

The Option

Happily married, a good job, two wonderful kids--the older starts at Oberlin this fall. Nearing fifty, but still in pretty good shape. What's not to like?

About the present, very little. About the past, quite a lot. I entered college young and clumsy. While my age mates were discovering sex and falling in and out of love, I was reading science fiction and playing board games. I went to mixers and tried to dance close, but nothing ever happened from there; I didn't quite graduate without ever having kissed a girl, but almost. Looking back, watching the college kids now, reading, talking, I have the feeling I missed a lot.

Which would never have mattered, aside from occasional feelings of regret, if it hadn't been for the little man from the flying saucer and his deal. That's how I think of him; he might as well have had horns and a tail for all I know, or at least all I'm going to tell. What mattered was the deal.

We all know the standard version, at least those of us who read that sort of story. You get to go back to your own past and change it. Then the time machine brings you back to your own time and you find everything is different, and not in the way you wanted. So you go back again. And again.

His deal was a little different. I get to be me again--seventeen, a Freshman, 1970, this time with everything I learned in the past thirty years. When I get tired of late night partying and friendly coeds I have an option, a return ticket. Press the button, say the magic word—details don't matter—and I'm back in my present very satisfying life with the same wife, the same kids, the same job, the same me. Plus the memories I missed first

time through. Think of it as a vacation in the past, most of four years if I want them, until my senior year ends and the option runs out. What's not to like?

I chose the first day of Freshman orientation to start. There's nobody who knows me well enough to notice the change within a thousand miles. I'll have to go home for Christmas, of course, but I'll be careful. College is supposed to change people.

The good part I expected. Who was it who said you know you are getting old when there is no such thing as a homely high school girl? I had forgotten about typewriters; writing term papers without a word processor is not my idea of fun. At least I had had the good sense to have my parents get me the little Smith-Corona electric; a manual would be even worse.

My new roommate and I agreed to turn our double into two bedrooms and no living room. Odd to have so little junk that it will all go in one room.

The orientation mixer starts in half an hour.

Two things to remember that I learned much too late:

Gawain's lesson: What every woman wants is to have her will. Act as if she, not you, is the most important person in the room.

The only erogenous zone that matters on the first date is the inside of her head.

I'm writing this down now; with luck I won't have time later tonight.

(September 10, 1970)

...

Rereading the first page, seeing how right I was, and how wrong. Controlling a seventeen year old body, hormones and all, was harder than I had expected, but mostly I managed. When I didn't—there are a lot more fish in the sea. I do not suppose my first two years set a college record, but I had a very lively time of it.

This time grades did not really matter, but I still did better than last. A lot I still remembered; for the rest, the second time is always easier. And I already knew the lesson that took me the first two years to learn: Sitting in class listening to a lecturer is mostly a waste of time; read the book instead. Which left more time for other things.

Time fades memory; I had forgotten how intense it all is. Aside from a little pot and alcohol when required by social circumstances, I stayed off drugs; I didn't need them. Even the tastes are brighter, stronger. Thinking back, or forwards, the comfortable life I left looks pale in comparison. Lows are lower, highs higher. Pale is not always bad; when Katie finally broke up with me, fall of my junior year, for days I could not read more than a few sentence before losing track. Thoughts wandering, forward and back, thinking of Katie, thinking of the wife and children I had not seen for two years, missing them. I almost took the option then.

I met Anne early in my senior year, her junior. Pretty, shy. Also very smart, although it wasn't obvious until you got to know her unless, I suppose, you saw her grades. In some ways she is a little like me the first time around. I was her first boyfriend. She wasn't opposed to the sexual revolution, just did not think it had anything to do with her. It took a long time, but it was worth it.

Last night we were talking about future plans. She still has another year to go. My nearest job offer is two hours away. Weeks apart, weekends together until she graduates. Not what we are used to, but it could be worse.

She's asleep. I am awake, reading my diary, looking at the clock. Thinking about a wife and two wonderful kids. Trying to remember.

In another three hours the option runs out.

(June 10, 1974)