

My parents, brother, one of my partners, and two young ladies were my guests at dinner last week. My father, trying to be amusing I suppose, regaled us with stories about my early childhood. Specifically he resurrected my three imaginary playmates - Marion Ballard and GoGo - who were my constant companions. He recalled that I would insist that a place be set for each of them at the table, and that food be served. When I came in from playing I would require that the door be left ajar so that they could follow at their convenience. All important decisions were made collectively with them. Having scored all the points necessary with this one salvo to win a loopsided dinner victory he made his triumph complete by adding benignly that such fantasies are not unusual in little children and do not foretell disillusionments in later life. So to begin the story I must admit this is all true, though perhaps inappropriate dinner conversation.

I retell all this not because I harbour any real resentment against my father for his indiscretion, but rather by way of introduction to the fact that I bumped into Ballard yesterday. We spent a fine afternoon and a full bottle of scotch reminiscing. I had not seen him since college days when we roomed together. But there are so many Ballard stories in the air that I have never felt that I ever really lost touch.

Ballard was always a bit of a rogue. When we were little he was a terrible devil, messy, and always spilling

food, sometimes on purpose I suspected. He was never properly clean except in the bathtub. As I remember it he use to goose me a lot in the bath which made me splash which made mother mad, and even angry on occasions. I got the blame, of course. He would laugh. She couldn't even see that it was his fault.

At college he was the star of ruger, waterpolo and one other that slips my mind. He was also rakishly handsome, hopelessly romantic and perpetually unfaithful. I always got great vicarious pleasure from his athletic and sexual prowess, and an even more satisfying sense of superiority from his incorrigable unreliability. Ballard quit college in the middle of second year. Perhaps I should say that he never came back from the spring break he took in the company of a lovely lady whose father had something to do with MGM or one of those companies.

Some people say he made six pictures, others eight. When I asked Ballard himself he said thirteen. His first six were as Biff Casey, which I knew. After that, he told me, he was sold to another studio, made seven more, but they weren't distributed in the U.S. A big hit in Argentina. So he quit, but by that time blond surfer-types were all the rage, which he is not, so there was little work to be found. I saw him in several commercials posing as a football player who loved compact cars. Ballard says his favorite was the cowboy in the snow storm in the Marlborough ads. Never showed his face but we knew it was him. He tried out for bionic man, but

he didn't even get a callback. So he came back east, worked for a while as a sex therapist at the Uptown Y, and now he is a PR man in an agency that handles only jock superstars. He says his real love is the therapy. His methodology is certainly unorthodox, but that is another story.

But the main subject of our inebriated conversation was not Ballard's history. I knew most of the things I have just written before our meeting. We were more interested in what had become of our two old friends.

I should explain that Ballard and GoGo did not get along. They were friends in the sense of compulsory associates. I should also explain that GoGo was slang in our house for - how shall I put it - to defecate. It derived from mother's plaintive toilet command, Go, go. Presumably no further explanation is required of the fact that it was a derogatory nickname. GoGo's real name was Ernest, but when Ballard started calling him GoGo it stuck. I believe we introduced him to my parents as GoGo and they never knew him by any other name. It shows how patronizing adults are that they never thought to ask.

Ballard used to beat up Ernest a lot. They seemed to fight automatically. Ernest was small, wore glasses, and couldn't run - you know the type. We usually played games that he made up. He would announce the rules at the beginning, make up more as we went along, but no matter what the restrictions he would usually end up tied to a tree or locked in a barn.

Ernest would get loose, of course, because he was smart. Then they would argue. Marion and I would make Ballard promise to be nice and make Ernest promise not to be so bossy. Life would go on.

Ernest was the only one who ever came to church with mother and I. I always told ^{her} all three were present and made her keep ~~the~~ ^{the} extra seats. It made her feel better. My father never came to church. He said he had gone twice every Sunday when he was a boy so he didn't need to go any more. This is the theology of an accountant.

