

ALTA

*For all sad words of tongue and pen,
The saddest are these, "It might have been."*

– John Greenleaf Whittier

For most of 1949 I lived in a boarding house in Waukegan, Illinois, clerking for the Electronic Supply Depot at the Great Lakes Naval Training Station. I had few friends, and spent many leisure hours sitting on the front porch, just thinking. Out of that came most of my thoughts about the nature of art, which served as a basis for the essay "What is Art?" on my web site, www.marvinfrench.com.

I did have one good friend, Steve, a co-worker who lived with his parents on the next block. A fine pianist, he introduced me to classical music, chiefly Mozart and Beethoven, teaching me more than I would have learned from any "Music Appreciation" course. He acquainted me with be-pop music, very popular at the time. Besides playing it on the piano, he showed me some night spots where be-bop was played.

His folks had a big rumpus room in their basement. His father would often entertain musicians there, some from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. That was the first time I ever heard a master violinist play up close, what a revelation that was! The father liked to fish for Lake Michigan perch, and often would provide a fish fry and beer to go with the socializing. A very good memory.

Steve talked me into taking the train up to Milwaukee, an hour away, to visit the Wisconsin Roof, a large ballroom on the highest floor of a downtown building, with a "big band" orchestra. Most of the dancers were couples, but there were many singles, self-segregated by sex. This was a nicely-dressed, well-behaved group of mostly young people who loved dancing to big band music. The men wore ties and jackets. Jitterbugging, fad dancing, or cutting in was prohibited. The Roof suffered from a decline in the ballroom business in the postwar period and closed down in 1958. It's gone now, but I found a picture of it on the internet.



The custom, usual at the time, was for the unattached men to walk over to where the unattached girls stood or sat and ask one to dance, seldom refused. Being quite shy and moreover a poor dancer, I doubted that I would participate. I did mosey on over toward the women's area, however, in the unlikely hope that I would see a desirable partner. She would have to be a certain type, very rare: good-looking, slender, with a clear

eye and an open expression that signaled intelligence with no emotional baggage. To my surprise I spotted one such. I was probably 20 feet away when she happened to glance in my direction, and our eyes locked on target, like the homing device of a heat-seeking missile. Summoning up some courage, I asked her to dance.

As I said, I was a poor dancer, but with her in my arms I felt like Fred Astaire. She seemed to float along as if her feet didn't touch the floor, effortless, graceful. Her personality matched her dancing, and I immediately felt a great liking for her. Her name was Alta (which I misheard as Elta, thanks to her Wisconsin voice), and she had beautiful green eyes. Her soft and wavy light-brown hair was just long enough to frame her lovely head. After a few numbers the orchestra took a break and I returned her to the women's area, leaving after thanking her. I believed this was the polite thing to do, as an undesired hanger-on would be a burden to a girl, especially one likely to have many partners.

After a decent time I glanced over to her area, expecting that she would be dancing with someone else. Instead, she had detached herself from the group, standing on the dance floor a few yards from them. I have a mental photograph of that, extremely sharp. She wore a high-necked simple white dress. She stood with one foot slightly forward of the other, as if posing for a photographer, looking straight ahead at the orchestra across the way. Perhaps she wanted me to see that she was alone, but did not want to be perceived as looking for me. I went over, asked her to dance again, and we stayed together until closing time, after which I walked her home. Not waiting until we reached there, we frantically kissed in the hallway when leaving the ballroom. She asked me why I had left her after the first dance, and my explanation pleased her.

The walk to her home was an easy one. She lived with her parents and younger sister in a modest apartment. The sister slept in an alcove just off the living room, the opening closed off with a white sheet for privacy, while we wrestled (you might say) on the couch. We were not into premarital sex, obeying the standards of the time and place (1949 Milwaukee, Wisconsin, remember), although I was 22 and she 20.

