

A BOARDING SCHOOL BOY'S REGRETS



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" Any story in a restricted setting - especially when everybody sleeps on site - (like boarding school) has the opportunity for enhanced drama and tension... from midnight feasts to... smuggling, to bullying, all these make for great drama."

- **Anna Smith**, film critic & broadcaster.

"... Loneliness is not a disease from which one can be cured... rather, it is an inescapable fact of human existence... When the dialogue ends, he has experienced himself in the new dimensions, evoked by the other person, and he has learned of the personal world of another. He is enlarged and changed."

- Sidney M. Jourard **'The Psychotherapist as Psychedelic Man.'**

Photographs are relics of the past, traces of what has happened. If the living take that past upon themselves, if the past becomes an integral part of the process of people making their own history, then all photos would reacquire a living context, they would continue to exist in time, instead of being arrested moments. -

- John Berger **'About Looking.'**

Previously...

Ben, a retired used bookseller and poet, inherits a large sum of money and a big house in the country. His new-found wealth offer much free time, he decides to enrol on a creative writing diploma course.

During his studies, Ben discovers he can write credible fiction. In class Alma, a female college graduate and memoir author, becomes his nurturing ally, collaboratively editing his poetry. She encourages Ben to enter a literary competition, which he does and subsequently wins.

Ben didn't tell anyone other than Alma, his favourite classmate, and Martha, his wife, that he had entered the poetry competition. When his winning poem, *The Clandestine Cilliní*, got published in Poetry Ireland, the editor described Ben's writing style thus: "*Bodkin may well become an important poet with a biblical perspective. Or, just as likely, he could become a fundamentalist, manic ranter...*"

That slapstick commendation made Ben smile. Alma asked Ben if he was going to tell the class about his literary breakthrough. He felt embarrassed to mention it, but she felt proud of his accomplishments. On the first evening after term break, Alma seized the opportunity. Her belief in him was a healing balm.

"I want to announce that Ben won a major literary prize over the Christmas holidays," she said, smiling at Ben, who sat beside her.

The class buzzed with excitement at one of their number achieving such success. This celebratory tide lifted all their boats with literary possibilities. Even the once-skeptical teacher chimed in.

"Well done, Ben. Please read your poem for us."

Ben read it with confidence, as he did on the theatre stage.

*Blank baby stare from abstract, lifeless eyes,
maternal uterus empty, groaned last goodbyes;
creation heaves, the heavenly Father cries.
Stillborn baby stiff, gently laid to rest,
hammered coffin nails, faith put to test,
milk-dampens the maternal full-sailed vest.*

When Ben finished reading, the class clapped. Their validation was an affirmation for him.

The following week, the teacher gave the college porter a copy of Ben's competition winning poem. She asked for it to be tacked onto the notice-board in the common room. It was photocopied on bright yellow paper that made it stand out among the many other notices. Ben wondered who might read it and what responses from other class students might occur?

Being a peer among younger, brighter students, studying in such a dynamic academic environment, invigorated Ben's imagination. For much of his life, he harboured literary doubts due to lack of self-esteem. His overactive alter ego was a harsh critic.

'Who am I? Just an autodidact with a penchant for poetry? Can I bring something unique to the Irish literary scene? I could never manage writing a novel. I wouldn't have the patience or stamina for such a project. However, a novella might be manageable.

Drifting into sleep one night, Ben came up with an unusual title for his novella. He would call it '**What a Difference a Day Makes**'. Soon, he came up with a series of autobiographical and imagined events to create the plot line. It would feature a middle-aged bookseller who inherits money, then retires early and enters college. The hero would exult in the interactions with younger students, revel in the academic atmosphere, then enter and win a national poetry competition.

That storyline intrigued his classmates, and their subsequent positive responses propelled him onwards. Ben couldn't stop thinking, planning and plotting, writing day and night. He became a monomaniac in his approach. It thrilled him to discover late in his literary life that he could write credible fiction.

His prodigious productivity caught classmates off guard. Most of them struggled with perfectionist aspirations, paralysing their output. Ben just raced on with carefree abandon. He was making up for decades of lost time and the missed college dynamic.

"My word count is 10,000 now," Ben said boastfully to the teacher in class one day.

"That's a lot of writing in so short a time, Ben," she replied, chiding him, presuming his project to be a novel.

"I intend to edit it."

"It's a tremendous output - but - are you reflecting enough? Novels can take years of writing, not mere months..."

"I'm writing a novella, not a novel. It will be a *Bildungsroman*."

Some in the class didn't know that literary term, so the teacher explained it.

"A novel, or novella written in *Bildungsroman* style is one of personal, emotional or spiritual discovery," the teacher explained.

A few months later, Ben showed his finished novella to his wife Martha but came to regret doing that. She forensically went through it, sentence by sentence, querying much in a tedious, pedantic way. Ben just wanted a general response. Though, it's true, he'd need an editor to fix his clumsy grammar and poor grasp of spelling.

He wanted to have the novella included as part of his diploma course assessment. It was important to get it into print as a personal accomplishment. He fully understood that his writing wouldn't make it into the weekend broadsheet newspapers review columns, but that didn't matter to him.

Ben printed fifty copies of it. He asked a few bookshops to stock his publication, but only a few copies had sold over the months. One friend kindly asked him why so few people had declined buying such a good book.

A display of art students' work got hung on the common room walls in the college. Many paintings were landscapes, seascapes, or dramatic portraits. But among those was a nuanced image that caught Ben's eye, not a painting but a large photo. It was a portrait of an unsmiling woman clothed in seaweed, titled 'The Sea Queen'. The photographer's subject wore an incongruous crown of bladderwrack and stood on a small rock, positioned on a tide-out strand.

The portrait looked enigmatic, its subject gazing out at the maritime horizon, sucking on a strand of her wavy bronze-coloured hair. Ben stood in front of it, transfixed, examining its detail. The name label under the photo stated 'X'. Nothing more.

'Wow! What a stunning shot,' Ben said to himself. 'The photographer is confident enough to not use a full name it seems,' he mused.

Many students talked and joked in the common room; the males threw balls of paper, stale bread crusts, and browning apple cores at each other. The females more passive, talking in groups, making quick sly glances at crushes. A few lads launched one or two paper gliders across the room, several even making a successful flight path above peoples' heads. Apart from his grey longish hair, Ben blended in among the students, being dressed unconventionally, wearing pink jeans, green runners, and a yellow flecked jumper.

Amid this commotion, Ben was looking over an unfinished assignment. Lying on the table in front of him sat an opened thesaurus and a fat rhyming dictionary. Sitting underneath X's interesting photo, he was crossing out some lines on a typed-out poem, tussling with how it scanned.

*First form boarding school,
apartheid enforced, after-dark rule;*

~~*In common room for junior boys*~~

*I spent most post-prep nights
passing by its windows sweet delights*

He closed his eyes to allow for extra concentration, tilted his head back and started trying to work through natural-sounding rhymes. Most modern poets wrote in blank verse, but Ben followed in the unfashionable rhyming style of John Betjeman. He sighed and stretched. His knee hit the low table and lifted one edge slightly, causing the manuscript poem to fall onto the floor.

At that moment, a chic-dressed woman entered the room. She wore jester-styled black-and-white checkered jeans, a black leather jacket and black wet-look boots. A camera hung around her neck. The first image that struck her was the daring colour combination of Ben's attire.

'What a colourful person! That man would make an excellent portrait,' she thought.

Xenia constantly took mental photos of interesting people and events in her daily life.

She noticed a page on the floor by Ben's feet. In typical caring reflex action, she bent and picked it up for him. As her short red-haired head rose in proximity to him, Ben became conscious of her movement and opened his eyes, seeing Xenia.

"There you go," she said, with a bright smile, and handed Ben his sheet.

"Oh. Thank you."

"You're busy working, I see."

"Not working, as such. Just struggling with rhymes about teenage memories of my old boarding school days."

"I'd have loved to have gone to one of those schools," she replied. "You are so lucky!"

"Well, yes, and no. So many people have a romantic idea of them from Enid Blyton books..."

"I guess I'm a romantic then," Xenia replied. "I'm Xenia, a photography student," and pointed to the camera slung around her neck.

Ben jumped straight in with a question; preliminaries didn't interest him.

"What are your favourite kind of shoot subjects?" he asked.

"Plants, flowers and portraits," she replied, undeterred by his invasive question. "In fact, that photo on the wall above your head is one of mine."

"So, you are the enigmatic person called X."

"Yes, X stands for Xenia. It's a Greek name. It means hospitable, welcoming."

"An interesting name."

"I'm Ben, obviously short for Benjamin."

"I gave myself an unforgettable name, just as rock groups do."

"Very smart. It works," Ben replied. Xenia smiled to herself at his compliment.

He turned around to take another look at her portrait shot.

"I like your curation idea a lot."

Xenia didn't know how to handle compliments and went silent.

Ben then asked, "Who's the model?"

"Have a guess. She's a student here," Xenia replied.

"It's so difficult to recognise women when they change hairstyle, clothes or makeup."

Ben couldn't come up with anyone that he knew.

"Will I give you a clue, then?"

"OK."

"Look at her eyes. That might help," Xenia said. She loved playing games and doing quizzes.

Ben searched the face in the photo harder. He thought he recognised the eyes.

"Your model might be someone I know. Is it Alma?"

"Yes!" Xenia said and clapped her hands. "I saw her late one night, jumping over a garden wall with a bunch of flowers in her hand and a wide grin on her face. That shot would have been amazing. I think I've captured her pirate-like personality. I enjoyed the shoot challenge and the dark room processing... Oops! It's class time," she said, looking at the large faced watch on her wrist. "I'd better be off." She gave a wave, then departed.

Ben watched her walk away. He later thought she might be just the person to take a portrait photo, for his upcoming novella, almost ready to print.

A few weeks later, Xenia and Ben bumped into each other on the wide granite steps that led to the large college front doors. Ben asked her if she might be prepared to take a portrait shot of him. She agreed without hesitation, then rooted in her bag for her college diary and made a note of the date that Ben proposed.

"It will be wonderful to work with a living author," Xenia said enthusiastically.

"Well, I'm not famous, but I am determined. I think I have a few interesting stories to tell, anyway."

A week later, Ben opened the front door of his house to a bag-laden Xenia who smiled as she struggled in. She looked around after placing her photography gear on the floor.

