

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER

by David Mills

Yesterday I was at a used-book sale, one of those events where hundreds of paperbacks and hardcovers are on display filling tables and large cardboard boxes. I love a bargain and I love a good book. Also, when I get there, I like to go through every title and count all the books I've managed to read in my seventy years. If it turns out to be a high number, I feel good about myself. Like I've accomplished something.

This sale happened to be outside a church on a sunny fall morning in late September. A pleasant time to be outside communing with like-minded souls. Dozens of people rummaged through best-sellers, mysteries, comedies and literary classics. In this electronic age, I felt heartened that print still held an allure, particularly with the younger bargain-hunters.

I found three titles that interested me and I had just finished paying for them when I noticed a young man of sixteen sitting on a bench in the parkette that bordered the church property. It was odd how I instinctively knew his age. Something about him was curious and engaging. As I peered at him from some distance, a memory came to me.

It was a vision of myself, at the age of sixteen, lanky and stoop-shouldered, with thick glasses, a snub nose, long straggly hair and the wisp of a moustache. Like this young man, I was sitting on a bench near a tall oak, reading a book. I even remembered the title of the book.

My heart skipped a beat. Yes, the young man did look familiar. He had the same build, the same posture. The same facial hair. But it couldn't be. What kind of trick of the senses was this?

The young man looked in my direction and I quickly looked away. I don't believe he realized I was watching him.

My curiosity got the better of me. I wanted to go over to him and see if he was reading the same book. Of course he wouldn't be, so then I'd be able to dismiss this odd apparition.

I ambled over to the bench, feeling quite nervous. He continued to read without noticing my approach. Trying to appear casual, I sat at the other end of the bench, reached into my bag and pulled out one of the paperbacks I'd just bought. I pretended to read for a few seconds, then stole a glance at the book the boy was reading.

It *was* the same title! The *same* book I had been reading at sixteen, when I sat on a bench outside a church sale, fifty-four years ago.

I glanced into that face, trying not to stare. The warm sun glinted off his glasses. I peered at the thick eyebrows, the moustache hairs sprouting from the top corners of his upper lip, noticed the wart on his right forefinger and the dirty fingernails. I remembered how I felt then. How I lacked confidence in my appearance.

The young man, compelled to acknowledge my presence, turned to survey me. There was a curious look in his eyes. As he took in my appearance, a look of apprehension came over him.

We continued to scrutinize each other and I felt the need to break the uncomfortable deadlock that was growing.

"I...", I began hesitantly. "I read that book."

I pointed ridiculously at the book in his hand. "A long time ago."

He said nothing in reply.

"When I was your age," I added.

He glanced at the book, then back at me. I didn't know what else to say, or more correctly, how to say anything else.

This time, his eyes actually studied me, going over the older features – the grey hair, the wrinkled hands, the crow's-feet under the eyes, but also the familiar snub nose and thick eyebrows. I felt he was trying to figure out who I really was and what I was doing here.

The memory of my younger self became clearer. It now included an older man – my age – coming to sit beside *me*. I remembered the awkwardness, the strangeness, the alien feel of the encounter.

Finally he broke the strained silence between us. In a hesitant but earnest voice he raised his book, shook his head slightly and said, "Don't tell me what happens."

I was taken aback by his abrupt response. We peered into each other's eyes for what seemed another full minute, then he turned back to his book.

The memory I had had reasserted itself in my mind. I remembered saying those very words to the older man who sat beside me on the bench, when I was sixteen.

I felt conflicted. There was so much I wanted to say. So much I could tell him. But I knew I couldn't.

I watched him as he read, or tried to read. He scratched at the wart on his finger then rubbed the left side of his thin moustache. I could tell he was not able to concentrate on the words right now. I felt he was hoping I would not say anything. Wishing I would just go away.

When he eventually looked at me again (as if to say 'are you still here'), I nodded slightly as an acknowledgement of his wish.

Then I got up to leave, still feeling however that I should tell him *something*. I could help him. I could save him from hurt and pain. I could guide him, make his life better. Or could I?

He watched me take a couple of steps and still had his eyes on me when I turned back for one last look.

I winked at him.

"It's a good book," I said, and walked away.

(January 6, 2019)