

Careless

Caught in the spell of a dangerous infatuation, a man finds that he must choose between his current life and a far-fetched dream

by Dave Margoshes

At the Banff Springs Hotel, Peter ran into a man he knew who was sharing a room with a slim, youthful looking woman who protested, when someone remarked how much like a kid she seemed, “Oh, but I’m old, I’m old.”

The man’s name was also Peter, and whenever the two met they referred to each other as Peter M and Peter F, the F standing for Frankenheimer. The last time Peter M had seen or talked to Frankenheimer, who was just an acquaintance, really, not a friend, was two years earlier. Frankenheimer had just broken up with his wife, had left her and his three children and was living in a mother-in-law suite in a friend’s basement. He had no job, no car, no money, “just my self-respect,” Frankenheimer had said, smiling sourly, when Peter inquired, “and that won’t get me far.”

It had, though, or so it seemed. The Banff Springs was far from cheap, and Frankenheimer and his young woman friend had just emerged from a new Lexus when Peter spotted them. They were well decked out in Hugo Boss sports clothes and carrying matching sets of soft-sided Samsonite, and then there was the woman herself, youthful looking and really quite splendid, despite whatever she may have thought of herself.

Peter and Barbara had checked in only minutes earlier and were standing in the lobby, about to go out for a walk, when Frankenheimer and his friend arrived and, after introductions, they agreed to meet on the tennis court an hour later.

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As they strolled through the gardens, not yet in full bloom, Peter told Barbara about Frankenheimer's breakup, two years earlier, and how, when he'd commiserated, the other man's one regret seemed to be the separation not from his two natural chil-

dren, a young boy and girl, but from the eldest, who was adopted, an Indian boy who had given him and his wife nothing but heartache since puberty. The boy had run away, gotten into drugs and other trouble, and had wound up in hospital, almost dying, from a beating. Peter recalled wondering if worry and strain over this boy hadn't hastened the end of Frankenheimer's marriage. At any rate, he appeared now to be over any remorse, any reversals of fortune, and was prospering.

"Peter M!" he'd exclaimed when he entered the ornate hotel lobby and saw Peter, "how's it hanging?" He thrust his hand forward and Peter, who, though he disliked shaking hands, always had, saw no alternative but to grasp it in return. Frankenheimer's grip was firm and dry, the shake sincere but brief, like the good-bye kiss of a former lover. Peter had had only a fleeting look at the woman Frankenheimer was with, but, the handshake over, the two men stood back from each other and, as the conversation circled around them, he allowed himself a good look, and he fell immediately in love with her.

Peter had always considered himself a fortunate man. His wife was still beautiful and, after 20 years, they still loved each other—or, that is to say, he believed Barbara still loved him and, up until that moment at the Banff Springs, he still loved her. His children were healthy and brilliant, their teeth straightened and bright. His job—he was a petroleum geologist, finding places where other people could drill holes and find things—continued to be interesting and rewarding. He was 43, a conventional man but capable of charm and insight, and his life was about to change utterly.

Frankenheimer was a petroleum engineer—one of the people who drilled the holes where Peter told them to—who had fared badly in the fortunes of the oil patch, losing his job when prices went south the last time, though clearly he had recovered. That had never happened to Peter, who, working for a succession of juniors, had always ridden out the storms, always landed on his feet. This did not confer any superiority, moral or otherwise, on Peter, he knew that, but he could not escape the feeling that Frankenheimer had somehow been careless.

"I'm in real estate now," Frankenheimer told him. He also introduced him to the woman he was with, whose name was Ingrid, which, Peter thought, was just right. She had a long neck, making her appear somewhat like a gazelle, graceful and fleet, with dark, alert eyes and short, swept-back dark hair. It seemed to Peter that Frankenheimer was careful not to use the word "wife," while still making it clear that their relationship was proprietary.

Later, on the tennis court, Peter was able to admire her long, shapely legs and the firm, slender sweep of her arms, the delicacy of her wrists, although her backhand was strong. Even her feet were small and precisely shaped, as if they, and not the expensive athletic shoes she wore, had been shaped on a cobbler's last. She moved like a ballet dancer, and Peter wasn't surprised to learn that she'd gone through 10 years of lessons, had even tried out, unsuccessfully, for the Royal Winnipeg school.

"Was that a disappointment?" he asked.

"Oh, of course. God, I was 16, I thought my life had come to a shattering end. It hadn't."

They were having drinks on the patio beside the court, the four of them—Frankenheimer and Ingrid, Peter and Barbara, who had no way of knowing, of course, that Peter was in love with another woman. He liked the way Ingrid said "shattering," liked the matter-of-fact way she said "It hadn't," without elaboration, liked the way she held her gin and tonic, the pinkie of her right hand extended just so, delicately but without affectation, liked that the fingers of that graceful hand were unencumbered with rings, liked the bright red shade of her nail polish, though ordinarily he didn't care for nail polish at all, liked the cool way she gazed at him, liked, he realized with a start, everything about her. He felt, simultaneously, uncomfortable and exhilarated.