Wanting my own transportation to pursue this relationship, I bought a jalopy 1934 Ford for \$75, borrowing the money from a small loan company. Just one headlight worked, and braking was at one rear wheel only. Also, it sometimes shimmied violently at low speeds, which I learned to stop with a sharp twist of the steering wheel. But it served the purpose, barely. I sent her a postcard, saying I would be coming to Milwaukee on a certain weekend. When I came to pick her up, she introduced me to her pleasant parents. They were quite amused that I had addressed the postcard to "Elta Nolop." That was embarrassing.

One night we parked in a lover's lane, a huge empty area with some other cars scattered around. In the midst of a kiss, Alta was startled, having seen a peeping tom's face in the window. The man said he was a detective checking the area and we were so naive we believed him. On the way out, the car would not shift out of low gear. Plugging along at a slow speed, I dreaded the rather long drive to her place, besides not knowing what I would do then. Going along, despite the lateness I came across a small gas station with an included garage. The lights were on and a mechanic was working on a car. I told him of my predicament, adding that I didn't have much money. "Well, let's have a look," he said. He then opened up the car floor and removed the small transmission, putting it on his workbench. The problem was that a small pin had broken off. He fabricated a replacement and replaced the transmission. "Have you got five dollars?" he asked. The answer was yes, and that's all he charged. If I believed in miracles...

I remember little of my subsequent weekend trips to Milwaukee, which therefore could not have been many. I cannot say that I had fallen in love, but I "had responded, as no one could help responding, to the

harmonious charm of her whole person, its strength, its grace, its tranquil frankness” (Joseph Conrad, in *Under Western Eyes*). Love would come much, much later, and much too late.

At Christmas time I quit my job and returned to San Diego, from whence I had come, driving the Ford down Route 66. The tires were rather bare, but I had a couple of mounted spares (even more bare) in the back seat. While driving through freezing sleet in Oklahoma, a huge mass of ice accumulated on the underside of the car, encasing the one working brake rod (no brakes now), but providing great stability on the icy highway. The front wheels could not turn much, so I had to be very careful going through towns. The ice melted by the time I reached Arizona. I got within 35 miles of San Diego before a tire went flat. After fixing that, I surprised my parents with an unexpected return, and rented my former bedroom from them.

Why had I returned? Simply, I was lonesome for San Diego and my friends there, and I wanted to re-enter the world of duplicate contract bridge, not possible in Waukegan. While it was sad to leave Alta, she was a dream that I could not fulfill. I had little to offer, no money, and I realized I would have to forget her. When we parted I asked her for a photograph, and she gave me one of herself in a bathing suit. I kept the photo for a long time, losing it eventually. I did not write. What could I say to her? “Forget me, I’m not good enough for you”? It was easier, if rather cowardly and insensitive, to say nothing. It didn’t occur to me that she might have been trying to say something with that picture.

That was early 1950, when I was working as a clerk in the Recreation Office of the San Diego Naval Station. Following that I bounced around on various jobs. In late 1953 I moved to New York City for a one-year stay with a US Navy nurse who was transferred there from San Diego. My mother forwarded to me a postcard from Alta that said she, her sister, and parents were driving to California in their new car. Surprisingly, the postcard was dated six months earlier. Mom had just let it sit for a while, thanks, Mom. While I surely would have responded to it had I not gone to New York City, it seemed way too late to do that. Besides, I still had nothing to offer Alta, who anyway deserved better.

In late 1955, feeling that I really should “settle down,” I married the nurse and applied for a job at Convair (later a division of General Dynamics Corporation) as an engineering aide. After 26 years with GD I retired as a Senior Engineer, having worked on every sort of aerospace vehicle: Air Force interceptors, commercial airliners, Atlas Space Launch Vehicle, Space Shuttle, Cruise Missile, and futuristic studies in the Advanced Design Group. Taking early retirement, I went to work with Cubic Corporation as a Software Specialist, working on various military projects having to do with training simulators, retiring for good after eight years.

