Old Long Since

Ian Roseen
ian.roseen@valpo.edu
For whatever reason, a Billy Ocean song was running through Paul Huntley’s mind as he held his glass above his head and weaved around the other guests in the hallway. Which was très bizarre he supposed, considering the party was French-themed, with echoey, music hall-ish French music lilting out of the speakers behind the potted plants, the furniture, the decorations on the mantelpiece. Isolated lyrics stood out to him, coming back from when his wife attempted to learn the language before the family trip to Europe several years ago—*Cet},*e* brunette aux yeux de paradis, Oh ça sent si bon la France*—but none of them stuck. Not a single melody could get past Billy Ocean, of all people. An artist dug up from—oh, it would have been twenty years now since the last time Paul had really given him a good listen. What even was the name of the song? If only it was “Caribbean Queen,” he would’ve had it, for that title just naturally followed “Billy Ocean.” But it seemed to be just out of reach.

Of course, the party itself was anything but disappointing. A New Year’s Eve celebration hosted by one of Melinda’s friends from the office downtown. There were just a few people here whom Paul actually knew, and even then they were only faces attached to memorable personality traits that he remembered from previous parties (add Brad and Nancy, the young pregnant couple he had just spoken with, to that list). But he liked that, liked it almost more than when one of his own work acquaintances hosted a get-together. Those didn’t have the potential that events like this had; they were too set in stone. But here things were as easy going and vibrant as they were when he was a young man just starting out. He could down a few drinks, stumble through a maze of laughing strangers, and perhaps end up leaning against an unfamiliar credenza in the hallway, carrying on a conversation with a slightly tipsy high school guidance counselor about the appeal of cigar smoking. Which was something he’d done last time.

Ended up embarrassing his wife that night. Melinda had come up directly behind him, took the beer from his hand, and whispered in his ear: “Time to go. Let’s get into the car.” She needn’t have done that. He hadn’t been doing anything wrong, made no inappropriate advances, was not even engaging in any harmless flirting. But he complied; always did. He didn’t mind being an easy husband to live with. Even this morning when she was badgering him about not making any stops on his way home from work, he had taken it in stride, even though there wasn’t anywhere he
had been thinking of stopping in the first place. She was angry today for some reason or another. She had been angry lately. It was important that she enjoy herself at this party tonight, more so than it was for him to do the same.

Tonight he was stumbling. Thankfully he was not the only one. Turning an especially noisy corner into the living room, he tripped and held onto the nearest thing within reach, which was the arm of a drunk blonde in a white dress. They went down, hovered close to the ground before veering back up again. The woman found it hilarious, howling in his face while laying a hand on his shoulder and taking another swig from her glass of champagne. Paul found it less funny, but he was laughing anyway, possibly out of politeness, although he could not be sure.

“I’m sorry!” he explained. “I’m looking for my wife. Have you seen her?”

A fine thing to ask a stranger. But even so, when the woman asked, “Is that her?” and pointed toward the fireplace, Paul saw that it was, indeed, his wife, and she was glaring at him. Her fingers clutched her thin little hip, and he could envision the words forming on her lips once again: “Let’s get into the car.”

Which was the answer, after all! The title of the song—“Get Outta My Dreams (Get Into My Car).” Last heard at their wedding in 1988, a whirl of rice confetti and tenuous friends from college and Kenny G. A day he had actually enjoyed thoroughly, but why should it come rushing back to him tonight?

“She was just saying how strange it is to find our kids halfway done with their senior year of high school,” Suzanne said. “After breakfast last Monday, I told our Rachel as I was heading out the door, ‘Enjoy your break! One more semester to go!’ Then I got in my car and I just had to sit there and think for a minute. I thought, ‘Already?’ It just hit me.”
“Ahh, yes,” Paul replied, for there was another connection: whoever these people were, their daughter went to school with his son. Or rather, she used to. He couldn’t place the name, though. Rachel. Had Andrew ever mentioned a Rachel? Rachel... well, he wouldn’t know her last name, even if he would drink plenty of her parents’ champagne and stand here yammering on as if he did. He imagined her light-haired, like her mother, but tall like her father; she would dress conservatively, study hard during the week, smile at her parents as she came in the door from a party on the weekends, having only drank a modest amount because she was tremendously capable. Probably, she wouldn’t have been somebody that Andrew would associate with after all.