The four had already agreed to have dinner together and, back in their room for showers and to change, Peter

eyed his wife as surreptitiously as possible as she laid out her clothes, and, wearing a pink slip, sat at a dressing table drying her hair with an electric blower. She had not become fat, had not lost the muscle tone in her legs or arms, had not let herself come apart. Her conversation was as intelligent and witty as ever, her hair as lustrous, but Peter was struck now by how plain and uninteresting she was. He found himself gazing at the woman he'd lived with for almost half his life with the same dispassionate disinterest he'd bring to bear on a checkout clerk at the supermarket.

"They seem like pleasant people," Barbara said suddenly, enthusiastically. She always enjoyed meeting new people.

"Yes," Peter said, but he turned away, afraid that his eyes would betray him.

It was at dinner that Barbara made the comment about Ingrid's youthfulness. Ingrid had laughed at something Frankenheimer said and Barbara, completely ingenuously, Peter was sure, said, "Ingrid, you're such a kid." Then she'd blushed, and quickly added: "Oh, I didn't mean that the way it came out. I just mean you're so youthful. It was a compliment, honestly."

Ingrid touched Barbara's arm lightly. "Not to worry. I didn't take it the wrong way. Oh, but I'm old, I'm old. I'm probably the oldest person at this table." She crinkled her face to accentuate the lines around her eyes and mouth, but that only succeeded in making her look adorable, Peter thought.

Barbara's gaffe, unintentional though it may have been, struck Peter as so clumsy, Ingrid's reply as so deft and modest. It turned out then, though, that Ingrid *was* older than she appeared. Like Frankenheimer, she'd survived a failed marriage, and had a daughter, 18 and in her first year at the U of C. Looking closer, Peter could see the faint lines around her eyes that the funny face she'd made a moment earlier had called to his attention, lines that even the skillfully applied makeup hadn't been able to hide completely, lines produced by the irresistible wrinkles that leapt like excited puppies to the tops of her cheeks when she smiled or laughed, both of which she did often. None of this new information did anything to cool Peter's ardour.

Both couples had come to the hotel for the long weekend, a chance to get away, as Barbara put it, "from the grind"—her omission of the word "daily" in the familiar phrase rang in Peter's mind as emblematic of the something which had suddenly gone missing from their marriage, though he had no way of knowing if she felt the same way he did, and he doubted that. Since the two Peters no longer worked in the same industry, it was not

surprising that their paths hadn't crossed for two years, and there was no reason why Barbara and Ingrid should have met—Barbara was a high school math teacher, Ingrid a physical therapist. It turned out, though, that the two couples lived not all that far from each other. Frankenheimer and Ingrid had moved to Roxboro the preceding year, and Ingrid's daughter had graduated last spring from Western, where Peter's and Barbara's son was in Grade 12 this year. And, as it developed, the two women had a mutual friend.

They laughed at how small a world it was, while still so large, and Frankenheimer regaled them with tales of the real estate world which, huffing and puffing, was continuously pressing outward at the city's borders. "Don't let them kid you, Peter M," he advised, "the world is getting larger, not smaller. Soon we'll be laying out subdivisions in outer space." He winked. "Gated communities."

The two women excused themselves after the entrée and went to the ladies' room. "What do you think of her?" Frankenheimer asked, beaming, his tone conspiratorial. "Isn't she something?"

Peter nodded, smiling wanly, but he couldn't speak, his heart was so full. Later that evening, he and Barbara would make desultory love and Peter would lie awake long into the night, his eyes closed but his mind bright,

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revisiting a vision that had come to him at that moment. It was a vision of the future that both disturbed and solaced him, a future in which he and Barbara were separated but in which Ingrid and Frankenheimer, Peter F, persisted; still, it was clear to him, the sheen of their relationship was all surface, and shallow, that it would only be a matter of time before Ingrid saw that—it was clear from the diamond-like brilliance of her cerulean eyes that she could see very well indeed—and that he would have his chance. It would only be a matter of time.

After he composed himself, he inquired as to Frankenheimer's adopted son. "Oh, that turned out all right," Frankenheimer said, almost casually, almost as if he didn't care. "Actually, much better than we expected."

Dave Margoshes, a former long-time Calgary resident, now lives in Regina, where he's a full-time writer. His most recent book is *We Who Seek: A Love Story*, a novella published last fall. A novel, *I'm Frankie Sterne*, will appear from NeWest Press this September.