"Wow!" Xenia exclaimed, noting the interesting collectibles crowding windowsills and shelves. Die-cast Matchbox and Dinky cars, a Parker fountain pen, a pair of opera glasses, a cap gun, a kaleidoscope, a gyroscope, and a ribbon-tailed kite hanging off the stair bannisters.

"So many intriguing possibilities for photo props," Xenia said, looking around with wide eyes.

"Oh, most of those belong to Martha. Only the kaleidoscope and kite are mine."

Ben led the way into his writing room. Through the window, Xenia saw Martha in the garden, weeding the pebble pathway. Sam, their rough-haired brown terrier, lay on the large lawn nearby.

"I'll introduce you to my wife, Martha, and my dog, Sam, later."

Sam detected Xenia's unfamiliar voice and started barking. Martha looked up from her work and waved at them through the window. Xenia waved back, mirroring her gesture. Sam continued barking, so Ben let him in the back door.

Xenia looked around Ben's writing room. Two walls held floor-to-ceiling shelves crammed with books. On another wall just a large abstract oil painting of a baby's feet. A stack of LPs leaned against a portable record player.

An unusually wide and high writing desk made of oak wood caught her attention. A series of pigeon holes were its central visual feature, once used for sorting letters in a post office. Each aperture held three old wooden spools wound with a panoply of bright-coloured, shiny silk threads. Standing to attention like toy soldiers, row by row a diverse swatch of primary and secondary colours invited inspection: ranging from midnight black to royal blue, to burnt orange, to moss green.

'All those coloured silk spools would make a wonderful depth-of-field shot,' Xenia thought.

On the dark green surfaced desk were the tools of the writing trade. A jar with bright orange *Faber Castell* pencils sticking out, a few chunky rubbers. A large piece of blotting paper with a *Quink* ink bottle on top, a Parker fountain pen, and a pile of blank pages.

In the centre of this writing table stood Ben's typewriter. It was made from curved black enamelled metal and had five rows of button shaped keys. Protruding from the paper roller was a half-written poem. Xenia's took a brief sneak peek look.

*Happiest when in rubber boots,
stumbling over pine tree roots,*

*looking awed at river running awash,
see muddy waters surge and slosh...*

'What a romantic setting,' Xenia thought. 'Who's it about, I wonder? Probably the poet's wife.'

The door got unexpectedly pushed open by Sam's snout. He barked a few times and wagged his tail at Xenia. Then he stretched his front legs upwards on her jeans. His affectionate antics made her laugh and stroke him.

"Sam. Get down!" Ben rebuked.

"It's fine. I like dogs. They are so loving and uncritical."

Xenia got on her haunches and held Sam's furry head in both hands. She looked into his eyes and talked to him while Sam licked her cheeks.

"OK, Sam. Time to leave," Ben commanded, and made to open the door.

"Let him stay, Ben. We could use him as part of your portrait."

"Well, OK,"

Xenia started rooting through her bags, taking out various lenses. While she was doing this, Sam dropped his ball into her camera bag. He stepped back a few paces, cocked his head and furiously wagged his tail in anticipation. He made such an appeal with his smiling brown eyes. She couldn't resist interacting with him.

She threw the ball, and it landed in a small rubbish bin beside the writing desk. Sam ran across the room, nose to the ground, tail wagging like clockwork. He upturned the bin and rooted in the mound of scrunched up drafts of writing to get his beloved ball.

"Sorry," Xenia said.

Ben pointed at Sam, scowled at him and said: "Sam, sit!"

Then, just as Ben was going to set the waste basket upright, Xenia intervened.

"Please, leave the paper spill as it is. It adds interest to the scene. Now, I want you to sit looking at your typewriter. Pretend you are struggling to get a poem right. And let's have Sam in the frame!"

Xenia loved creating theatrical-like scenes, *mise-en-scène* elements of portraiture photography. She took out her light meter and then set up her tripod, humming an innocuous tune. Now and then she muttered numeral reminders to herself.

"Will you type something so that I capture the long letter stems of the typewriter in action?" Xenia asked.

She took the wooden, three-step library stool that stood in front of the book shelves. It would give her extra height, to capture the inner workings of Ben's typewriter. Without looking up from her viewfinder, Xenia asked Ben why he started writing, to get him talking and make him feel more comfortable. Meanwhile, Sam lay down his head and soon fell asleep, legs jerking slightly and voice faintly barking as he dreamed.

"In third year at boarding school, my girlfriend Amelia took an overdose. That saga provoked my first ever poem."

"Why on earth did she do such an extreme thing? Were you her first boyfriend, perhaps?"

"Yes, I was. I'd love to meet her again. I've so many questions that I'd ask now..."

Xenia realised she'd get far more verbal detail than she really wanted.

"Raise your chin and straighten your back more. I'd prefer to not portray you with a double chin, nor in a slouchy position!"

Ben sat up more, but Xenia wasn't happy. She walked towards Ben.

"No. Not like that," she said. With her hands, as if she were arranging an Action Man figure, she guided his upper torso into a better position. "That's much better. Now, pretend you are typing," she said.

She went back to her camera and peered through the viewfinder and took a few shots.

"Now, please turn your body and shoulders more towards the camera. And smile, please!" she urged.

Ben wanted to perform his best for her and tried a smile, but felt self-conscious. Xenia jumped off the short steps. Wondering how to lighten his serious look, she stood behind his chair and gave his ribs a playful poke. Then he laughed, startling Sam from his sleep.

"That's the kind of relaxed look that I want."

Ben listened to the repeated click of the shutter and the ratcheting sound of the wound-on film.

Outside, the sky was becoming overcast. Xenia preferred shooting in natural light, but now the weather was working against her. Then she saw a red angle-poise lamp in a corner of the room, and without asking, set it up near Ben's typewriter and turned it on.

Half an hour passed with Xenia taking shots from different angles and heights. Then Ben started feeling exhausted from the effort. Xenia noted the strain in his look.

"I think I have enough shots," Xenia said. "Shall I make us some coffee now? You look pretty shattered."

"I'd appreciate that."

The way she spontaneously offered to play the role of host, even though not in her own house intrigued Ben. He led the way to the kitchen and showed her where the coffee and coffee pot were. After the kettle boiled and the aromatic caffeine permeated the room, Xenia joined Ben at the kitchen table.

"Now, tell me more about your school," she suggested.

Ben told of all that he had loved and lost: the pillow fights, the apple-pie bed-sheet jokes, the midnight feasts and illicit walks on rural roads, the girlfriends, the annual supper-dances, the evening assemblies mitched. And he mentioned Amelia, again. He also spoke of the much-relished independence gained, and his escape from divorcing parents. Xenia detected poignancy in his voice.

Later, their conversation moved to art and what inspired each of them. Xenia told how her fingers constantly itched to twist lenses into focus, arranging the correct curation in the viewfinder. That was when she felt fully alive. Ben explained how his irrepressible brain kept on suggesting rhymes for sentences that his alter ego came up with, as he viewed poetic scenes, giving free rein to his imagination.

What he enjoyed most was writing dramatic biographical poems about significant people from history, like Handel, composer of The Messiah, or concert organist and missionary, Albert Schweitzer, and William Wilberforce, the freer of slaves. He also explained why he wrote 'portrait poems' for friends, trying to capture the essence of who they were.

Then Martha entered the back door and shook off her muddy wellington boots, sending a spray of clotted mud across the floor. Her casual action surprised Xenia.

"How did the shoot go?" Martha asked.

"It went well," Ben replied.

"I'd better be going. I'll develop these photos by next week," Xenia said. Shy and not wanting to further intrude, she took her leave.

The following week Xenia showed Ben ten different angled shots of him at his typewriter. Ben didn't choose what Xenia thought was the best shot. She had her own criteria, but was learning to let go, to accept compromise.

With his text complete and a cover photo chosen, Ben booked an appointment with a local printer. The typesetter and Ben chose the font and paper tint to use. A few weeks later, Ben collected fifty copies of his novella, *What a Difference a Day Makes*. It was a thrill to show a printed copy to Martha. She glanced at a few pages randomly and found a few small grammatical errors. Ben didn't care at this stage. Life was imperfect, so what if a few mistakes got missed in the proof reading?

He held a launch party in his house, inviting his classmates and, of course, Xenia. She took many photos to commemorate this significant-to-Ben publishing event: people talking, smiling, laughing, drinking wine.

Ben read a portion of the novella to the gathering:

'The poet pushed the library's heavy entrance door. As he tiptoed in, his shoes squeaked on the polished parquet floor, disturbing the quietness. One or two people peered at him in slight annoyance, then resumed browsing. In his haste heading for the reference room, one face he didn't observe was Alma's, but she had spotted him.

*He sat on a low seat and rifled through the past weekend's newspapers, concentrating on the arts and literary supplements. Next, he turned to the column called '**Zozimus**', featuring gossipy reports of book launches, gallery openings, and concert events. The journalist highlighted a new diploma course in creative writing for both graduates and mature students.*

Never having been to college, the thoughts of academic learning in a communal atmosphere appealed to Ben. The possibility of studying for the first time, even though

late in life, was exhilarating. Perhaps this course might help validate his small literary hopes...'

Xenia's photo on Ben's book cover helped get her work known around the college. It would also be good to have this commission when tutor assessment happened. She realised the one thing missing from her portfolio were photos related to community living. Remembering Ben talking about his boarding school, she came up with an idea. The next time they met in college, she asked,

"What might be the chances of my photographing your old school for a portfolio project? I might capture that lost atmosphere that you so often reminisce about."

"What a wonderful idea! I'll write to the Principal and see if we can get permission. I don't think anyone else has done this type of project of the school."

Ben informed Martha of the proposed photo project. She had always been intrigued by Ben's unstoppable affection for his old school, regardless of the teacher who beat him up and the headmaster's *faux pas*.

Initially, Martha wondered about the wisdom of letting her husband spend time alone with a much younger student. She noted how animated Ben was whenever Xenia's name cropped up in conversation.

Martha ambiguously accepted his going there with Xenia. Next, Ben wrote to the school, outlining Xenia's idea and asked for their permission. He strategically suggested that the proposed photos might be useful for the following year's centennial celebration. For good measure, he enclosed one of his homage school poems.

Girls swung racquets, balls pinged off taut strings:

mini-skirted sporty torsos made male hearts sing;

slim athletic limbs, white runners, short socks,

contoured t-shirts, ear tucked long shiny locks.


