

The Good Shepherd

She said his name was Harry and what she said about him I had to believe because I never doubted anything she ever told me. She was the most honest person I had ever met. We worked together in the college library in my hometown in the early 1960's during my last year before graduation. She was the first girl I ever met of whom I could honestly say I loved her mind. And yes, I know the phrase is almost never used seriously.

Life was often confusing to me back then and the bond I felt with her puzzled me. Maybe Mina (she pronounced it My-na) was the sister I never had or maybe she was my Anima, the summation of my emotions toward women, thank you Carl Gustav Jung. She was 2 or 3 years older and we would talk of books and ideas and plans and honor and beauty and duty and all those things young people just know they will do right and never screw up and never hurt anyone or lose anyone or certainly never get sick and die. Maybe die in a flaming plane crash as it explodes into a Himalayan mountain side where people are waiting for you to heroically rescue them. Hopefully while the cameras from CNN are rolling. But never just get sick and plain old die, vomiting and choking and crying, for Chrissake. That was for old people.

So in the library we talked and talked actually, whispered... as we rolled the book cart among the stacks and returned texts and tomes and James Michener best-sellers to their rightful Dewey Decimal homes on the shelves. Sure, I would try to kiss her back there in the stacks. After all, she was a girl and I was a certified idiot. She seemed to understand and simply move out of the way.

When I thought of it, I would wonder about the two of us, how a boy and a girl could just click so completely on an cerebral level and seemingly not have a romantic interest in each other. Or maybe that's just my memory fooling me again.

I wasn't inexperienced with women. I had dated a girl in high school, after all, and pledged my undying love for ever and a day. But I lost her telephone number and she found someone else. Mina was quite different. For one thing, she never looked at me like I was crazy. She thought what I said had value. And she always said the neatest things. She had the deepest thoughts and the coolest ideas about life and love. I could feel the heat of her mind's passions when I could get my mind off the heat of her physical attributes.

Her revelation of Harry was unexpected. She didn't tell me much about him ... hardly anything ... but immediately I felt threatened. I told myself I should not feel anything except happiness for her. After all, we didn't have a romantic relationship. But I wasn't sure I believed myself.

Mina was an orphan. She had no family of any note. She had spent a few years in the 1950's at the House of the Good Shepherd, an orphanage just south of the Parkway. Each morning before breakfast, the children would say a prayer to the Good Shepherd. He was the grand and beautiful one who took care of his little sheep. He loved them and was genuinely concerned for their welfare.

The orphanage was torn down in 1954 and replaced by a bowling alley and a regional office of the New York Telephone Company. The children were placed out to foster families. Young Mina was taken in by an older childless couple on Kensington Drive. She was thrilled to have her own sunny bedroom and to sit down each night with "Mom and Dad" and have dinner and talk about where they would go on vacation come summer. His vacation at the insurance office would be in August this year. Everything was perfect and each night she would kneel down at her bed with her new doll and look around her room and thank the Good Shepherd for loving her so much.

She returned from school one afternoon to find her suitcase on the front porch. There was a note attached saying to wait there and a social worker would pick her up. The couple had changed their minds. The doll they had given her was not in the suitcase. She banged on the front door until her hands bled and she screamed into their windows and she cursed them and she vomited and she choked and she cried until she almost died, for Chrissake. Plain old died.

She told me this one night in the book stacks and it was the only time I ever saw her weep. Just tears now, there were no sobs. They had gone off to hide, maybe to harden into a defensive callus for the future.

Through her tears Mina asked of no one in particular, "How could she have done that?" I reached out to her, but my hand stopped midway.

In the summer of 1963 as my graduation approached I got a job offer in New York City. It was a great opportunity and, truth be told, probably better than I deserved. Mina was happy for me. Attending college part time, her graduation was a couple of years away. She told me everything she had read that one could see and do in New York. One evening as we wheeled the book cart back into the stacks, I told her I wasn't sure I wanted to go. She looked into my eyes and I could feel her peer everywhere inside me. I felt naked, but not the way I would have wanted.

"Well," I said, "New York seems awfully far away."

"So is the rest of your life," she said.

"And I would miss our.....times together," I said. She continued to peer into me. After a moment, I relented and said, "I'm afraid, Mina. I've never been anywhere and I'm afraid. And...I would miss you." I knew she knew it. She took my hand and brought it to her, opened my palm and kissed it.

"Well," I said, clearing my throat, "I'd be home some weekends. I'd come to see you. Maybe we could actually go out on a date. Or something." She returned my hand, tenderly, and placed it against my chest.

"But," she said, "I'm seeing Harry."

Harry? Who the hell was Harry? She said his name was Harry and when she told me of him I didn't want to believe her, but I never doubted anything she told me.

"Who is Harry?" I almost shouted. "I've never heard you talk about him." She looked up from my hand and said, "You could say he's the Good Shepherd."

Mina never mentioned Harry again and neither did I. I tried to, but like the time I had reached out to her and stopped halfway, I knew there was something I didn't want to touch or couldn't touch. I imagined it to be a kind of strength that wasn't mine to investigate. I didn't want to hear the truth. To this day I don't know what I wanted to hear.

In two weeks the final semester ended and I was headed down the Thruway on a Greyhound bus.

I was excited and gloomy and scared all at once and I thought of Mina. She had been right. The rest of my life seemed a long way away.

I called her once from New York in late October. She was civil, but distant. I had lost my shepherd, but I wished for Mina the good fortune of finding her own. I never saw or spoke to her again.

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In the 1970's the newspaper viewing room at the Utica Public Library was located on the second floor, hidden away in a corner and piled high with old papers and boxes of little coils of microfilm. It was easier back then to find a parking space near the building and then make one's way through the ornate and beautiful lobby up the staircase and toward the front windows overlooking Genesee St.

Each week or so I would drive in from Syracuse where I was in graduate school working on my final project. Sometimes I would bring my wife and two children and drop them off at my parents' home on my way to the library.

Rolling through the microfilm of the past 3 years' newspapers and taking notes was tedious. If I had known someday there would be an Internet and Google I would have seriously thought of delaying my thesis for 20 years. For a break, after going outside for a smoke, I would often look through obituaries for the fun of it. Not because death is humorous, but the family names and street names mentioned would often bring back memories and take my mind away from the task at hand. On page three:

Shepherd, Harry Brent, age 72, of Kensington Drive. At rest on September 23, 1971. Devoted husband of Mina Hurley Shepherd. Mr. Shepherd was a retired insurance broker and had previously been married to the late Irene Lassely Shepherd, who died June 12, 1958. There were no children.

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