As you might expect I had kept better track of Ernest than had Ballard. He went to a prep school, registering as Ernest, and then to Princeton, then to Harvard Law. He was one of Nixon's most active workers in the whole state but I understand he came close to a nervous breakdown after the resignation. He keeps up the church connection ghost writing sermons for the bishop once a month. He works as a tax attorney. I ~~don't~~ know anything about that, but, naturally he is quite successful and brilliant. When I last saw him he asked to be remembered to my parents and we promised to get together soon with Marion, though not Ballard.

The only thing Ballard had heard of Ernest, who he insisted on calling GoGo, was a very funny and nasty story that he picked up from one of his ~~best~~ buddies at the Y. I will not repeat it. I can not be sure that kind of gossip is reliable.

As the afternoon wore on we started talking about Marion and decided to call her. She didn't live very far away. Anyhow when we did she said she would not meet with the two of us unless Ernest was invited. It seemed kind of dumb to me, and it made Ballard mad. But she always had her reasons for everything, and she was usually right. So I promised to track down Ernest for a grand reunion. At first Ballard said he wouldn't come, but later he relented.

There's nothing remarkable to tell about Marion. She runs a tight ship, keeps three lovers on the string, and produces detergent commercials - faster than anybody on Madison Avenue. She is one of the few really happy people I know. She has a unique ability to rally everyone around her to work to-gether like a team.

In any event the reunion dinner actually happened. It went quite well. It even ended in conversation. And then a little surprise.

"You know," said Marion, "I always liked your mother. She was really good to us."

"She was a prude," interjected Ballard.

"In a way, I suppose, but you've got to admit, Ballsie, that she got all the mechanics right. I mean we got the right dosage of crude mother love, and all that. She was very good to you considering what a bratty kid you were. I haven't seen her for a long time. We should go for a visit."

"It would be very nice," said Ernest correctly. "Though I couldn't take more than ten minutes of that arrogant father of yours."

"Are you guys for real!" I shook my head in disbelief.
"It's not possible. You can't do it!"

"Are you afraid your old friends will embarrass you?" Ballard laughed. He goosed me, and I jumped spilling a glass of wine. He laughed again. Marion looked askance at me. "This'll be fun. Let's go."

And so, off they, we, went, drunk with nostalgia for dear old mum and dad.

In the taxi I tried to think what to say when I walked in the door. The reader will appreciate the predicament in light of the conversation related at the very beginning of this tale. Would father get the jump on me once again? I decided to say nothing and hope they wouldn't notice them.

My three friends tumbled out of the cab telling each other how great it was to be home. They went bouncing up the steps and waited outside the door for me to enter. Which I did, leaving the door slightly ajar behind me.

"Well, what brings you home?" Mother was serving dinner. "And look who is with you! Well, well, well," said mother, "Marion! And Ballard! I'd recognize you two anywhere. But GoGo! How you've changed!"

"Sit down, kids. Sit down," said father. "Who wants some pie? One at a time. One at a time. And what have you all been doing to-day?"

If there is a faint or a weary smile creeping across your face let me hasten to say that I regard the matter with the utmost seriousness. No matter what you may think this is not written as some ironic freudian indulgence. This is

Not knowing what to say, I said nothing, a common problem these days. What could I say? And to whom? A delicacy of sort beyond my grasp was called for. Identities were on the line. Self-administered therapy is the most difficult kind.

Without intending disrespect of my parentage I must confess chagrin that they should haunt me this way. I had thought they would be easier to manage. ~~Ballard~~ ^{Ernest} warned me about ~~making them up~~ ^{such fantasies}. He said they would cause trouble in the end. And he was right. At first he would not even speak with them a fact I attributed to jealousy not insight. ~~Ernest~~ Marion was more supportive in charming but diffident way. She seemed to understand how compulsive is such a sentimental attachment. But it is Ballard's work that echo loudest, ~~Yer livin' in a fantasy~~ ~~water~~ "Don't fuck with people in yer head, man. They'll never go away."