On Saturdays, Arts Block stairs ascended,

authors and artists in library books; I pretended

to understand their secular existential despair:

that wood-panelled space, place of pagan prayer.

A month later, in September, a letter arrived from the school principal. It contained a positive response to Ben's request. He informed Xenia, and she beamed on hearing the good news. Next, Ben phoned up his old housemaster, informing him of their photo project and asking if they might stay two nights at his house. The housemaster said that he'd be pleased to facilitate an old pupil.

 n the three-hour drive to the school in Ben's big, classic American car, he and Xenia chatted about wide-ranging subjects. They opined on political, philosophical and personal points of view; from the population explosion to the meaning of life and private family happenings.

Ben expressed his Christian beliefs and the message of the Bible. Xenia, in contrast, shared her religious scepticism. Their new friendship had few conversational barriers. Their growing propinquity of repeat encounters was exhilarating to him. Did she think the same? He pondered.

Then Xenia exclaimed: "Stop, stop!"

Ben wondered at the urgency and braked, tyres skidding on roadside grit. Xenia reached into the rear seat to retrieve her camera in its snug brown leather case and opened the passenger door to get out.

"I've just seen a large orchard with a crop of ripe apples! The rows of trees look wonderful. I just must take a few photos."

Ben watched Xenia as she looped the camera's leather strap around her neck. She then leaned over the field's barbed wire fence, muttering as she adjusted the lens settings, then took some shots. Ben next saw her looking for a way through the fence, but her coat got snagged. She didn't ask for help, trying to solve this problem herself.

"Why not ask for some help?" Ben challenged her.

Xenia didn't reply and put an arm behind her back to try to un-snag her coat. Ben walked over and held up one of the barbed wire strands to help her get through. She thanked him and strode off through the field towards the orchard. He wanted to go with her but stalled, not knowing if his presence would be welcome. So, observed her working from a distance. He admired her curiosity as she sought shadows, shapes, and light and how they interacted with each other.

"Ben! I need you to help me," Xenia's voice shouted from the distance.

As he neared her, she was arranging a wooden ladder, placing it between the lower thick gnarled branches. Then with both hands holding it, she tested it for wobble.

"OK. Climb, please," she instructed.

"And then?"

"Pick a few apples!" Xenia said with a conspiratorial grin.

Ben hesitated halfway up the ladder. He didn't have a head for heights and a wood splinter had speared into one of his palms. Xenia shot in a determined way. In the distance, a dog barked.

Ben picked a few apples and stuffed them in his trouser pockets. Xenia lay flat on her back in the grass underneath the ladder to get a different perspective.

"Now, drop an apple towards me." Xenia commanded, her face obscured by the camera.

"Seriously?" Ben asked.

"Of course!"

Her shirt accidentally untucked from her jeans, exposing her petite belly button and the sculpted curve of slightly-exposed pale hips. Distracted by such feminine beauty, he miscalculated, and dropped the apple closer than Xenia had intended, accidentally smacking the lens of her camera.

"Oops! Sorry," Ben said and turned blushed.

He expected Xenia to grumble or get cross, but she didn't. Instead, she continued shooting film. The weather suddenly turned, and it drizzled, but that didn't distract her. When she eventually finished, Ben descended the slippery wooden rungs and stood sheltering under the dripping leafy branches. Raindrops on the curved surfaces of the apples made the reds and greens stand out more sharply.

The approach of a barking dog brought a quick halt to their *ad hoc* photo session. They both ran back to the car. As they slammed the car's doors shut, they laughed so much that they lost their breath. Their cheeks flushed, their hair wet and their foreheads sweaty from their run.

"That was a close call," Ben said, when he got his breath back.

"Yes, indeed. The thrill of the chase!" Xenia replied.

"Shall we share an apple?" Ben asked and pulled one out of his pocket, handing it to her. She took a few big bites from it. Her small white teeth made a crunching sound. An arc of apple juice sprayed towards him. He patiently waited his turn while she ate some of the fruit...

When she had consumed over half of the apple, Ben repeatedly tried to snatch it from her. Her up-down-left-right gaming reflexes were quicker than his, though. She giggled at his slow failure to grasp the remains of the apple.

Then, putting niceties aside, Ben leaned completely over to her side of the car. For the first time, their bodies met in play wrestle. One of his hands gripped her free arm, the other held on to her wrist, preventing further evasive movement. She wriggled to free herself, but failed.

“Ow! Stop! You are hurting me.”

Ben overestimated her Tomboy-like apparent toughness, so he let go. Then she handed him the apple, and he finished what was left of it.

They travelled on. Many questions were on Ben’s mind. Would favourite buildings still be standing after three decades? Might the outdoors bell still toll for meals and class breaks? Would he meet the teacher who had beaten him up?

At school, Ben usually read books in the library. Other than that, he practiced for his piano lessons. He also spent time with his girlfriend, Amelia. He wasn’t academic or sporty. Most of the teachers allowed him to find his own path, which was in art, music, and writing. For that acceptance, he was forever grateful.

Motoring slowly up the leaf-littered drive, they passed the same century-old rugged trees, those weather-worn, stoic sentries standing to attention. A groundsman was sitting on an old tractor that puffed a pillar of smoke into the cool autumnal air. He pulled a Victorian-looking combine behind. Ben rolled down his window and inhaled the scent of cut grass and diesel exhaust.

The tennis courts were net-less and fringed with drifts of golden-coloured leaves in its corners. Just beyond these were the rugby fields, where he never represented his school team, except for bringing on the orange quarters at half time. And beyond those playing fields were rough pathways through a copse where he rode his home-made chopper bike. The high granite walls that encircled the school grounds bound all these scenes.

As he cycled, ducking under branches and skidding around corners, he daydreamed of riding a Harley Hog in the ‘Easy Rider’ movie, unseen apart from a dorm poster. Steppenwolf’s rock song, ‘Born to be Wild’, playing on a loop in his head, spangly electric guitar and raucous chorus:

“Get your motor runnin’

Head out on the highway,

Looking for adventure

And whatever comes our way...’

As Xenia saw the many buildings, she got excited. Ben parked the car in front of a modern building with floor-to-ceiling picture windows. They sat for a few minutes while Ben gave a brief running commentary:.

"The first room on the left is the Woodwork Room. That's where I executed poorly constructed dovetail joints."

Xenia laughed at Ben's self-deprecation.

"The next room is the Junior Boys' Common Room. That's where I idled away many evening hours after prep, tuning into pop stations on the valve radio. My housemaster stated in a term report: *'Ben spends far too much time listening to the radio, and leads an aimless existence.'*"

Music of all sorts played an important part of Ben's life. He didn't mind being chided by that acid reprimand.

"I listened to the Motown sounds: Jackson Five, Stevie Wonder and The Temptations. One top ten song that I remember well, was called 'Oh Happy Day'. It had wonderful hand-clapping, muted piano and drums leading the mass choir melody. The full-throated gospel chorus once strengthened my resolve to escape when trapped in that room. A pimple pocked bully drop-kicked a rugby ball outside and kept it ricocheting off the door."

"Were you scared?" Xenia asked.

"Each time that ball smacked, it sent a coded malevolent message from that bully to this scut. I had no other way of escape except to make a dash past the bully. I can still remember him laughing like a hyena. I cracked the door open. Seeing the bully's back turned, I made a dash for it and ran zig zag towards the exit. He turned and saw me." "Don't think you'll escape, Bodkin!" he shouted. In his haste to not miss his opportunity, he mis-kicked the ball, and it fell far short. I escaped unscathed."

"Well, that's some story Ben," Xenia said in reply.

Ben and Xenia got out of the car then. He brought her to the lecture hall, with its shiny black grand piano, glass cabinets of leather-bound books, tiered benches and oil paintings of past headmasters. The same cloying waxy smell of polish from years ago emanated from the wooden parquet floor tiles.

"This is where we had boring Sunday evening spiritual lectures and is also where the choir rehearsed. Films also got shown here on Saturday nights. Those were wonderful opportunities for an illicit snog with whatever girlfriend I had."

Then Ben brought Xenia down the adjoining corridor to a classroom. The blackboard showed a series of maths calculations scribbled in chalk. Maths was one of his most hated subjects.

"One free afternoon, I was gazing out those large sash windows, daydreaming. I leant against those old-fashioned, warm, bulbous radiators looking out at the autumnal landscape. I remember the skylights rattling in the wind. Then in walks Amelia..."

Xenia suspected the start of another long story but needed to begin her survey of the scene for her project.

"I'd better get going on my reconnaissance of all the buildings and grounds," Xenia cut across him. He accepted her interruption graciously.

Ben wanted to go with her, pointing out places and regaling her with his memories. But Xenia wanted to be alone to concentrate, gain her own perspectives, and not be influenced just by Ben. This project was to be on community school life and not only Ben's perspective. They went their separate ways, agreeing to meet at tea-time bell.

A few hours later Ben was waiting for Xenia in the shelter of an archway. Rain fell heavily, bouncing off the handball alley's slabbed surface. Xenia's silhouette approached from the far end of the sheltered walk-way, laden with all her camera apparatus.

They ran to the car getting their clothes slightly soaked. A few awed boarder boys stood around his car oblivious of the downpour, admiring its exotic curves and sci-fi styled rear fins. As Ben and Xenia approached, the boys drifted off to get their tea in the dining room.

Ben unlocked the passenger door, then rushed to the driver's side. They both sat looking out through the windscreen streaked with rain. Droplets fell on its large curved glass, joining each other, creating small rivulets on the windscreen. The wet windows made the outside scenes appear abstract. Rain drummed insistently on the soft top canvas roof.

"Well, how did you find things?" Ben asked and looked at her profile.

"There are many buildings and general scenes to take pictures of. You'd better draw up a list of favourites, so that nothing gets forgotten."

"I meant to do that before we came. Martha even reminded me."

The car windows started misting up. A drip fell down the back of Ben's shirt collar. He looked up at the canvas roof.

"Damn!" he exclaimed.

"What's the problem?", Xenia asked.

"There's a leak," Ben replied and pointed to the source of the drip.

He turned the ignition key, kicking the V8 engine into action, and revved it a bit, enjoying its distinctive exhaust noise. Then he reversed the car slowly, looking through the rear window over his right shoulder. He switched on the wipers and the large round headlights. The beams outlined uniformed girls and casually dressed boys running in the rain towards the dining room.

