

For Roberta, if you're lingering nearby

Hey. Hey there, lady. R.J. here, your old friend – one of quite a few, judging from what I've read over the last little while. I know we haven't talked in ages, and maybe for you this isn't the best time; but then again you might have noticed it isn't exactly the best time for any of us. And maybe it's for naught anyway. I don't know much about this life, death and time stuff; those who call themselves experts (the preachers, the psychics, the wandering gypsy spiritualists) seem to disagree on more than they hold in common. I'm just hoping you're still close enough by that you can hear me.

Damn it, Roberta. This didn't work out the way any of us expected. You should have stuck around a lot longer than the shitty number (what was it – 44?) you ended up with. Maybe it's our fault; maybe we took too much out of you, because (as Dave noted the other day) you always seemed so willing to give. Or maybe it's no one's, at least not in this world – maybe it was just a question of that number coming up. The Almighty has his own purposes, so they say. But if that's true, to me at least, just what he's getting at becomes harder and harder to ascertain every year.

So I won't waste any more of our time trying to figure out the why. All I can do now is thank you. You and I had a relatively brief acquaintance, in terms of being day-to-day comrades; but damn if you didn't make sure it counted.

It's funny that even after more than 20 years, the fall of 1994 doesn't seem like that long ago. That was when I first started coming around St. Anthony's (Katie can probably figure out the approximate date), and so that was when our paths crossed. I guess that first day we started from about the same perspective – for each other, just another face in the crowd. You probably didn't know much about what to make of this stranger who'd just walked in off the street, to read a poem and eat some pancakes. And I, of course, didn't know you. You nevertheless made it a point to come over and say hello.

(The other specific thing I remember from that Sunday morning is Carlar staggering out, clearly in the midst of a mighty hangover, cracking one eye open to watch the proceedings and thinking – as she told me much later – "Who IS this guy?" From such moments are these improbable bonds forged.)

What is important to remember from this short episode, and the events that followed, is that you didn't need me. You might wave that aside, but it was quickly obvious in the fall of '94 that Roberta Moore was the emotional balance wheel at St. Anthony's, North Carolina chapter – leader, organizer, confidante, the one the rest looked up to. You had plenty of friends. Then there was me, a shy, often angry kid with a chip on his shoulder who didn't trust that many folks, but who sensed he had to try and be something better. If I hadn't, I should have never come around the place to begin with.

Each era (for lack of a better word) at St. Anthony's divides itself into its crowds, its cliques. You had yours, you were a senior; you could have stuck with your bunch and left the next generation to bring me along. Except you didn't. And the fact that you showed me you wanted to be my friend, in those days when I was trying to find a new way to live, had more of an impact than you might ever have known. You weren't the only one, but you were among the first.

Then again, that's always who you were, isn't it? This outpouring of love over the last days, since Doug broke the terrible news to me, only confirms that the lady I got to know back in 1994-'95 was the

genuine article – warm, intelligent, fiercely loyal, compassionate, easy to be around, at the center of things. These are qualities that, guarded as I was, I could spot right away. That took no special insight, though; anyone who found themselves around you could recognize the same.

So again, thank you. We had those two semesters together, packed some good times and memories into those days and nights; then for you it was off to grad school, and for me, time to try and steer a new course. It was time well spent; by example, by kind deeds and comforting words, you did help me find a better way. I know for a fact I was not the only one.

This is going to be tough, Roberta. The only hope we have is that you managed to teach us enough of those qualities I mentioned a moment ago to help us carry on. Big Russ is tough enough, I know; he's also in a tough spot, and who knows how long it's going to take for things to get close to normal again. As for the kids, no doubt they're taking it much harder than me or anyone else. I have none of my own, and so what I can say here is limited; but if the situation presents itself maybe one day I can pitch in a little, and try to make them smile, by taking them to a Carolina basketball game.

I regret one thing. Except for that trip I took out to Arizona (October '99) to see you and Brian, get my first taste of the mythic Southwest, we never spent much time together as adults out in the world. Hell, no one's fault – lives and fortunes being what they are, we took separate paths. I wandered for awhile; you started a family and built a career. But for several years now I've been settled here in Hillsborough, you just across the way in Durham. There have been alumni events at which we could have reconnected; I didn't make them (just a couple).

I kept telling myself I'd get up with the old crowd one day. That day did not come soon enough. So, sorry won't help; but please, dear, know that it was never because I didn't care.

OK, Roberta, I guess this is it. Wrote this out longhand, old-school, straight into ink on paper, my heart to yours. If you're still lingering about, maybe that means you'll get it quicker. And if you've had to go, so be it. I'll tell you myself when I finally cross that river, one day.

Goodnight, sweetheart, and God bless you. We love you, and we always will.

R.J. Beatty

Hillsborough, N.C.

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