

Chalk and Cheese

GRETA, MY STEPMOTHER WHO DIED LAST WEEK, and Bish, my father, who died eighteen years ago, were, to use that Limey expression, chalk and cheese.

They were each sixty years old when they married, both well beyond the age at which anyone finds anyone else fascinating enough to make the futile effort younger couples do, to change.

Greta owned a cabin on a point of land on an island on Penobscot Bay many miles off the Maine coast. It had been in her family since the earliest days of the twentieth century. Although she was as sophisticated and urban a woman as I have known, she loved the quiet, rustic old place and the clunker car she kept there. The shingled cabin grew moss and lichen and suffered the wounds of a century of Maine winters.

Bish loved it equally. But he was a no-nonsense businessman and decided the neglected place needed tighter management. Greta liked it the way it was, but she wasn't into control, so when he began drawing up plans to improve the place, she stayed on the sidelines, bemused.

Having spent summers on the island her whole life, she could smell what was ahead.

Before they returned to Baltimore for the winter one year, Bish drew up an elaborate set of instructions for work to be done over the winter, a schedule to be followed, and had a meeting with the one guy on the island who did this sort of work. The other seventy or so people who spent winter there braved treacherous water trapping lobster.

Buster (I gave him that name) listened to Bish's directives impassively and took the work schedule Bish handed him, which Bish took to be an implied contract.

There was no contact between the island's winter and summer residents until Memorial Day, when a few hearty Baltimoreans braved the lingering Maine winter to check on their places. Bish asked one of them to see how Buster was coming with the work on Greta's place.

They returned a week later to tell him nothing had been done. Greta seemed to enjoy his noisy exasperation, likely anticipating the next chapter.

When Bish and Greta moved to the island the first week in July, the cabin was just as it had been when they left on Labor Day, perhaps a little the worse for an unusually snowy winter.

Bish sought out Buster, finally found him hanging out in the quasi grocery store, trading stories with the lobstermen. Bish—usually polite to a fault—lost it. Interrupting, not bothering with a greeting, lit into Buster.

"I gave you a list before Labor Day of the work you were supposed to do and a schedule. I am appalled that you haven't even started."

He went on like that for perhaps a couple of minutes, while Buster and the others regarded him silently, expressionless, as they might an old dog. When Bish finally paused for a breath, Buster spoke for the first time:

"Guess you haven't heard."

"Heard? Heard what?"

"I don't work for you anymore."

Bish was even more exasperated that Greta enjoyed the story. She waited—not long—for Bish to repent, crawling back to Buster—the lone islander who did that work.

"Whenever you think you can get to us, Buster, we'd be most grateful."

The work was done over the following winter.

Greta smoked, loved gourmet food, good wine, museums, the symphony, all mere pretensions in Bish's life before her. My affection for her was kindled when I discovered she was addicted to chocolate. Not any old chocolates. There was a chocolatier near her in Baltimore who not only made chocolates like no other, but began concocting special candies just for Greta. Of course, they were as precious as Tiffany jewels.

Despite Bish's scolding and shaming, Greta continued her near-daily stops for whatever they had cooked up for her, bringing home a box—and a bill—that would raise Bish's blood pressure forty points.

They fought. Well, Bish fought, while Greta looked bemused at his efforts to reform her.

A few years after they married I was visiting. Bish was in his big leather chair, watching football on TV. He reached over to the table next to him, picking up a small, white cardboard box. He opened it and reached across to me.

“Have one of these chocolates. They’re like nothing you’ve ever tasted. They make them especially for us.”

I suppose it would be specious to try to make anything of Bish—disciplined, abstemious, tight-ass—dying at seventy-eight, while free-spirited, high-living, unrepentant Greta lived another eighteen years, dying at ninety-six.

A few days before he died, I asked Bish how it had been being married to Greta—how the chalk had liked the cheese. By then he was weak, mostly uncommunicative, the cancer sapping his remaining energy. He smiled:

“Most exciting chapter of my life.”

Must have been the chocolate.

BLAYNEY COLMORE, retired Episcopal parish priest, using arcane and numinous theological education, explores reality that recognizes no boundaries nor is confined to human consciousness. Only, he discovers, by seeing the human place in our universe alongside rocks and quarks can we transcend our dread of extinction and embrace this season between birth and death. His two books, *In The Zone* and *God Knows*, take a stab at it.