Exiting the tall granite gates, Ben drove for five minutes. Then he parked in the drive of a Georgian terraced house, where his retired housemaster lived.

"How did you get on with your housemaster?" Xenia asked.

"He was like a proxy parent to me. There was hardly a Saturday when he hadn't put me in detention."

"You don't sound as if you minded."

"Absolutely right. It was the best discipline for the rebellious teenage boy that I was. Smoking, not doing prep and caught kissing girls in unlit classrooms..."

Ben got their suitcases from the car boot and locked the doors. They walked over the pebbled drive, small stones shone from the rain. At the top of the rough granite steps, Ben put down their cases and pressed the large doorbell button, encased in a brass dish-shaped circle. Its loud carillon sounded inside the hallway.

The opening of the heavy front door followed carpet-muffled footsteps. Light streamed out from the hallway and the housemaster's wife welcomed them.

"Come in out of that horrible rain. I'll bring you up to your bedrooms."

Up three flights, they climbed on the faded carpet. On the last landing, she showed them their separate sleeping quarters, rooms side by side.

"When you're ready, come down to the dining room. I'm just finishing the cooking," she said.

After they both unpacked their cases, they met on the landing. Descending to dinner, they stopped to admire paintings on the stairwell wall. They also paused at a big arch-shaped window and looked out at the narrow oblong back garden.

Over the meal, Ben, and his housemaster exchanged many school memories. The housemaster's wife engaged Xenia in conversation about her school days and her studies in college. After dinner, Xenia, and Ben retired to their rooms.

Ben tossed and turned. He recalled his good and bad experiences from many decades before. On the other side of the wall, Xenia read a few old scholar's magazines left on her bedside locker. She was interested in reading different accounts of old scholars' memories, along with obituaries of former students. Normally a good sleeper, the challenge of how she would approach this exciting project kept her awake deep into the night.

She thought how she wanted to capture the school in the style of Atget, the classic photographer who shot early morning, un-peopled Parisian scenes, focussing on architectural detail.

At 6.30 AM. the next morning, Ben knocked on her bedroom door.

"Are you up?" he whispered.

"Yes," she replied, and exited her room. She dressed in dark working clothes, black jeans and jacket.

"So, how did you sleep?" Ben asked.

"Well enough," she said, not wanting to admit to insomnia. She patted her braids. "Shall we go, then?"

They tiptoed down the creaky carpeted stairs, hoping not to waken the elderly couple. In the hallway, Xenia picked up her camera bag and tripod. Together they entered the house basement and opened the garden door. Their shoes crunched on the pebbled pathway, confetti-strewn with fallen leaves. They passed shadowed flowerbeds.

Xenia halted to listen to the full-throated birds singing. Their feathered silhouettes swooped back and forth from bush to tree, one or two hopped on the dewy lawn. A few flew close to them, their swift wing movements startling Ben.

"What a magnificent dawn chorus!" Xenia exclaimed and smiled.

"Their songs are so sweet and strong, so noble; a sunrise symphony," Ben replied.

They walked through an old-fashioned, ivy-woven gate which led into the garden next door. As Ben opened the chest high wrought iron gate, it loudly squeaked. Xenia noticed their shoe imprints on the dew-dampened grass.

Ben then pulled open a weatherworn door in a boundary wall. It led to the school grounds along the gritty, grey-coloured all-weather pitches. Xenia looked at the vista: sports fields in the foreground, old Scots' pine trees and school buildings spotlit by rising sun at a short distance.

"That square white block at the end of the pitches was my dorm," Ben informed her. "Behind that are the sheds that held sports nets. It was also rendezvous point for many Romeos & Juliets on dark nights. The high jump cushions were ideal for snogging on."

"I presume you brought Amelia there?"

"Yes, I did. On one of our visits to that shed, our nervous giggles gave us away. We heard a teacher's footsteps on the flagstones outside and retreated into the rear of the building.

"Did you get caught?"

"In our haste to hide, we knocked over a bag of cricket equipment. The shed door opened and a bright torch scanned the darkness. He commanded us to come out from hiding, but we didn't. Then he appeared to go away."

"Did he really go away?" Xenia asked.

"No, he'd hidden behind a corner to catch us. When he confronted me, I lied and said the games master had asked me to tidy up the shed. He checked with that master, then challenged me much later, just before lights out."

"I'd better concentrate now on taking photos. I don't want to miss the interesting effect of dawn light."

She closed one eye, then looked at the dorm block building through the viewfinder. Ben waited until she indicated conclusion. He led the way towards the classroom they visited the day before. Loose wooden parquet tiles creaked under their shoes. Xenia inhaled the chalk dust and ink. The loose panes of the high skylight windows rattled from a strong breeze, just like he remembered.

On the blackboard in chalk writing was a list of Latin verbs: *amo, amas, amat, amamus, amatis, amant*. Facing the rows of lidded, sloping wooden desks was a low platform that mounted the teacher's desk. In its carved-out trough were sticks of chalk and a blackboard eraser.

Ben remembered his Latin teacher, Bam-Bam, a bald-headed, pencil-moustached man, who wore the same baggy, grey flannel suit every day. Ben imitated his deep booming bass voice for Xenia: 'Boy, if I cut your head in two and found concrete in one half, what would I find in the other half? More concrete!'

Xenia laughed at Ben's imitation of the teacher's droll put-down and wondered if it was ever aimed at Ben in class.

"This room is so old-fashioned and atmospheric. I love the grained wood of the partition between the two class rooms," Xenia said.

She set up her tripod, placed her camera on it and adjusted her settings. Then she bent over and squinted through the viewfinder.

"Could you step aside, please? Your shadow is affecting my view."

Unbidden, Ben started telling her about the romance that took place in that room, distracting her concentration. She sighed and reluctantly humoured him by listening.

"One gloomy winter evening, I was looking out of the windows in this classroom. I was wearing a long, hand-knitted, yellow scarf. My transistor was blaring out Hendrix's psychedelic version of 'All Along the Watchtower':

'There must be some kind of way outta here

Said the joker to the thief,

There's too much confusion

I can't get no relief...'

"Amelia, a classmate, entered and switched on the lights. I saw her reflection in the window, as she leaned over the teacher's desk. She was reading Asterix in French in the back pages of a broadsheet newspaper.

Her long blond hair curtained high cheekbones that mesmerised me.

'Please lower your radio volume. I'm trying to read,' she said.

"A short while later, needing the toilet, I left my transistor and scarf on the windowsill. On returning minutes later, they were missing, and so was Amelia.

"I looked in the library, the piano rooms, and even braved the squeals of protest from entering the girls common room. She was nowhere to be found.

Walking around the buildings to the games pitches, I thought I spotted my purple scarf in the distance. I tip-toed alongside the gravel path, so Amelia wouldn't detect me. Then locking both my arms around her waist from behind and refused to let her go. One thing led to another and we kissed. That was the start of a one-term relationship. She broke us up at the entrance to the supper dance."

*Amelia read Asterix in the Irish Times,
she exuded charm, engaged in crimes:
that "darling" thief stole my treasured transistor,
I caught the culprit, I couldn't resist her.*

*Premature lovers, promiscuous teens,
contours mapped out under jumpers green:
oh amorous apples, swoon of soft skin,
ignoring biblical command, indulging in sin.*

"That's so romantic. Did you ever show it to her?"

"I left it too late. I found out that she was dying at the time of writing."

"That's kind of spooky, isn't it? And so, so sad. Does Martha mind you writing about such romantic feelings for old girlfriends?"

"Not at all. I've written several poems paying homage to those girls, including Amelia. She's not jealous of my teen romances."

"Now, you really must stop talking. I've got to get on with my work."

Xenia made a variety of facial expressions as she concentrated, humming a made-up soft melody, her fingers twisting lens settings with subtle micro-movements. Then she pressed the camera button repeatedly, opening and shutting the lens' aperture. Next, there was the sound of the film being quickly wound on to the next frame. He wished he also had a camera to capture her in action.

"Now, I want to get shots of the school buildings from a height. Where could we do that from?" Xenia asked.

"There's only one prominent building in this school, and that's the administration block."

They went across the car park to that Georgian era building. Its outside walls showed gaps where random cladding slates had fallen off. A fern incongruously protruded from between the brickwork at one point. A palm seedling stuck out of one of the chimney pots, high on the roof. This building needed some love and maintenance.

Ben pushed the heavy oak front door open, marvelling once more at its large polished brass handle. In the flagstoned hall a grandmother clock's tick-tock echoed. They climbed the circular stone steps to the first floor. In the distance, down long corridors, domestic staff members shouted greetings to each other over the sound of busy vacuum cleaners.

On the first floor, Ben approached a door and turned the small loose handle. Inside, there were a few bookcases of old novels showing sun faded, warped covers. In the room's centre stood a circular table, a few chairs, an old-fashioned electric heater, and a walnut framed baby grand piano.

"This is the Visitor's Room," Ben announced and reached for the light switch. The heavy velvet curtains were drawn closed.

"Don't turn on any light. Pull the curtains open instead. I want to capture the dining block and frontage in that orange opaque light. It creates an interesting atmosphere," Xenia said.

She walked over to the partially misted-up tall windows and looked out. The yellow-tinted light below gave a mystical atmosphere to the room. It seeped in through the windows and offered ample light to negotiate the room's dim interior.

Faint muffled sounds rose from the dining room below, cutlery clanged, cereal bowls and plates clattered as they were being set out on long plain tables. Xenia walked to the windows and took photos of distant buildings with a long range lens. As she worked she adopted many athletic stances, taking shots from differing angles. A while later, she announced those shots satisfied her.

They stood side by side in silence, looking out the window, watching the sun rise above the many school buildings and nearby house roofs. After a few minutes, Xenia said, "Did you miss home much?"

Ben recalled seeing his peers greet their parents on weekends. They came to visit their children, bringing them for a drive, then out to a meal in the Tower Hotel down by the quays.

"No, not at all. I was one of few first year boys that didn't cry on my first night here. I was so happy to be away from arguing parents."

Xenia wondered had her many peppered questions stirred up unhappy memories. Ben didn't mind recounting all his experiences, be they good or bad.

Of course, Ben had story that centred around this Visitors Room. It wasn't a good story and it changed the trajectory of his teen life.

"This room was the setting for a major denouement, the end of my boarding school days. Would you like to hear that story?"

"Of course. I find your many life dramas pretty compelling," Xenia replied encouragingly this time.

Ben started telling that life-changing story, the one which caused him to leave boarding school.

