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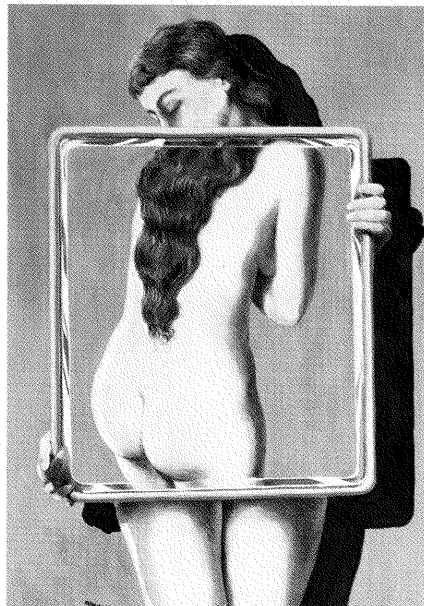
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# Living Without Regrets

We often think about the road not taken: an old lover, a friend, a childhood memory. Author Martha McPhee ponders the question, Is it wise to return to your past?

Not so long ago an old boyfriend called to ask if he could see me. We'd broken up 12 years before and had not been in touch since. Now he was divorcing, a messy situation that involved two children. He was a handsome man, resembling Jude Law. For two years in our early 20s we'd been together. We'd traveled Southeast Asia, lived in Sri Lanka, trekked through Nepal, but I'd never been able to love him properly because I was in love with someone else. I was curious, though, so I invited him to visit. I put on mascara and a pretty sweater, fluffed up pillows, vacuumed even. I was happily married, had a daughter and a newborn son, but still I wanted to go back as if seeing him would make me 23 all over again. I was eager, nervous, as if I really would be able to travel through time. He spent the afternoon at my apartment in New York City, met my children, looked at pictures on the walls of my husband (who had excused himself for the day), our wedding, our trips, our life. He looked at my furnishings, my books, asked about my career, my marriage. He studied me. The old boyfriend stepped



René Magritte's *Les liaisons dangereuses*, 1936

inside my world, peered down the road not taken, and then said before leaving, "Now I know. I could never have married you."

Though I laugh about this story and indulgently turn over the reasons he may have had for his parting comment, I realize this visit was ultimately not about me. Rather, it was about him and his desire to shatter the myth his memory and imagination had created of me. After seeing him, I pondered the notion of returning to the past. Is it a good idea? Perhaps the desire to explore this question, if anything, is what I

gained from seeing him again. At the time, I was working on a novel, a love story loosely based on the romance—with an Italian—that had eclipsed my ability to love the Jude Law look-alike. I wondered whether my fictional lovers should meet later, years after the end of their affair. What would happen if they did? What would they be hoping for, trying to redress? Then I made the question more personal: Would I want to see him again, the man I met one summer when I was 18 on a Greek island? We were together for six years and loved each other so impossibly, it took us five years to break up. Who would this man be today?

I have tried on a few occasions to return to the past. On a trip to Maine I drove by the house my grandmother had once lived in, a Victorian home on a lonely road, atop a hill. I idled in front of it, sitting in my car, half expecting my dead grandmother to appear at the front door. I had spent my summers here as a child—an enchanted house filled with stories, my grandmother spinning them as she raked pine spills and I played with dolls beneath the evergreens, sea air all around. The house was as beautiful as ever, now painted a pale yellow. But I did not ask the new owners if I could go inside. Instead, I drove on. ►

With my husband and baby daughter, I went back to Italy after vowing I never would, but once there I found myself going only to places I had not been to before. I noted with not a little regret that now I was referred to as signora. I was a signorina no more. Returning there starkly revealed how much time had passed, forcing me to take its measure.

To Gladys, a childhood friend, I went back, but only because she came to me. We were in love and inseparable.

I met her the year my parents separated. I was 5. I did not want to go to kindergarten, so I went with my mother to Head Start, where she taught, and there I met Gladys. She came from a family of 16. Her mother had severe diabetes, and her home was in more chaos than mine. Through each other we escaped until fifth grade, when our friendship came apart. Twenty years later she called me and without identifying herself said, "The New York Lotto pot is huge. Buy me a ticket and I'll pay you back. If I win, I'll split it with you." I knew exactly who she was,

and I thrilled inside. I had her on the phone. I was talking to my past. I was not a 30-year-old writer, struggling to survive. She was not a 30-year-old plumber on the outskirts of Trenton (doing quite well, by the by). Desperately, I wanted to see her. "I'll buy two," I said. "If I win, I'll split mine with you." We lost, of course, but we did see each other. We recounted many stories, remembered old times, and then life carried us away from each other again.

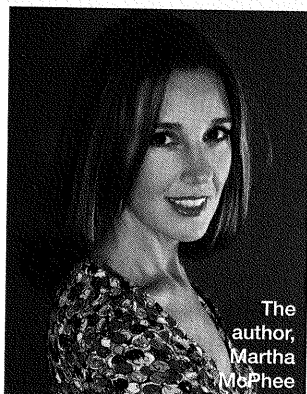
The older we get, it seems, the more people and places are going to be left behind on the banks of our pasts, left there because a love went bad, because of a move, a fight, a betrayal, an injustice, a death. A few weeks ago I wrote to a friend with whom I'd lost touch for reasons I cannot recall. I'd read a short story of hers, and it reminded me of when we were aspiring fiction writers, the hurdles and hoops we would laugh about

having to hazard. I wanted to tell her that I admired the story, that I missed her. I never heard back from her. I do not regret having written the letter, but I do feel this experience confirms that it is rare to be able to dart into the past to retrieve it, to fix it.

The past is littered with loss. Each one is a fossil in the folds of our memories, and fossils, though sometimes delicate, are tempting to hold and admire. After September 11 my Italian called to see if I was all right. His

voice was the same, strong with a lilt to each perfectly enunciated word. I told him I was fine. Then his voice was sucked away, back through the lines, across the Atlantic to Italy. Soon after that horrific date, I read in the newspaper that many old lovers called each other to be certain that the other had not been killed, wanting to be reassured that the fossil was still intact, to know that resurrection, even if unlikely, could still be a hope.

Memory is a dream-scape, and a dreamscape has no expiration date. It is an eternal present. The dream is all that is behind



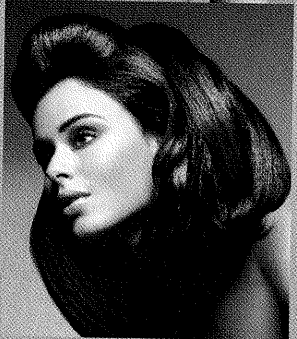
The author, Martha McPhee

We can't help wanting to go back. The mistake, it seems, is to dwell there

us, and thus we can't help wanting to go back. The mistake, it seems, is to dwell there. Change in linear time is the one constant truth about the world. Just as the image of me shattered before the Jude Law look-alike and with Gladys I could not be 10 again, going back to my Italian could also squash the memory, kill it even, and then indeed I would feel regret—regret about its loss. Regret of any kind is insidious. It steals from the present. If I leave my Italian floating on the island of my youth, we can always be young and in love and flooded with its possibility. Preserving memory does not steal from the present. Rather, the past, left alone, accumulates to create all that is now. ■

*Martha McPhee's new novel, L'America, is available this month.*

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