“It certainly is strange...” he offered.

“Paul, are you feeling alright?” Melinda asked him. “I’m thinking of heading home—”

The man in the suit piped up. “No, don’t go just yet! Stay.”

“Oh, I don’t know...”

“Come, sit,” Suzanne said, leading them to the nearby couch, fresh and white. Uncomfortable, too, it turned out. “How is Andrew these days?”

“He’s doing just fine, I think,” Paul said, even though she had been looking at his wife when she asked.

“Really, Suzanne, I’m getting tired—” Melinda said, but it was haphazard, weak, and Suzanne wasn’t hearing any of it.

“We never see him around anymore!”

“Neither do we,” Paul said. Amazing how uncomfortable this couch was.

“Paul...”

The man shrugged, commiserating. “Well, I suppose we’d really have to say the same about Rachel. Hell, we’d have to say the same about ourselves, wouldn’t we? I mean, I was never home when I was that age. Too many friends to see, too much trouble to get into before I moved onto college. Gosh, that doesn’t seem so very long ago at all.”

“Has Andrew decided where he wants to go to college yet?” Suzanne wanted to know.

And this was what set Paul off laughing. He put his palm to his knee, and hunched over on top of himself; the corners of his eyes, he could feel, were moist. Next to him, Melinda sat stiffly, locking her jaw into place. Oh, he would hear about this later, in the car ride home and underneath the comforter in bed, when all he would want to do would be to sleep. But what could he do?

“No,” Melinda said, which was good because Suzanne and her husband were beginning to send sidelong glances to each other. “That part is still in transit. For us.”

“You don’t suppose a good college would accept your kid if he dropped out his senior year of high school, do you?”

“Paul!”

That was bad. Bad bad bad of him.
The other man leaned forward, very thoughtful with his chin on his fist. “What are you saying there, Paul? Is Andrew having trouble in school?”

“Of course not!” Melinda interrupted. She was running her fingers through her hair. “Andrew is a very smart boy. Very smart.”

“She’s right,” Paul added. “He just decided to drop out this year. Is it called dropping out if you’re choosing to do it?”

“Well, but why would he do that?” Suzanne asked.

“Oh, well, we’re trying to think of other options, you know,” Melinda said. “But due to some extenuating circumstances—”

But here the words just began falling out of Paul’s mouth. “I think he thinks it would be weird to try and raise a family while he’s still in high school like all the other kids. Plus he’s just moved into his new apartment downtown, and it’s pretty nice. Or not nice, but cool, you know? Gritty. You probably drive right past the area on your way to work there, uhh...” Whatever his name was.

“Stop it. Would you stop kicking?” Melinda smacked him on the shoulder, and he stopped. She was looking at him with the face again, that sharp, needling face, contorted to resemble an angry squirrel. Or no... a shark? A shark, with those intense eyes and set, determined jaw. That was it. She was determined not to enjoy herself tonight, and that was a shame. Because it was such a nice party. It really was.

“You know what song I’ve had in my head all night?” he asked her. “That Billy Ocean song. ‘Get out of my dreams! Get into my car-ar...’ Remember that?”

“Remember what?”

“Remember dancing to that at our wedding? And the girl from your high school—the one who married the stockbroker with no ear lobes—got dizzy from spinning around so much and fell down, but we all kept dancing anyway?”

“Judy. Her name was Judy. And I didn’t appreciate you telling Frank and Suzanne all of that about our son.”
“Frank!”

“What? Listen: you just officialized this situation we’re in by running your mouth back there. All the work we’re doing trying to fix this isn’t going to account for anything in the long run if everybody knows.”

Paul frowned. “Don’t you think they would have heard one way or another, from what’s-her-name? From Rachel?”

“Well, they didn’t, Paul. They heard it from you. From his own father.”

There was a moment she let pass in which Paul felt himself rock back-and-forth. He tried to think of something he could say, but another moment passed and Melinda had already walked away. To the bathroom? To the car? Who could say. He sat down on the staircase and tore the beret off his head.

