

Spring fever hits in unexpected ways

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Each fitful March, the City of Newport sponsored a treasure hunt at sprawling Easton's Beach on the Atlantic. Grown-ups had hidden numbered wooden blocks in the sand, and at the signal (sometimes a whistle, often a starting pistol), we little Newporters bolted from the cement retaining wall of the promenade and scoured the beach for the buried blocks that were redeemed for prizes.

One year, the block I unearthed fetched a small clay figure of a baseball player, batting. He was painted with a white uniform and the prints of the fingers that had shaped him were visible through the paint, giving the sculpture a childlike quality.

I placed him on a shelf in my bedroom amid my growing collection of Little League trophies and other baseball-related paraphernalia: photos, pennants, team stickers and the like. Because Ted Williams batted left, and this fellow batted right, I decided to call him Fred.

After many years of schooling and travels, I bought my own house and settled in Providence. I retrieved Fred and placed him on top of a bookshelf in the foyer. There he stood, alongside various other talismans: shells, rocks, yard sale figurines, street finds and the like.

Now, many Marches later, at the tail end of this tedious winter of 2014, I walk in Swan Point Cemetery, safe from vehicles navigating torn-up roadways at dusk.

Down a peaceful avenue, I approach a woman in a black coat, no hat, her bearing in front of a headstone such that I am drawn to stand nearby, but far enough away so she can acknowledge me if she wishes. I feel to be her guardian without understanding why. When she lifts her eyes and looks at me sorrowfully but with a longing, I know I can approach her.

"My father," she says quietly.

I stand next to her. It is so very cold that I let my shoulder press against hers.

We leave the cemetery together, and in the near-darkness we reach her house and I ask, "May I take you to dinner?"

We walk over to Wayland Square, find a cozy place and sit at a table next to a window. We order warm food. We sip hot tea and drink wine.

I learn that she was raised in Providence, moved away for several decades before leaving a crumbling marriage and returning to Providence. Now, like so many of us, she is living the unexpected life.

She makes me feel giddy. It feels natural to take her hands and wrap them around my mug of hot tea and cup them in mine.

After that evening, work and prior commitments keep us apart for almost two weeks but we communicate several times daily by email, eventually building a tension that has to break. We arrange a walk together on a sunny afternoon when it's less frigid than it has been.

We meet on her front steps and wend our way over and around frozen snow, up and down streets until we arrive at my house. I invite her inside. In the foyer I take her coat and while I hang it on the rack I notice her take Fred the ballplayer down from atop the bookcase.

"Where did you get this?" she asks, and I tell her the story of the block hunt so many years ago.

"His name is Fred," I say.

Returning Fred to his position, she turns to me and we kiss. And kiss.

After three days together, she says, "I want to show you my old 'hood."

We walk up Thayer Street and she says, "That's where Ladd's Music used to be, where I got all my 45s . . . and Andreas — that's where Liggett's Rexall Drug used to be." . . . Further up, we turn onto a quiet street and stop in front of a fine old Queen Anne. "This is where I grew up," she said.

I follow her down the driveway to a carriage house converted to a garage. Along the side she stops and peers into a window then steps back so I can look into the small room with a heavy wooden bench built into the wall. It's dusty and dirty and filled with cobwebs. There's a tall chair pulled up to the bench.

When I step back from the window she looks at me. Her eyes are shining and her face is open.

"That's where Fred was born," she says. And she proceeds to tell me the story of how her father returned from a business trip to Europe with a special polymer clay that she could mold and then harden in a conventional oven. "I was obsessed with making things from clay and I loved baseball, so I made Fred. I took him to school one day for show-and-tell and he disappeared."

Questions like a flock of chirping sparrows fill my brain with such a happy noise that I surrender, life carrying me where it will. After all, it is spring and we want life to be wonderful again: happy and as brilliant as childhood dreams of glory and love so perfect and overwhelming that anything is possible.