"About Amelia and I hiding in games shed. She managed to evade that teacher on duty and got back to her dorm undetected. I thought that our supposed reason for being there was convincing. But later, just before lights-out, as I got ready for bed, taking off my shoes and socks, the teacher who caught me earlier, summoned me."

"Bodkin! You lied to me earlier on," he challenged.

"I told him he could put me in detention and that I was immune to such punishment."

"The other boys in the dorm paused changing into their pyjamas and waited to see how this tense exchange would play out."

"Oh, that was cheeky..." Xenia interjected.

"Yes indeed. Those challenging words caused me a lot of problems over the following twenty four hours."

"How so?"

"As I turned to leave, my shoulder-length hair suddenly got yanked. The teacher dragged me using my hair like a harness, pulled me past the prefects' room and washroom."

"Did you try to pull free?"

"What would the point be? There was no escape. At the top landing, his unexpected push launched me into the abyss. My frightened scream echoed as I tumbled down the stairs. I lost my footing and fell pellmell. Face, arms and glasses scraped against the rough brick wall."

"Oh, my goodness! He could have broken your neck!!"

"He was lucky that he didn't. At the bottom steps, my specs sprang off my nose. Everything was a blur. My head started throbbing and my elbow was bleeding. The teacher ran down the stairs. His muscular hands rugby-tackled me, then he threw me out the open door. I tumbled down the steps, then fell, landing on the pathway. He followed me and hauled me up by my jumper, pummelling me in the stomach. Boys in their pyjamas crowded around the top floor windows, viewing this bout with shocked amazement."

"Did anyone intervene?"

"Who would intercede on my behalf against that teacher? The prefects? Some brave pupil?"

Xenia got embarrassed for asking such a naive question.

"But aren't Quakers meant to be pacifists?"

"The headmaster was a Quaker, as most teachers at the school were. This one wasn't though. I got defiant at his bullying and retorted: 'If you think.... that.... will make..... me.... say sorry.... you're wrong.'

"I'd imagine that angered him."

"It did. His reddened face came up close to mine. His shouting produced spittle that splattered my cheeks. The smell of stale male sweat and nicotine made me almost gag. Bruised and sore, I conceded defeat and uttered an insincere apology. The beating halted. I caught my breath and walked back into the building, found my specs on the floor and picked them up."

"What a dramatic story!"

"I wish now that I had punched him back, or had run down the dark rugby pitches. Sleepless all that night, I ran away early the next day."

"I'm so glad that you did! He was so unjust."

It pleased Ben that Xenia sympathised with him.

"I dressed very early the next morning, bulked out my bed with spare clothes, and tip-toed out of the dorm. Heading for the stairs, one of my leather boots slipped from the bundle. It clattered on the floor. I froze, listening, then picked it up. Behind the prefects

door, one of them muttered in his sleep, then settled back into a steady snoring. Getting caught in the act of escape would have been such an extra humiliation.

"After descending the stairs, I sat on the cold concrete steps outside and buttoned up my grey Army Store greatcoat. I pushed my socked feet into tall leather boots and pulled up the zips.

The gritty ash surface of the car park crunched underfoot as I tiptoed away. Birds started up their scattered chorus. Next, I went to deflate that bully teacher's Morris Minor tyres. Then I ran down the drive, past the gatehouse, and out the gates to my freedom."

"A hill led down into town, then I made my way over a river bridge to the railway station. My fear was, might a prefect notice my absence on the bench at breakfast? Would some idiot blab about my runaway?"

Ben recalled the grumbling bass hum of the train's engine throbbing through the empty station. Its diesel exhaust enhanced Ben's headache caused by hunger, lack of sleep and last night's falling impact. His empty stomach rumbled as he hid in a locked toilet cubicle and waited. A few station office doors opened and shut. Staff exchanged greetings and jokey jibes.

Ben waited for an hour, opened the toilet door and peered out at the concourse. The large station clock showed five minutes to eight. A loudspeaker announced imminent departure. He snuck out from his hiding place and boarded the train, choosing the carriage furthest away from the platform.

Out the nearest window, the view was of the cliff rock-face. Across the aisle, the far window framed the bridge and river quays. The train horn then hooted, the carriage gave a jolt.

It sped past industrial silos, riverside warehouses, and far off housing estates on the hills. Soon, farms and fields sped past the dirt-smearred carriage windows. He exhaled a sigh of relief, but his troubles weren't over.

After being on the train Ben had to explain to the ticket inspector why he had no ticket, his upper lip quivering nervously. He related the bully teacher's beating, not expecting to be believed. It surprised Ben that this adult found him credible and told him not to worry. He just wrote his name and addresses in a notebook and brought Ben a cup of tea and a few plain biscuits.

"What an adventure!" Xenia said, immersed in Ben's drama.

"It didn't feel like one. When I got home, my mother rang the school to report where I was. The headmaster and she agreed I should return that night, even though school holidays were just four days away. A bit of time would have made all the difference to the rest of his young life..."

"Was the headmaster angry with you for running away?"

"No. He was relieved to have me back. The board of management now didn't need to know about it. He also told me he had dropped his college-going son to that same train I got. He could have caught me before I escaped. In our conversation, he also let slip that my father had fallen behind paying the school bills."

"Why on earth did he mention that?"

"Who knows? When he saw the shock on my face, he blurted out that the charity committee had paid them on my behalf."

"What an embarrassment for you."

"This shame coming on top of my toxic relationship with Amelia, convinced me to leave that school."

"On account of other people's problems?" Xenia said and touched his arm to show empathy.

"Indeed. So much for the noble school motto: '*Una persona sit amet.*'"

"What does that mean?"

"It translates as: 'One person can make a difference'. I wonder, did my act of protest have any impact and make any difference?"

This tsunami of emotional conflict was overwhelming for Xenia. Her face was facing downwards as she reflected, not knowing what to reply. Ben wondered had he revealed too much.

"Let's move on and I'll show you the old gym," Ben said, to change the subject.

When they got there, Xenia felt underwhelmed by how plain it looked, with worn wooden floorboards and plaster cracked walls.

"Not much to capture here, Ben, I'm afraid."

"I agree. But this is where the annual supper dance took place."

Ben told Xenia about that school calendar highlight event and how he helped clueless boys who sought his sartorial advice: whether to wear wide crushed velvet flares or narrow Levi jeans, and what colour Paisley patterned shirts and kipper ties worked best together.

Long-anticipated supper dance,

psychedelic strobes, furtive glances;

late-sixties student, born to be wild:

underground sounds, flower child.

*Restless teens queued at dance hall doors,
soles slip-tested soap-flaked floors;
bright balloons bulged in nets above,
Motown melodies, sweet puppy love.*

"That's so evocative!"

"Thank you. I regret now that I hadn't stayed until Fourth Year, when I could have helped decorate the dancehall and maybe even had a go at being DJ..." Ben said ruefully.

Next visited was a plain and modern classroom, where much of his emotional life got shaped. To her, it looked boring. Nothing stood out as being image-worthy. It was just a modern cube-shaped room. It was a challenge for Xenia to capture his painful past.

"This is where whispers circulated the morning after I split up with Amelia."

"What were they about?"

"That Amelia was in hospital getting pumped out from an overdose attempt."

"Oh, no! What a horrible, very public, way to find out such devastating news!" Xenia exclaimed.

"I felt so guilty. I started sweating and thought I was going to vomit. The teacher agreed to let me go to the toilet. As I shut the classroom door behind me, my ears started whistling and my vision flared. I was faint. I doubled-up and vomited just outside the closed door."

"Over the following days, a torrent of vitriol got directed against me by classmates. I felt so isolated. That was when I scribbled my first teenage trauma verse on a torn-out exercise page."

"Do you still have it? It would make an interesting photo."

"I never kept a copy. Maybe Amelia still has it, wherever she is? When I realised she was returning from the hospital a few days later, I tore it up and threw it away. Amelia heard gossipy rumours about it and hunted obsessively for it."

"And did she find it?"

"Yes. Those torn shreds of paper lay in the bottom of the classroom bin, among hard bubblegum lumps, empty ink cartridges, and stubs of chalk sticks. She sellotaped the page back together."

"What did that poem say, if I may ask?"

"I can't remember all of it but a few verses stuck in my mind."

*My teenage hands sneaked under
your virgin-white school shirt,
addicted to soft feminine wonder
leaving behind tears and hurt.*

*This boy's boorish heart unkind,
your overdose drama failed,
my promiscuity selfish and blind,
close to the edge we sailed.*

"What did Amelia make of such emotional nakedness?"

"An excellent metaphor! I didn't expect her to appreciate it, but she did. She hugged me tightly in gratitude."

Ben wasn't afraid of being trusting and open with Xenia. He didn't stop to realise what effect it might have on her. Did she welcome such candidness with someone twice her age? In retrospect, he wondered should he have shared so much personal background with her.

Ben remembered there was one other room to visit: the archives. They gained the key for it from the school secretary. It was on the third floor of the administration block.

"I'm hoping to find a few photos of me," Ben said to Xenia, as he led the way.

Xenia's camera bag bumped the walls as they climbed the narrow back stairs. A cardboard sign on one door read 'Archives'. Ben inserted the old brass key in the door key hole. He tried to turn it in the lock, but it didn't register. He jiggled the and turned but it failed to engage.

"Damn that. Now how are we going to get in there?" Ben said with dramatic frustration.

"Calm down, Ben. Let me try to sort this out," Xenia said.

Ben handed her the old brass key and she examined it. A few of the key's pins had got bent out of shape. She rooted in her camera bag, took out a screwdriver and using its flat head carefully straightened the unaligned teeth. Then she inserted it in the lock. On hearing the register-click, she smiled in a satisfied way, turned the handle and opened the door. Ben entered the musty room first. He pressed the light switch, only to discover that the bulb didn't work. The room was quite dark.

Unbidden, Xenia rooted in her bag and produced a big black torch. She clicked the on-button and stood beside Ben, helpfully pointing it at the shelves of year-dated boxes. Its powerful beam was more than adequate.

"You are so resourceful," Ben said.

"That's thanks to my time in the Girl Guides! Their motto was: 'Be prepared to help all people, at all times.'"

He saw many piles of boxes on top of each other. He opened one at random. In it were cardboard-framed photos of hockey teams, captains holding silver trophies. Team players stood in sports uniforms behind cross-legged players squatting on the ground. To the side stood the coach, a bespectacled, stern-looking man with backswept, greased hair. It was Ben's housemaster.