Here was the thing: when Andrew had told them the news about this kid he was fathering at age eighteen, Paul had actually not been that upset. (Although he was pretty sure that out of shock he’d stopped chewing the steak he had been eating, letting it grow soggy and flavorless in his mouth for a good minute until he realized he hadn’t swallowed.) Meanwhile, Andrew—spiky and resilient in his dirty hooded sweatshirt, all angular limbs and flyaway hair—sat there next to his sister Molly at the dinner table, spelling out his grand plan detail by detail, as if this was, oh, on the same level as quitting the school lacrosse team. Which was something he had done two years ago, actually, much to his mother’s disappointment.

“Granted, I didn’t mean for this to happen,” he explained. “But I think it’ll be alright. Liz talked to her boss at the dentist’s office, and he said she can keep her job for as long as she likes; it’s just answering phones two days a week anyway, so we figure it’s not like she’ll be exerting herself that much, right? Otherwise, I’ve been making good money—I mean some good money—performing down at the Salty Dog, so I’ll keep that up. And so far as living goes, one of my buddies is moving out of his apartment near the city and the landlord owes him a favor for something. We’ll probably get married eventually, although one thing at a time is my thinking. Annd I’m quitting high school; I don’t see there being much point in sticking with it if I’m not gonna be going to college. Mom, could you crack open that window behind you?”

Of course, all Melinda had done was sit there, clenching her teeth and letting her eyelids flutter in that terribly tolerating way she had about her sometimes. She gripped the table with her hands and arms both. Molly looked back and forth between Andrew and Melinda in a panic, seeming almost to play catch up, as though she had misheard and this really was not as big of a deal as it came across. (She did not once cast her eye towards Paul, he noticed, as if she understood that he played virtually no part in what potentially could unfold.)

Finally, Melinda spoke up. “I don’t know what... the hell...” she said, and she threw her napkin down on the table before marching outside to her car. The headlights glared through the windows as they spun around into the street; she was off on one of her drives, and she would not come home until 5:30 in the morning this time.
Andrew flinched, forgetting about his dinner for a moment. Paul remained in his seat, reading his son's face, the flash of worry that skated across it just briefly—he was thinking, “Maybe I’ve gotten myself into deeper shit than I thought.” Not that he had planned on it, of course; he was a boy (or young man, rather; a father, after all), who stumbled through life with absolutely no troublesome intent. Things just happened to him, that was all, and if he was considered by some to be a “bad kid,” well, Paul knew better, knew that deep down he was actually a good kid who sometimes ended up doing bad things, such that in the end you couldn’t even really call them “bad” so much as you’d call them “unplanned.” This pregnancy, aside from being the final nail in the coffin in which any lingering hopes Paul and Melinda had for their son’s education rested, was basically the same thing as when he had painted his room in metallic green, on impulse three days before their previous house went on the market. Or when he was banned from his friend Kenny’s house after Kenny’s mom came home from work early and found them smoking some of Andrew’s pot behind the shed. (Who did he know that sold him the pot in the first place? It seemed that Paul had never in his life had friends with that kind of capability.) Even as a child, he had been walking home from school alone for the very first time, and what did he do but hitch a ride with a complete stranger. This just a few hours after they’d warned him over and over again not to do exactly that.

He fell into things. It was just that usually, before, he was also able to climb back out of them.

Melinda, no doubt, hadn’t stopped planning on how to backtrack out of this one ever since that evening. Which was noble of her. Proactive. One of her strong points. But looking at Andrew from across the table that night, with his jet-black hair bristling beneath the lamp light, and his eyebrows—those same eyebrows he’d carried with him all the way from childhood—twisted and throbbing together in concern, it was all Paul could do not to lay a hand on the boy’s shoulder and tell him things were going to be okay. Instead, Molly came around and hugged Andrew tightly, soldiering through his slack-jawed gaze at the wall. Paul coughed into his napkin before getting up to clear the dishes.