The nurse and I had divorced after a few years, and I immediately remarried in 1960. Divorced a second time in 1988, I was doing some searches for high school classmates, hoping to get them to attend a class reunion. On a whim I put in Alta’s maiden name, expecting nothing, surely she would be married and have a new name, but there it was. Hmm, if she had married, she must be divorced (not widowed, or she would not have changed her name back). Paying a small fee, I got her address (not in Milwaukee) and phone number. I waited about a week before calling, trying to figure what I should say. Then I nervously dialed the number and after a few rings a woman’s soft voice answered. It had to be her! My heart was in my throat as I managed to say, “Is this Alta?”

“No, this is her sister. Who is this?”

“Marvin French, I knew Alta many years ago. Is Alta at this number?”

“I remember you, Marvin. I’m sorry to tell you that Alta died five years ago.”

What a shock that was, after thinking I had heard her voice. Alta had shared a house with her widowed sister and a nephew. After her death the sister hadn't bothered to change Alta's telephone listing. Had she done so, I never would have found it.

Since I was going to be within easy driving distance of her home a month later, the sister and I agreed to meet there. She would tell me about Alta and show me some pictures. This we did, and what follows is an outcome of that meeting.

The family had moved from a rustic family farm (no plumbing or electricity) to Milwaukee when Alta was halfway through the eighth grade, attending a one-room schoolhouse. Her widowed grandmother had lost the farm when the mortgage money, held in a bank, was lost in the bank's failure. This was the time of the Great Depression, when many banks failed. Her father was a jack-of-all-trades and found work as a mechanic in Milwaukee, moving the family there.

Alta was working for Northwestern Mutual Insurance in a low-level position when I met her. She had been hired one year out of high school, before that working in a department store. With college out of the question for financial reasons, her later education came from many night classes. The classes showed a wide range of interests, not just work-related, including a foreign language (French or German), classic literature, and even drafting (unusual for a woman in those days).

Over time she rose in the organization, becoming a system analyst. Management thought so highly of her that they used her as an escort for visiting VIPs, to show them around and explain the various departments. She was well-known and well-liked throughout this large company.

When Alta sent the postcard to me in 1953, saying they were driving to California, she was actually engaged at the time. Then why the postcard? Her sister said it was pretty obvious, considering that Alta broke off her engagement on their return. As so often when someone wants to end a relationship, they consider finding a replacement. That was the family's first trip outside of Wisconsin, during which they visited the Grand Canyon and California's national parks.

The sister married in 1955, and Alta, who until then had been waiting for "the perfect man," decided that the wait was futile and it wasn't appropriate for her to be single after her younger sister was married. So she found someone to marry, a serviceman who shortly afterward was stationed in Europe. On his return he proved to be an unfaithful scoundrel and Alta divorced him, the divorce not finalized until 1958. She had never stopped living at home. What a coincidence, that we both married for the same reason in the same year, both regretted it, and both terminated the marriage about the same time. She then stated that she would not marry again, but would devote herself to her career and caring for her parents, with whom she continued to live.

Nevertheless, Alta was not a stay-at-home. A lovely woman, she did not lack for dates even though she had abandoned thoughts of marriage. She liked to have fun and could always find fun things to do. She loved to read, shop, take short trips, go to plays, and dance. She would try almost anything, her sister says. She was an omnivorous and fast reader, interested in everything. She did read a lot of romantic novels, surprising for one of her intelligence. Did these give her the taste of great romance that was lacking in her life? It is tempting to think so.

Her father, a machinist, retired in 1962 after a heart attack and two strokes. For ten years Alta cared for both him and her mother, until he died of liver failure in 1972, with Alta continuing to live with her mother.

In 1974 her sister was in a terrible auto accident in which her husband was killed by a drunk driver and she severely injured. Alta cared for her all through the ordeal of recovery and rehabilitation, which took about eight months, meanwhile seeing to her teen-age nephew as well as her mother. In 1978 the sister bought a house in a Milwaukee suburb, in which she still lives. She shared the house with Alta, her mother, and her son. Alta paid for most of the household expenses, but their mother paid for the food. This was indeed a loving home, in which the widowed mother had constant companionship until she died of a heart attack in 1987.

During their time together the sisters went on trips occasionally, all within the United States. The destinations included Hawaii, Washington DC, and Orlando, Florida. They watched the liftoff of the first Space Shuttle (the Columbia, which I helped build!) from Cape Canaveral, and attended a Kentucky Derby.