Other photos in the box showed the amateur dramatic club and the gender-mixed choir, standing in front of benches in the Assembly Hall. He recognised a few of the choir members and even found himself in the top left corner of one photo.

Ben wondered where all those people were now, and what are they doing? How many were at the peak of their careers? Ben's life had been adventurous, hardly stellar in comparable professional achievements. But then, how many of them had won poetry awards or written a novella?

"I want to locate my year-out archive box." Ben said.

Ben opened the cupboard full of container boxes, looking for the date of what should have been his final year there, 1975. After a quick scan of the shelves he found it. He reached up, lifted the box down, placed it on a table, and took off the lid. He started flicking through the photos and ephemera. Three-quarters way through the box, he exclaimed:

"I don't believe it!" he exclaimed.

Xenia peered over his shoulder. She saw the black and white photo that Ben's hands held. It featured a few boys with their bicycles standing in front of a shed. Through the cycle shed door, most bikes were leaning together any-which-way. A number had flat tyres, others portrayed twisted handlebars.

"Are you in this photo somewhere?" Xenia asked, not sure what Ben looked like so long ago.

"Yes I am, and my chopper bike! My older brother worked in a garage as a grease-monkey and made it for me from his own design. Look at those amazing 'cow bars' made from aluminium tubing. That long banana-shaped seat positioned over the rear wheel meant that 12-o'clock wheelies were very easy to do. The back-rest made sure I didn't slide off the saddle in the process! My brother modelled it on the Raleigh chopper bicycles. They had big fat rear tyres and smaller skinny front wheel tyres. The gear shift was positioned on the flat crossbar."

Ben looked at the photo, his eyes shone as he explained the bike's design in geek-boyish way.

"I've never seen a bike like that before," Xenia said.

"No-one else at school had a bike like mine. Everyone wanted a go on it. I rarely had it to myself," Ben replied, and sighed. "When leaving that school, I thoughtlessly left that chopper bike behind."

"Why, if it meant so much to you?"

"I don't have the answer..."

Ben decided that this photo, among so many others, wouldn't get missed among so many. Out of character, he slipped it into Xenia's camera bag without asking her permission.

"What do you think you are doing, Ben?" Xenia reprimanded.

"We won't tell anyone, OK?" Ben stated conspiratorially.

Xenia didn't want to mar their project with any awkward disagreement but felt she had to challenge Ben.

"You shouldn't steal this photo, Ben. I see that it means a lot to you."

"More than that. It symbolises my individualism."

"Tell you what. If you shine the torch on it, I can take a photo of the photo."

"Another brilliant idea, Xenia! You're a star."

When Ben finished looking in his year-out box, he peered around the room. A wardrobe in the corner caught his attention. When he opened its doors, the stench of mothballs made him cough. On wooden hangers were a few blue school blazers. Xenia leaned in and opened a drawer. In it were a couple of caps with school crest, and blue-red-green ties. These made up the official uniform for the junior boys.

Xenia playfully suggested that Ben place a cap on his head and a knotted a tie around his neck. He agreed and mock-posed for her. She laughed at how ridiculous he looked and took a few shots.

"At the end of Second Year we boys no longer had to wear caps. One Sunday a few of us threw them in a local river in the public park near the school. Then we raced the surreal flotilla down to nearby quays."

"Crazy!" Xenia said.

"We waited on a bridge for their river arrival. A passing teacher asked us why we had gathered there. We made up an excuse about watching the fish, which satisfied him. Luckily, our floating caps hadn't arrived downstream to betray our lie."

"You've so many stories." Amelia said. "It seems you enjoyed your time here. Why did your parents let you make such a momentous, mistaken decision about leaving??"

Ben appreciated such empathetic, nuanced insight.

"Well, my mother didn't oppose me and my divorced father was... who knows where? Besides, I've always been independent. Headstrong, too."

"Well, you and I have those traits in common."

"So I've noticed," Ben said and grinned at Xenia. "I hope that my telling so many stories isn't overwhelming for you."

"No. They're so interesting."

"I didn't tell you, on my last term here my fellow students elected me class captain. I reckon that was most likely a sympathy vote, after my Spring Term dramas."

"So, what does a class captain do?"

"I had to set up rotas of Saturday volunteers to make sure the classroom was clean, for starters. I also showed visitors around the school."

"What visitors came?"

"Well for example, once a blind man came to speak about the dangers of drink and drugs. I had to guide him around the school. He had shoulder length white hair, and a big white beard. Even though he was blind, he had magnetic eyes. He looked prophetic. I really took to him."

"I've never interacted with someone blind. What was that like?"

"He asked me to hold his elbow as we walked, explaining he needed help to negotiate steps and doors. I was very self-conscious with being in such close contact with a stranger."

"They say that blind people have a sixth sense."

"You're right. It was as if he could see right into my soul."

"How did that make you feel? Vulnerable?"

"His leading questions got me opening up. He learnt about my school and family troubles."

"Did you mind him probing?"

"Not at all. I really needed an active adult ally. Those that had any agency in my life had let me down in different ways."

Ben's backstories gave Xenia's photo project a deeper experience than expected. 'Was there anything that Ben didn't share?' Xenia wondered

"After talking to the class and a question-and-answer session, the blind man asked me where the Friends Meeting Room was?"

"Curious. Why?"

"I wondered that at the time, but I led him there, anyway. I'll tell you more when we get there. Come on, I'll show it to you."

Ben and Xenia entered the musty meeting room. Their voices and footsteps echoed in the empty space. A semi-circle arrangement of wooden benches faced forwards. On the front wall hung a bright green cloth banner that depicted a river, with painted words in water's flow that declared: 'The Spirit Gives Life'.

Underneath the banner was a plain table. A floral decorated jug stood in its centre. It was filled with a large bunch of purple and cream-coloured poppies, their stems presented eccentric odd angles. Xenia smiled seeing them, spotlighted by sun streaming through the windows.

"Wow! My favourite flowers!" Xenia exclaimed, her eyes lighting up. She walked up and stood mesmerised, in front of the display. Then she gently caressed their crinkled, tissue-thin petals with her fingers. She bent to smell them and momentarily closed her eyes, as if this was a holy moment. Then, with her camera lifted she captured their beautiful form in that spartan setting.

How women went into private ecstasies over flowers fascinated Ben. Their imaginations responded so quickly to floral colour, scent, and shape; abandoning themselves to such splendour.

"So, what happened with the blind man?" Xenia prompted. She wanted to hear the rest of Ben's story. He hadn't experienced such equitable exchanges outside his marriage. It was stimulating to be in Xenia's vibrant company. Ben wondered would such unexpected blessings last long?

"I held the blind man's elbow, and we walked up towards the front. He felt about to find the bench, then sat down. He talked for a short while about God's loving care for me in my teen tumult. Then he asked me if he could pray for me."

"That's a strange request. What did you make of it?"

"It was a shock at first. Then I asked myself - well, why not? What harm could come from it?"

"I would have been scared to have been put on the spot, like you were."

"I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do, so I closed my eyes and knelt beside the bench. He placed a hand on my head and whispered a prayer; something about how the old had passed and the new had come. There'll be no more tears or sadness." Whatever power was in them caused me to feel relieved and renewed; it was as if I had inhaled summery sunshine and blue skies. I felt free..."

The photo project mission now completed, Ben and Xenia returned home. She needed notes for the photo project back story. As Ben drove, Xenia did a mock interview with him concerning his experiences at the school. A few of her questions caused much boisterous banter between them. Ben laughed so hard at one point, the car wheels strayed over the central white line of the road. That spontaneous gaiety bonded them. They became closer than just mere friends during their collaborative time at Ben's old school.

Ben dropped Xenia back at her flat. He opened the boot and gave her all her belongings.

"Thank you so much for the wonderful opportunity of experiencing your old school," Xenia said.

"It was great to revisit it in your cheerful company," Ben replied.

She leaned in giving an unexpected hug, then kissed both his cheeks. That wowed him. No female friend had ever done that previously.

When Ben arrived home, Martha gave him a perfunctory brief peck-kiss and asked how things went. He answered abstractly and didn't go into much detail.

"Where's the Lad?" Ben asked.

"He had trouble while you were away."

"Oh, what happened?"

"He got a dewclaw trapped in a gap of the floorboards. I had to bring him to the vet. "

"Is he O.K. now?"

"He had to have his broken claw extracted. He's bandaged and sedated and sleeping in your writing room."

When Ben drifted off to sleep that night, he felt some discomfort in his heart, like an exertion-caused stitch. Should he get a medical checkup, he wondered? He'd talk to Martha about that soon. He wondered might he have inherited his father's propensity for heart attacks.

Xenia was excited to see how her photos turned out. Not bothering going to bed, she started developing the negatives in her bathroom-darkroom. The scientific wonder of witnessing how microscopic silver halide crystals enhanced the roll of negative images. She explained this technique to Ben. He said that developing photos from negatives was like seeing prayers being answered by God.

'Why does Ben make such frequent spiritual references, I wonder?' Xenia asked herself, as she worked in the chemical pungent atmosphere. She opened a small window for fresh air.

Being self-critical, she took time choosing which test-sheet shots worked best and curated her selection decisively. Twenty-five frames got chosen, ready to show to Ben.

A few days later, in the college common room, Xenia gave Ben a large envelope. It contained some duplicates of her project photos.

Together, they sat at a table. She kept quiet and looked at Ben's profile as he studiously examined them, one by one, interested in his likes and dislikes.

"These are excellent, artful, like paintings," Ben pronounced. Xenia squirmed at Ben's effusive compliments. Her self-critical perception always saw opportunities for further improvement.

"The ones that I especially like are the school gates, the teachers' common room and the dining room," Ben continued.

"I enjoyed immersing myself in this project and trying to imagine what it was like when you attended that school. It was wonderful to meet your school housemaster. I loved his swept back snow-white hair, shiny old-fashioned shoes, worn tweed jacket and proudly-sported college tie. Thank you for arranging things and bringing me there."

Ben then put the photos back into the envelope and handed it to Xenia.

"No, these are for you, a present."

"That's so kind of you, a prescient gift."

"Well, you introduced me to your school. That project helped me fulfil one of my module requirements," Xenia responded.

"It will be interesting to see what grades you get."

"I'm not going to think about that, until I have to."

