it for years. I always liked it, but she felt she’d done many better ones.”

“I’ve done better, too,” said Deirdre. “But these were handy.”

We spoke a little more before the meal came. I tried to keep it general, because I could see all these parallels with Deedee were making her uncomfortable. Vincenzo had his walls covered by photos of famous Italians; she knew Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin and Joe DiMaggio, but I spent a few minutes explaining what Carmine Basilio and Eddie Arcaro and some of the others had done to deserve such enshrinement.

“You know,” I said as the salads arrived, “Deedee had a beautiful leatherbound set of Jane Austen’s works. I never read them, and they’re just sitting there gathering dust. I’d be happy to give them to you next week.”

“Oh, I couldn’t,” she said. “They must be worth a small fortune.”

“A very small one,” I said. “Besides, when I die, they’ll just wind up in the garbage, or maybe at Goodwill.”

“Don’t talk about dying like that,” she said.

“Like what?”

“So matter-of-factly.”

“The closer you get to it, the more a matter of fact it becomes,” I said. “Don’t worry,” I added lightly. “I promise not to die before dinner’s over. Now, about those Austen books . . .”

I could see her struggling with herself. “You’re sure?” she said at last.

“I’m sure. You can have a matched set of the Brontës too, if you like.”

“Thank you, but I don’t really like them.”

It figured. I don’t think Deedee had ever cracked any of them open.

“All right,” I said. “Just the Austen. I’ll bring them next week.”

Suddenly she frowned. “I don’t think I can make it next week, Walter,” she said. “My fiancé’s been

away on business, and I'm pretty sure that's the day he comes home."

"Your fiancé?" I repeated. "You haven't mentioned him before."

"We've only spoken twice," she replied. "I wasn't hiding the fact."

"Well, good for you," I said. "You must know by now that I'm a believer in marriage."

"I guess I am, too," she said.

"You guess?"

"Oh, I believe in marriage. I just don't know if I believe in marriage with Ron."

"Then why are you engaged to him?"

She shrugged. "I'm thirty-one. It was time. And he's nice enough."

"But?" I asked. "There's a 'but' in there somewhere."

"But I don't know if I want to spend the rest of my life with him." She paused, puzzled. "Now why did I tell you that?"

"I don't know," I replied. "Why do you think you did?"

"I don't know either," she said. "I just have this feeling that I can confide in you."

"I appreciate that," I said. "As for spending the rest of your life with your young man—hell, the way everyone gets married and divorced these days, maybe you won't have to."

"You sure know how to cheer a girl up, Walter," she said wryly.

"I apologize. Your private life is none of my business. I meant no offense."

"Fine." Then: "What shall we talk about?"

I thought about Deedee. Sooner or later we talked about everything under the sun, but her greatest passion was the theatre. "Whose work do you like better—Tom Stoppard's or Edward Albee's?"

Her face lit up, and I could tell she was going to spend the next ten minutes telling me exactly who she preferred, and why.

Somehow I wasn't surprised.

We skipped the following week, but met every week thereafter for the next three months. Ron even came along once, probably to make sure I was as old and unattractive as she'd described me. He must have satisfied himself on those counts, because he never came back. He seemed a nice enough young man, and he was clearly in love with her.

I ran into her twice at my local Borders and once at Barnes & Noble, and both times I bought her coffee. I knew I was falling in love with her—hell, I'd been in love with her from the first instant I saw her. But that's where it got confusing, because I knew I wasn't really in love with *her*; I was in love with the younger version of Deedee that she represented.

Ron had to leave town on another business trip, and while he was gone she took me to the theatre to see a revival of Stoppard's *Jumpers* and I took her to the racetrack to watch a minor stakes race for fillies. The play was nice enough, a little obscure but well-acted; I don't think she liked the color and excitement of the track any more than Deedee had.

I kept wondering if she could somehow *be* Deedee reincarnated, but I knew deep in my gut that it wasn't possible: if she was Deedee—*my* Deedee—she'd have been put here for me, and this one was marrying a young man named Ron. Besides, she had a past, she had photos of herself as a little girl, friends who had known her for years, and Deedee had only been dead for seven years. And while I didn't understand what was happening, I knew there couldn't have been two of her co-existing at the same time. (No, I never asked myself *why*; I just knew it couldn't be.)

Sometimes, as a bit of an experiment, I'd order a wine, or mention a play or book or movie that I knew Deedee hadn't liked, and invariably Deirdre would wrinkle her nose and express her lack of enthusiasm for the very same thing.

It was uncanny. And in a way it was frightening, because I couldn't understand why it was happening. This wasn't *my* Deedee. Mine had lived her life with me, and that life was over. I was a seventy-six-year-old man with half a dozen ailments who was just beating time on his way to the grave. I was never going to impose myself on Deirdre, and she was never going to look upon me as anything but an eccentric acquaintance . . . so why had I met her?

From time to time I'd had this romantic fancy that when two people loved each other and suited each other the way Deedee and I did, they'd keep coming back over and over again. Once they'd be Adam and Eve, once they'd be Lancelot and Guinevere, once they'd be Bogart and Bacall. But they'd be *together*. They wouldn't be an old man and a young woman who could never connect. I had half a century's worth of experiences we could never share, I was sure the thought of my touching her would make her skin crawl, and I was long past the point where I could do anything *but* touch her. So whether she was my Deedee reborn, or just *a* Deedee, why were the two of us here at this time and in this place?

I didn't know.

But a few days later I learned that I'd better find out pretty damned quick. Something finally showed up in all the tests I'd been taking at the hospital. They put me on half a dozen new medications, gave me some powerful pain pills for when I needed them, and told me not to make any long-term plans.

