



— JOURNAL ARCHIVES

Frank Sinatra and Grace Kelly in "High Society."

Love by the shimmering ocean in 1968

CHARLES PINNING

I've never seen the ocean." We're smoking cigarettes outside the swank Sulgrave Club in Washington, having just stepped out of a Valentine's Day party for a visiting national high school organization, "Future Lawyers of America." I was invited because a friend of my mother's called and said they needed a few more young men to "round things out."

"I can show you the ocean," I say, suave in my tuxedo.

Earlier that year, my father's new job had uprooted our family from Newport to a Virginia suburb of D.C.

"Okay," she smiles. I'm falling in love with this lightly freckled Grace Kelly look-alike from Sheboygan, Wis., whom I've known for exactly two dances, one fast, one slow.

I drop Catherine off at her hotel and roar back home in my third-hand Triumph TR-3, grab a change of clothes and high-tail it out of there. Catherine is waiting by the entrance, blue chiffon exchanged for bell bottom blue jeans and a brown suede jacket. Her hard suitcase fills the TR's trunk and we blast north into the night.

We arrive at the shores of Narragansett Bay just in time to catch the first ferry of the day across to Newport.

"Is this the ocean?" asks Catherine.

"Almost."

Twenty minutes later, on the bright new morn of Feb. 15, 1968, we roll off the ferry and on out to Ocean Drive. Just before we get there, I take the top down and toss the side curtains into the jump seat.

A hundred yards further and there it is: the glittering, shimmering Atlantic.

"Oh!" Catherine stands on her seat, gripping the edge of the windshield, hair blowing straight back, her whole face beaming. I feel the thrill of seeing another suffused with the new.

Petit Réve, nestled in a small, rocky cove with lawn running straight to the water is a small chalet, the guest house of one of the mansions closed for the winter. The caretaker of the estate is a friend of my older brother's and I know that he keeps a key beneath the paw of a stone lion that guards the terrace. Manny has a blue pickup but it's not there.

Sunlight pours through the big windows facing the cove. We sit in a pool of it like two cats, eating peanut butter and jelly on crackers I'd grabbed from home and drinking instant coffee that we found here.

After breakfast we scamper over the rocks, inspecting periwinkles and starfish in the tidal pools. We collect driftwood and build a fire in the fireplace.

A little while later, we hear tires on the gravel

and Manny's truck comes into view. I go out to the terrace and tell him what's going on.

He shakes his head, his long brown hair shifting on his shoulders. "Your father is going to blow a gasket."

Manny comes in and I introduce him to Catherine. He takes a quick look around and I walk with him back outside. When I ask how he has been, he tells me he has been drafted and will probably have to go to Vietnam.

"Go home tomorrow," he says. "I know your father. He's not gonna understand this at all."

"I know," I say.

"Your lady is real pretty and has a nice way, too. You got any protection?"

His question confuses me for a moment, then I mumble something between yes and no.

He goes to his truck and comes back with a couple of foil packs and hands them to me.

That night is all candlelight and ocean sounds, and laughing and saying, "Thank you, thank you," over and over into each other's faces in every possible tone like crazy people.

In the morning, I take Catherine to Green Airport outside of Providence and watch her disappear into the sky. I drive back to Virginia, savoring every detail of the last 36 hours.

My father is furious! I am lectured. My keys and my allowance are taken away. I am expected to spend every waking minute lining up a summer job. All my mother can say is, "Why didn't you call us?"

Catherine and I write letters every day. She invites me to come live at her parent's house in Wisconsin for the summer. She says her father is a judge and will find me a job, and that I'll get along really well with her brother, who is my age.

I ask my father if I can borrow plane fare, that I'll pay him back from my earnings. He glares at me in disbelief.

"You must be out of your mind if you think I'd let you do this!" he rails.

"Fine," I say. "I'll get a job and buy the plane ticket myself."

"If you do that," he says, "don't bother coming back."

What am I gonna do? I'm 17 years old. He's sunk me.

In the merry month of May, my mother is talking on the phone to a friend in Newport and learns that Manny was killed in Vietnam. I am stunned.

Four months later, I get a letter from Catherine. She's sorry, but she has a new boyfriend. My father sees me reading the letter, unable now to hold back all the tears.

"Son," he says, "trust me. In a year, you will have forgotten all about her."

Charles Pinning, of Providence, is the author of the new Rhode Island-based novel "Irreplaceable."