It struck him as odd, all of a sudden, to be sitting here in the midst of a celebration, watching all of the festivities happening along the periphery. The hallway itself was fairly empty, but he peered into the main living room where the mass of people seemed to have grown, and he got that sensation of being enveloped by a wall of sound. The tinkling glasses, and the flutter of laughter, the music—which didn’t even sound as though it was French anymore, but selections from Gigi, that old movie whose soundtrack his mother was always playing while he was growing up. He became lost in trying to get the exact lyrics right in his head as they came up, but it was difficult to focus.

“We’re heading out, Paul,” someone said. “It was good to meet you.”

Then, “Where’s your wife, Paul? You didn’t make her up or anything, did you?”

Now, who—? But, oh: it was the couple he’d met earlier in the night, back when the Billy Ocean song first lodged itself in his head. Brad and Nancy, the newlyweds who already were expecting their first baby. Good Lord, talk
about a wake-up call. Barely finished working off their own college beer bellies before stretching Nancy’s out to its limit again, responsible now not even for a child but for an actual, miniature human, one that will emerge from the womb with all of these ready-made, momentous decisions waiting for it, choices to make, hairstyles to experiment with, ways of speaking to settle on. That kid was going to turn out nothing like what they were expecting.

“Maybe I did,” Paul replied, doing his best to keep his eyes locked on them as they shrugged into their jackets. “I’m starting to wonder if I came here alone after all.”

“Oh, ho ho,” Nancy said.

“We’ll see y’at the next one, Paul.” Brad raised a single hand manfully as he ushered his wife out the door. “Peace.” A click of the door sliding into place, and they were gone.

Peace? As in, what? On earth?

Paul got up to stretch his legs, leaning on the credenza and massaging his painted-on mustache probably into a smudge. He ended up examining a small, glazed ceramic jug of some sort sitting beside him. He ran his fingers over its smooth ribbing and then, just like that, dumped the remainder of his drink inside.

_Peace on earth_, he hummed to himself. _Can it be?_

Well, yes, why not? When it got right down to it, why couldn’t his son and his budding family (for Paul was _going_ to call it that from now on, for better or worse) be sitting cozily in each other’s arms right now, beneath the light of the Christmas tree they bought at Dollar General? Why did they—why did Melinda—have to think of it as being so dark and bleak? Where was the optimism? The faith. Or whatever it was she had so long ago in their son, that little boy tottering around the backyard with a Super Soaker, chasing his grandmother. They’d laughed, then, blowing bubbles into their beverages to conceal their amusement. But he supposed that had been a long time ago, a different age, a completely different situation; he wasn’t even sure why he seemed to equate the two.

“I went to see him this morning, after all.”

This coming not from Paul’s mouth, but Melinda’s. She stood behind him, squaring her shoulders and clutching her little gold handbag. There was an attractive coolness to her face, such that Paul wanted to reach out and touch it. But he didn’t; he knew enough not to push any more boundaries tonight.

“And I know you’ve been there, too,” she went on. “I knew even before you mentioned it for the first time this evening.”

“Well, Melinda, I mean—”

“But I wanted to see for myself what it was like. I wanted to see how Andrew was doing, if he was at least _happy_, you know?” A sad little smirk developed in the corner of her mouth. “But I seemed to think that by visiting him and actually going to that dumpy little ground-floor apartment I would be letting the cat out of the bag. People would see me getting out of the car, carrying a bag of groceries as a peace offering and, ‘Oh,’ they’d say, ‘look at Melinda Huntley
going to check up on that son of hers. No wonder he’s such a failure, the way she coddles him.’ Which obviously makes no sense. But I realize that’s kind of what I thought, and I was mad, about it and about him... And then today, I just couldn’t help myself. After you left, I finished my orange juice and I found that I was unable go into work, and so I skipped. Before I knew it, there I was parked in front of a trash can, staring at myself in the rearview mirror, mustering up the courage to go in and see my son.”