"I've been thinking... might the school be interested in mounting a display of your photos at next year's centenary weekend?" Ben said. "You would have a distinctive public platform for your work. Also, old scholars would appreciate seeing favourite buildings and places in the school grounds."

"That would be brilliant! I'd love that. And maybe we could include a few of your school poems placed alongside my photos?"

"That's a wonderful idea. I've always wanted to share my rhyming reflections with old scholars. God bless your busy brain!"

Ben decided to immediately pursue the photo exhibition idea with the school. Martha found difficult to understand the deep, illogical love he had for his *alma mater*. After many months silence the school eventually agreed to their idea, as part of the following year's centenary celebration. When Ben told Xenia the exciting news, her sunshine smile lit up the room. This would be the first public display of her photos.

The exhibition would be held in the school library. When the old scholars magazine editor heard about the project, they requested to use a few of Xenia's photos in that publication. She readily agreed.

Ben couldn't stop thinking of further ideas for this event, and came up with the concept of a souvenir leaflet, for exhibition attendees to take away. He soon created a "printer's dummy" of a photo-poem idea. First, he photocopied a few of Xenia's photos and reduced their size. Then he typed out one of his poems. Next, he started experimenting, cutting and gluing a few stanzas between some photos on a sheet of paper.

'Wait until Xenia see this! She's going to love it!' he said to himself, with misplaced confidence.

When he finished the layout, he asked Xenia if they could meet in Cafe Colombia the next day. But what Ben presented to her did not thrill her at all.

"I see that you've cropped one or two photos," Xenia said. "It changes the perspectives that I intended. I'm not sure that I want my name on this leaflet idea at all, unless this bad layout gets changed..." Xenia spoke forthrightly.

Ben blushed at his blunder. His need for speed, and wanting to include too much detail, spoiled the look of what he was trying to create.

“Why are you even thinking of creating this leaflet, anyway?” Xenia sceptically asked.

“I wanted to further publicise your impressive images and one of my poems for old scholars.”

“Are you are using my photos just to advance yourself?”

“That’s very harsh. It was my intention to promote both of us.”

“Well, OK. But we have to seriously improve the layout.”

They tussled as they analysed different ideas about lay-out look. Ben enjoyed their teamwork dynamic; the closest experience that he ever had to being in a rock band collective.



The day before old scholars’ weekend started, Ben drove Xenia and Martha down to the boarding school. Both women in the long back seat and found things in common to chat about.

They arrived at the school. Ben and Xenia took a large cardboard box that contained the blown-up photos and poems and searched out the headmaster, to announce their arrival. Martha waited at the car until she heard the shrill sound of games umpire whistles and coach commands in the distance. She wandered over to where student teams were practicing hockey and rugby.

The headmaster led Xenia and Ben to the library. They started assessing wall spaces between the wall shelves. Xenia revelled in her ability to make things look pleasing to the eye. She expertly analysed where and how each photo and poem should get placed. Ben’s was happy to cede control of the process to Xenia.

She developed a detailed grid plan on graph paper, taken from the Woodwork Room. Ben was repeatedly asked to hold one end of the measuring tape while she held the other. While she lightly pencilled measurements on the wall, she hummed a meandering melody.

Ben looked on in awe at her uncomplaining work ethic. She had set the photos and poems in place over a few hours. Each image represented particular school landmarks: the music practice rooms, the lecture hall, the archive room, the dining room, and classrooms. Then, they both stood in the middle of the library, satisfied, very satisfied with what they saw.

"Your photos complement my poems and capture the nostalgic memories behind my words. Thank you for being such a help and inspiration," Ben said. "Your belief in all of this has been very satisfying."

Ben had to restrain himself from hugging Xenia for her wonderful execution of his idea, instead symbolically placed his right palm over his heart.

"This has been an unequalled adventure for me as well," Xenia said.

It would have been so easy to fall in love with such an energetic, positive, younger woman. However, their divergent life outlooks, and both coming from different eras made practical barriers against any possible foolish romantic illusions. Not only would it have been wrong, it would have spoilt their unique collaborative friendship.

That night Ben tossed and turned as he slept beside Martha. He had an unusual dream about Amelia, his first teenage muse, who attended the poetry competition award night:

In the theatre crowd, sat Amelia, looking and listening as he read his award-winning poem. Afterwards, they excitedly met and talked until Ben explained that he had to get the "ghost bus" home. It was time for Ben to return home to Martha and Sam. They stood together on the dark city quays, reminiscing about their shared school memories, as they waited beside an old-fashioned, bottle green double-decker bus.

Amelia lit up a cigarette and shared it with Ben, just as she used to do at school. Her musky perfume was the same scent she wore years ago. After a short while, the bus engine started. Its interior decks glowed from a few light bulbs in the ceiling, and its big round headlights got switched on. A cloud of diesel exhaust haloed them. They both knew that their cheek kiss and brief embrace was their last.

"It's been good to see you, Ben. I'm pleased that our friendship still means so much to you, as it does to me. And it's been wonderful how your writing has stayed the course," said Amelia.

"Thank you for being such a good friend, and also for unexpectedly attending my award reading," Ben said.

Eager not to miss this last bus of the night, Ben hopped onto the open platform and found a window seat. They both bit their lips, trying hard not to cry, making last farewell waves through the window. The bus driver indicated, revved and pulled away.

Amelia ran alongside the bus, madly waving farewell like a schoolgirl. Mascara streaked her cheeks. As the bus turned and crossed to the other side of the bridge, Ben got up out of his seat and walked to the open platform. He held onto the chrome pole, wondering whether to jump off and go back to her. And then what?

Instead, he continued waving to her ever-diminishing figure until he couldn't see her any more, as much obscured by tears as by distance...

Then Ben woke with wet cheeks, much troubled by his dream. The digital clock showed it was 4.30 AM. Ben felt uncomfortable and kept changing position in bed. There was a nagging discomfort in his chest. He must tell Martha. But not this weekend. Nothing was going to be allowed to discolour this significant event. When Martha woke he told her about his strange dream though.

By early afternoon, there were many cars and the occasional Land Rover parked in front of the school buildings. A hubbub of people gathered. There were shrieks of laughter, as well as more restrained responses on recognition. Grey-haired or balding, belly-bulging men in blazers or jeans and jumpers formally shook hands. Well-dressed women with dyed hair and wrinkled faces emotionally cheek-kissed. They all regaled each other with career accomplishments, offspring's educational progress and exchanged topical news about classmates not present.

Might any of Ben's classmates arrive? Each time he'd returned for school reunions it disappointed him not to meet any peers. Did none of them care to return? Ben saw his school days as being halcyon times.

At the edge of the crowd Ben thought he saw someone very like Amelia. Martha distracted him with a question and when he looked again, the woman had disappeared.

Some people wandered around the grounds looking at iconic buildings, reliving common shared memories both good and bad. Teacher nicknames were fondly uttered: 'Bam Bam' 'LEP' and FEF.

Later on, many old scholars filled the school library. Ben stood with Martha and Xenia, waiting for any face from his class that he might recognise. None appeared, so he wandered from photo to photo, looking at the blow-ups afresh: the lonely looking, rusty school bell that was once activated by rope pull; the long benches turned upside-down on the tables in the dining room after dinner; an open door leading into an old-fashioned room. Xenia had also hung a duo-portrait of Ben talking with his old housemaster, that strict detention-giver, and proxy parent from his boarding days.

After a while, the headmaster asked the talkative crowd for quietness. He introduced Ben to the gathering and asked him to say a few words.

"My good friend and photographer, Xenia, enabled much of this wonderful project. I think you'll agree that she has capably captured our many shared memories. I've had the pleasure of watching her in action: lying on lawns wet with dew, balance on ladders, focus-squint through her viewfinder to get the best possible shots. Seeing her passion and ability has been an invigorating experience.

"Xenia doesn't like me going into laudatory, descriptive detail - but how can I not? I love how she has captured the lustre of the buildings, the majesty of the ancient trees and the poetry of open spaces. Her passionate commitment shows. Please remember to take a complimentary leaflet, based on my poems and her photos."

Then he read his elegiac poem about his time in school:

Harboured from harm by high stone walls,

Emotional atmosphere fondly recalled;

- spartan-lunches schooled us in justice,

Quaker-soaked silence this rebel trusted...

The applause at the end of his poem was validating. A woman at the back of the crowd whistled, showing her appreciation. That intrigued Ben. She looked very much like what he remembered of Amelia. Slimmer than most of the women present, it wasn't hard to miss her, dressed in seventies-era bohemian style.

Xenia also spied the woman who whistled at Ben's poem. She thought that woman would make a powerful portrait photo, with her purple dyed hair, silk multi-coloured scarf thrown over her shoulder, baggy pantaloons, and bare feet shod in camel-toed sandals. Not conventionally pretty, but confident, a lady who invented her own beauty.

Xenia's reverie was interrupted by the announcement that it was her turn to briefly talk. She clasped her hands, nervously twirled left and right, swirling in a fashionable party dress, and spoke confidently about why she chose particular photos.

"It's been a pleasure to work with Ben," she said, "to experience his and your school. I've heard so many interesting stories from him. Maybe there's an illustrated book to be published one day. I'll not say any more, except please enjoy the poems and pictures. I hope they bring back fond memories for you all."

A crowd of admirers surrounded Ben and Xenia, complimenting both. Martha wanted to overhear what they were saying. After a while the constant stream of people became too much for her. She retreated and went to view the photos and poems instead. She particularly appreciated a number of photos: a pair of hands choosing chords on a piano keyboard, the deserted hockey goal posts on the all-weather pitch, a glass cabinets of leather-bound books in the library.

Ben watched as people admired Xenia's photos and read his poems. He enjoyed overhearing comments and reminiscences: the exclaimed delight. Such wonder in viewers' voices and seeing their eyes shine was rewarding.

One interesting comment came from a woman responding to the swimming pool photos:

“Once a group of us girls had a nude swim. Our laughter stopped when the headmaster entered the pool area with prospective parents. He didn’t blink an eye at our nudity but merely commented on what wonderful summer weather we were having, and then left!”

Another overheard response to the photos came from a onetime cricket team member: “The coach promised a half-crown reward to the first person successful in batting a ball through the window - with the proviso that it had to land in a certain female teacher’s teacup!”

Ben smiled as Xenia threw her head back, laughing with wonderful abandon at this story’s recounting. Her generous smile made her eyes light up in such attractive manner.