Hell, I wasn't even that unhappy about it. At least I'd be with my Deedee again—the *real* Deedee, not the charming substitute.

The next night was our regular dinner date. I'd decided not to tell her the news; there was no sense distressing her.

It turned out that she was distressed enough as it was. Ron had given her an ultimatum: set a date or break it off. (Things had changed a lot since my day. Most of my contemporaries would have killed to have a gorgeous girlfriend who had no problem sleeping with them but got nervous at the thought of marriage.)

"So what are you going to do?" I asked sympathetically.

"I don't know," she replied. "I'm fond of him, I really am. But I just . . . I don't know."

"Let him go," I said.

She stared at me questioningly.

“If you’re not certain after all this time,” I said, “kiss him off.”

She sighed deeply. “He’s everything I should want in a husband, Walter. He’s thoughtful and considerate, we share a lot of interests, and he’s got a fine future as an architect.” She smiled ruefully. “I even like his mother.”

“But?” I prompted her.

“But I don’t think I love him.” She stared into my eyes. “I always thought I’d know right away. At least that’s the myth I was brought up on as a little girl, and it was reinforced by all the romance novels I read and the movies I saw. How was it for you and your Deedee? Did you ever have any doubts?”

“Never a one,” I said. “Not from the first moment to the last.”

“I’m thirty-one, Walter,” she said unhappily. “If I haven’t met the right guy yet, what are the odds he’s going to show up before I’m forty, or sixty? What if I want to have a baby? Do I have it with a man I don’t love, or with a guy I love who’s living six states away before it’s even born?” She sighed unhappily. “I have two good friends who married the men of their dreams. They’re both divorced. My closest friend married a nice guy she wasn’t sure she loved. She’s been happily married for ten years, and keeps telling me I’m crazy if I let Ron get away.” She stared across the table at me, a tortured expression on her face. “I’d give everything I have to be as sure of a man—*any* man—as you were of your Deedee.”

And *that* was when I knew why I’d met her, and why the medics had given me a few more months atop Planet Earth before I spent the rest of eternity beneath it.

We finished the meal, and for the first time ever, I walked her home. She lived in one of those high-rise apartment buildings, kind of a miniature city in itself. It wasn’t fancy enough to have a doorman, but she assured me the security system was state of the art. She kissed me on the cheek while a couple of neighbors who were coming out looked at her as if she were crazy. I waited until she was safely in the elevator, then left and returned home.

When I woke up the next morning I decided it was time to get busy. At least I was going to be in familiar locations where I felt comfortable. I got dressed and went out to the track, spent a few hours in the grandstand near the furlong pole where I always got the best view of the races, and didn’t lay a single bet, just hung around. Then, after dinner, I started making the rounds of all my favorite bookstores. I spent the next two afternoons at the zoo and the natural history museum, where I’d spent so many happy afternoons with Deedee, and the one after that at the ballpark in the left field bleachers. I had to take a couple of pain pills along the way, but I didn’t let it slow me down. I continued my circuit of bookstores and coffee shops in the evenings.

On the sixth night I decided I was getting tired of Italian food—hell, I was getting tired, period—and I went to the Olympus, another restaurant I’ve been frequenting for years. It doesn’t look like much, no Greek statues, not even any belly dancers or bouzouki players, but it serves the best pastitso and dolmades in town.

And that’s where I saw him.

His face didn’t jump right out at me the way Deirdre’s did, but then I hadn’t really looked at it in a long time. He was alone. I waited until he got up to go to the men’s room, and then followed him in.

“Nice night,” I said, when we were washing our hands.

“If you say so,” he answered unenthusiastically.

“The air is clear, the moon is out, there’s a lovely breeze, and the possibilities are endless,” I said. “What could be better?”

“Look, fella,” he said irritably, “I just broke up with my girl and I’m in no mood for talk, okay?”

“I need to ask you a couple of questions, Wally.”

“How’d you know my name?” he demanded.

I shrugged. “You look like a Wally.”

He cast a quick look at the door. “What the hell’s going on? You try anything funny, and I’ll—”

“Not to worry,” I said. “I’m just a used-up old man trying to do one last good deed on the way to the grave.” I pulled an ancient photo out of my wallet and held it up. “Look at all familiar?”

He frowned. “I don’t remember posing for that. Did you take it?”

“A friend did. Who’s your favorite actor?”

“Humphrey Bogart. Why?” Of course. Bogie had been my favorite since I was a kid.

“Just curious. Last question: what do you think of Agatha Christie?”

“Why?”

“I’m curious.”

He stared at me for a moment, then shrugged. “I can’t stand her. Murders take place in back alleys, not vicarages.” It figured. I’d always hated mystery novels where the murder was committed primarily to provide the detective with a corpse.

“Good answer, Wally.”

“What are you smiling about?” he asked suspiciously.

“I’m happy.”

“I’m glad one of us is.”

“Tell you what,” I said. “Maybe I can cheer you up, too. You know a restaurant called Vincenzo’s—a little Italian place about three blocks east of here?”

“Yeah, I stop in there every now and then. Why?”

“I want you to be my guest for dinner tomorrow night.”

“Still why?”

“I’m an old man with nothing to spend my money on,” I said. “Why don’t you humor me?”

He considered it, then shrugged. “What the hell. I don’t have anyone to eat with anyway.”

“Temporarily,” I replied.

“What are you talking about?”

“Just show up,” I said. Then, as I walked to the door, I turned back to him and smiled. “Have I got a girl for you!”