In January 1973 Alta discovered a lump in her breast, which proved to be cancerous. After a mastectomy, radiation, and chemotherapy, she seemed to be cancer-free until August 1981, when pains in her lower leg led to an examination that showed the cancer had resurfaced as bone cancer, even reaching her brain eventually. Now it was her sister's turn to provide loving care, which she did for 18 months until Alta had to be hospitalized.

During that time Alta was comforted by her sister's constant presence, which she needed badly. She said that thinking about how many people died younger was a consoling thought. Not a religious person, she nevertheless turned to prayer eventually. "There are no atheists in the foxhole." Her doctor told her sister that faith kept her alive her final year, but that's hard to believe. More likely it was because she was a gal who would not give up life easily. Her sister gave me a book entitled *Timeless Truths, Priceless Promises* by Linda Gramatky Smith, dated 1981, which Alta evidently was reading sometime during her final year. It is full of inspiring and consoling quotations from various sources, including the old and new testaments. Maybe it gave her comfort, let's hope so. A typical entry is a quotation from Ralph Waldo Emerson:

Though I am weak,
Yet God, when prayed,
Cannot withhold
His conquering aid.

A false "truth" and a broken "promise."

She was taken to St Mary's hospital in Milwaukee for her last four weeks, with her sister constantly by her side "to make sure the nurses were doing their job." For a while she was seemingly awake, but unable to speak. Then she fell into a coma, and woke no more. Her sister says Alta looked as beautiful as ever, even to the end. She died March 29, 1983, at age 54, and was buried beside her father in the lovely Trinity Rest Cemetery near the small town of Hixton, WI, a 2-1/2 hour drive northwest of Madison. Her mother was later buried beside them. Her sister and nephew will someday be there too.



St Mary's Hospital

After hearing all this, and looking at photographs of Alta, then it was that I fell in love with her. One of the first photographs I saw was a duplicate of the bathing suit picture that I had lost! That did it, tears and remorse overwhelmed me, and the remorse still lingers. Like Shakespeare's Othello, I was "one whose hand, like the base Indian, threw a pearl away richer than all his tribe."

I drove to that beautiful little cemetery the following year after another visit with her sister, put a few flowers on her grave, and kissed the grass above her head.

I often wonder what would have happened had I not gone to New York. I would have responded to the postcard, and she and her family would have come to San Diego. They would put up at a motel, and I would have taken Alta out to dinner. We would talk, and she would tell me she was going to break her engagement when she got back to Milwaukee. I had a low-paying job as a shipyard inspector and could not have asked her to stay and get married to me, especially since she had a good job in Milwaukee. Also, she would not want to live far from her family. Perhaps she would have suggested that I move to Milwaukee. She would get me a position in her insurance company and find me a small apartment. That done, after a decent time we would get married and she would move in with me. Yes, I like to think that could have happened.

Or suppose I had sought out Alta after my early divorce, when she too had divorced. It just had not occurred to me to do that. She would be married and unattainable, what's the use?

Addendum: Alta's sister Phyllis died of pancreatic cancer on March 20, 2008, very close to 25 years after Alta. Her last days were in the Mt Carmel Nursing Home in Milwaukee, where she had done volunteer work for many years. She was buried beside her husband, near Alta and their parents, as was previously arranged. Alta's bachelor nephew remains in the house.

ALTA

This lovely woman slipped right through my hands,
Which lacked the strength to hold her close to me.
Thus did my weakness lose that ought to be,
Leaving us both to live in neverlands.

Twice more she reached for me, but life's demands
Made me ignore each subtly coded plea,
Leaving her none to love but family.
Work she loved too, refusing wedding bands.

After long years I found her last-known place,
But then (oh God!) they said that she was dead.
Her beauty never waned at all, they said;
She died as she had lived, with gentle grace.

All that remains of her now lies below;
All that is left for me are tears of woe.



Age 14



1949 - the lost picture



1953 - Off to California



1967 - System Analyst



Final Destination