One arty-looking woman aptly summed up the exhibition, saying to Xenia and Ben: “These photos and poems bring me back to all the smells, sounds, and emotions of my time boarding here.” Xenia blushed at such a heartfelt comment. Ben felt rewarded.

Xenia overheard Ben excitedly say to Martha, “I’ve just spotted Amelia...” Xenia remembered that Amelia had been the person to first provoke Ben into writing poetry.

Martha replied, “Well, you’d better go and meet her. You’ve talked so much about her. You don’t want to regret having missed this opportunity. Go!”

Amelia and Ben also had much in common, divorced parents, separated siblings and a shared deep and hungry lust. They imagined themselves Haight Ashbury hippies, romantic rebels and founded a secret record club. On Sunday afternoons a few select boarders got invited to an attic room in the administration building. There they sat on the floor surrounding a portable mono record player. Subversive underground seventies sounds, psychedelic heavy rock blasted out: Frank Zappa and The Mothers of Invention; Captain Beefheart and his Magic Band; Janis Joplin and The Big Brother Holding Company.

Amelia read about the exhibition in the old scholars magazine and for the first time, decided to attend. Now, here she was, looking around the room in a bemused manner. She didn’t engage with anyone. Ben was had much to say and ask of her. He had long regretted not realising how good a friend she had been to him.

Amelia hoped to meet Ben alone. She didn’t want anyone else being part of that. Seeing Ben in the company of both Martha and Xenia changed things. She decided to leave the library. Was she expecting Ben to follow?

“Amelia!” Ben shouted over the chattering crowd, as she neared the library door. She failed to hear him calling over the hubbub. He pushed through groups of people,

getting closer and closer to Amelia at the edge of the crowd. Martha watched Ben from afar, hoping their reunion would go smoothly. Xenia looked on, regretting that she hadn't her camera to hand to surreptitiously record that reunion scene. It was so full of anticipation and drama. She willed the two protagonists to smile ecstatically and tearfully hug each other tightly.

"Amelia!" Ben called out again, to no avail.

As he pushed through the dense crowd, suddenly, a tight band squeezed hard around his upper chest. His breathing became difficult. Then his ears started buzzing, and he became dizzy. He collapsed to the floor like a string-severed puppet. Amelia, determined to quickly depart, passed nearby, not realising who it was that had collapsed.

Martha saw Ben vanish from view and shoved through the crowd towards Ben. The loud talking diminished. Ben's body was curled up embryonically on the floor. A circle of space haloed around him. His breathing slowed and became stop-start irregular. A man leant down and asked him if he was alright. There were long pauses between each of Ben's breaths. His eyes rolled over, showing the whites. Spittle dribbled from the side of his mouth.

Tearless but practical-minded, Martha knelt beside him. She administered a determined mouth to mouth resuscitation, pinching his nostrils shut tight and blowing oxygen into his lungs. After doing this a few times, she started pressing hard on his ribs, willing him back to consciousness. Ben's body had a spasm and then lay still.

"Someone call an ambulance," Martha nervously said over her shoulder.

At that instance, Ben saw a series of flashbacks, as if hallucinating. He wondered if he was dying. In cinematic scenes, he saw himself cycling to work at the printers; seeing his wife crying, holding their stillborn baby; himself banging out poems on his Underwood typewriter. Another scene involved him on stage reading his award-winning poem. The last flashback scene was of his first meeting Xenia in the college common room.

Then Ben made as if to sit up but then fell back again, muttering a few indistinguishable words, and then going silent and still. Martha's held-back tears now spilled down her cheeks and spattered Ben's face. She hugged him tightly as he lay on the floor and remembered the hopeful gospel words: "Ask, and it will be given to you.... Everyone who asks will receive."

Xenia saw Ben's inert figure lying on the ground and felt helpless. Martha prayed to God and asked for a miracle. She didn't want Ben to die in the very place that meant so much to him. That would be such a sad and ironic coda. After the emergency team stretchered Ben, Xenia went up to Martha and hugged her. Martha stiffly acknowledged her.

God didn't answer prayer as Martha hoped. After a few days in the hospital hooked up to monitors and other medical machines, Ben died. A small gathering of people

attended his Anglican church funeral. On his coffin was the classic photo that Xenia took: Ben at his typewriter, with Sam sitting close by. It was the same photo that Ben chose for his book cover.

After all the prayer book liturgy, the clergyman opened the lid of a portable record player, lifted the arm and placed the needle on the opening track. There was a crackle as a song started. Bob Dylan's plaintive, poignant gospel song had become Ben's credo. The recognisable, cracked, hoarse singer's voice echoed through the church.

"If you find it in your heart, can you can forgive me?"

Guess I owe you some kind of apology.

I've escaped death so many times, I know I'm only living

By the saving grace that's over me."

As it played, Martha craned her neck up to the timbered roof, to not have to look at anyone while the record played. She remembered how Ben had once described the church's roof timbers as being like the inside of an upside-down rowing boat.

When the track ended the clergyman cleared his throat.

"Martha has a few words she wants to say."

Martha stood in front of the altar and read unfalteringly from a sheet of paper, occasionally looking up at the gathering:

"Over the years, Ben had tussled a lot with God. He questioned his Maker, seeking and looking for answers in the bible, and in his life. He firmly believed in God's benign intervention. This showed in particular, concerning his going to college for the first time. Ben thought that meeting Xenia, his collaborative photographer, was another sign of God's goodness and mercy. The book of Job answered some of his life's conundrums. 'Though he slay me, yet will I trust him.' Ben clung to the bible's assurances, and God's gluing back together all brokenness."

Xenia sat the last rear pew, wearing an olive green flecked tweed coat and matching scarf, in tribute to Ben's fondness for that hardy fabric. Her head bowed, her eyes closed as she listened to Martha.

'How can she be so calm after losing her husband?' Xenia wondered. She held no particular philosophical outlook. Ben once tried to get her to accept a bible from him.

"You might need this sometime," Ben said persuasively. "Who knows what your tomorrows might bring?"

"Ben, I don't need a bible. You are my bible."

It flattered him that Xenia regarded him in this ambassadorial way. He saw himself as a failure in communicating the Christian message effectively to her. How else could he explain Xenia's stubborn refusal to not commit herself to Christ's message of hope and forgiveness?

The clergyman interrupted Xenia's reverie:

"We will now close this service with a reading:

"God has moved into the neighbourhood, making his home with men and women! They're his people, he's their God. He'll wipe every tear from their eyes. Death is gone for good—tears gone, crying gone, pain gone—all the first order of things gone." - Revelation 21: 4

This had been one of Ben's favourite bible verses. It was the same scripture used on the grave of his stillborn daughter. The positivity of that scripture passage intrigued Xenia. It helped her to understand Ben's religious outlook a bit better. It would have pleased him to know that she attended his funeral.

"You came along at an opportune time. You were a wonderful gift given by God," Ben once said authoritatively to her. But Xenia thought of their path crossing in more abstract terms, of being mere accidental good fortune. Her belief in him helped him experience a renewed vigour, a wonderful hope and a tipsy take on life.

After a last prayer, a recording of exuberant Orthodox Russian bells was played. Ben once said how wonderfully celebratory those many bass and treble bells were. Such a campanology celebration was fitting for a Christian funeral.

Martha almost forgot mention to the gathered friends that Ben wanted to give copies of his novella away freely, should he happen to die prematurely. She told people where a small pile of copies waited, on the table at the back of the church. Ben was always looking for offbeat ways to promote both her photos and his writing. Xenia smiled at Ben's last publicity hurrah. He had given her an inscribed copy immediately it was printed.

As she stood up to leave, she noticed a bible on the pew. On its cover was a label that stated it was free to take. She picked it up and took it with her, in memory of Ben. She knew Ben would smile from wherever he now was.

As she closed the side door, the stiff metal handle settled back with a clatter. She quickly exited and left. She decided not to linger with other people unknown to her. The finality of the coffin being slid into the hearse would be too upsetting for her.

Outside, strong wind blew clouds at a quick pace. Magpies chased each other from tree to tree, their ack-ack calls sounding like toy machine guns. Brown leaves fell and swirled, brushed around by the breeze.

Xenia walked to a nearby park and saw a father and child launching a kite. It got tossed about by an ever-changing wind, rising, then falling to the ground, only to rise once again, then having a near-tangle with trees, finally making an earthbound cartwheel crash. When the kite fliers relaunched it, the wind pulled it up into the cloudy sky decisively. That kite's rising then falling according to the whims of the wind, symbolised Ben's life, she thought.

It had been rewarding to play a part in Ben's unusual life. She helped him write a significant section of his living novel. Her photos had played a part in his adventurous narrative. Each had complemented the other's life dance, as in a ballet *pas de deux*.

Then she felt for the folded piece of paper in her coat pocket and took it out. She read the quote that he had typed and given to her a while ago. She wiped a tear from her eye, looked up at the clouds and was very thankful.

"The day will come when you will review your life and be thankful for every minute of it. Every hurt, every sorrow, every joy, every celebration, every moment of your life will be a treasure to you, for you will see the utter perfection of the design. You will stand back from the weaving and see the tapestry, and you will weep at the beauty of it."

- Neale Donald Walsch

Postscript Poem

*Harboured from harm by high stone walls,
Emotional atmosphere fondly recalled;
- spartan lunches schooled us in justice,
Quaker-soaked silence this rebel trusted.*

*Three sweet, special girls all equally adored;
Long reads in the library, I was never bored;
I remember crowd-rowdy pillow fights,
And unsanctioned expeditions in early light.*

*Long anticipated each supper dance,
psychedelic strobes, surreptitious glances;
Early seventies student, born to be wild:
underground sounds, hippy flower-child.*

*School report true: my existence "aimless"
my challenging conduct, far from blameless;
this student a failure, sometime class-clown
still misses his school – fond fare thee well, Newtown...*

*Decades later, I walked through those doors:
sweet remembered scent, waxed parquet floors.*

Newtown: I got my first good start there.

Newtown: reluctantly I left my heart there;

*You faithfully fed my hope-hungry heart,
And almost redeemed me with music and art;
I still yearn those lost years, still easily get upset:
this rhyming reminiscence refunds that debt....*





Photo: Dora Kazmierak, 2018



Photo: Alan Hemmings, 1971

A Treasure Trove of Fond Memories: boarding school photos & video poems etc:
<https://newtownschoolwaterford.weebly.com/>