Paul licked his lips and swallowed; his mouth was awfully dry. “Do you really think people talk about it? You think they care about our business or our son’s business, how he’s chosen to live his life?” And then, though he knew the words were wrong even as he formed them and let them fall out: “Anyway, should it even matter? Have some faith in them, Melinda, I think there’s a chance at least that—”

But she shook her head and cut him off. “No, Paul. They’re not going to stay together, I’m telling you that right now.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I can just tell! I walk in the door and she’s standing there, big as a house in her flannel pants—nice quality, I suppose, but sloppy—frying up grilled cheese in the middle of the day for herself and this young skinny guy in a t-shirt whom I’ve never seen before. There’s another guy over there, Paul, flopped on the couch and watching TV all day; probably one of Andrew’s friends if I had to guess.” She sighed. “People talk. They always do. You cannot just slip by through life expecting to do your own thing, to have everything just adapt more or less to another, happy version of what you imagine it to be.”

And there—there was the fundamental difference between the two of them. It had always been there, noticeable even when they were dating in those muttering sort of lists she used to make for around-the-apartment improvements, divided straight down the middle, one side for herself and one side to show the landlord. Or in the way she veered a conversation back towards a safer, less revealing topic whenever it left her control for a moment at a party. Hadn’t she done that tonight? Hadn’t she requested a week to think about it when he’d asked her to marry him twenty-one years ago, while he had grinned the whole evening in dumb bliss that she was even considering it?

Hadn’t that been why, perhaps, the memory of dancing to the Billy Ocean song so long ago stayed with him even now? For all day he’d watched a faint line form above her brow while she flashed determined smiles and glanced over her shoulder, keeping an eye out for any possible kinks in the reception. Then the song came on, and it was like something cracked; there had been a newfound looseness, a pliability in her expression. And she didn’t even like Billy Ocean. But he’d looked at her as he wrapped his arms around her, realizing that for the first time all day she was his. This capable woman he’d chosen to marry, with whom he’d buy a house and raise a family, and with whom, one way or another, he’d never stop having fun. Yes, their guests crowded the dance floor during that song as well, and yes, he and Melinda had laughed openly at her high school friend Judy falling down halfway through. But the memory—the reason it had remained a memory, lodged deep inside for so long—it had really been about Melinda all this time, hadn’t it?

Yes, he believed it had.
“Was Andrew glad to see you?” he asked her now, blinking, pushing through the fog to get to the moment at hand. “What did he say?”

Melinda looked down at her shoe. “He wasn’t there.”

“Wasn’t there…”

“He was out getting a new amplifier for his guitar. Or a cord or something, I don’t know. According to Liz, one of their friends owns an old van and wasn’t doing anything better today, so Andrew hitched a ride…” She looked in on the party, at the people just beginning to mill around the clock on the mantle. It was fifteen minutes until midnight.

“I felt like screaming at her,” she said. “At her and the kid on the couch. For not being Andrew, I guess. But instead I helped her reach the plates in the back of the cabinet, and poured her a glass of milk. The other kid I let fend for himself.”

Which made Paul laugh a little, and maybe she did, too. It was hard to tell in this light, with her face angled downward and the noise from the other room spilling over. Oh, there always seemed to be so much noise. So many discarded coats and fellow guests, fragile glasses and bric-a-brac cluttering his pathway. He loved it, had always loved it; and yet… Where was his jacket?

“Would you like to leave now?” he asked.

“Now?” she said, even as she reached for the jacket she’d left on the banister. “But it’s almost midnight.”

“Yeah, we’ll beat the rush and skip out before Dan Fogelberg starts up. I promised you we’d leave before we had to listen to Dan Fogelberg, didn’t I?”

“You did… You did say that.”

“So let’s go,” he said, helping her into her jacket. She didn’t argue, nor did he think she would. They stepped outside onto the landing, feeling warm still, even in the midst of all the snow, and he waited a moment to collect his bearings while she headed down the driveway.

But then, “Wait!” she said, and turned around to face him. “Your jacket. You forgot your jacket in Frank and Suzanne’s room, Paul.”

He could hear her clearly now, and see her face clearly, too; the celebration inside was a faint murmur behind him. But even so, with the snow coming down like rain all around her, he could have sworn just for a second that people were throwing rice confetti.

Probably it was the champagne, or maybe he was more tired than he thought. Either way, he figured he was warm enough and bounded down the steps to their car.