

#201 FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: September 22, 2011

His desk was his castle

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I suppose I'm no more snooty than the next guy, but maybe I'm cutting myself a break.

Every once in a while, you're supposed to act like what we, whose speech has been both enhanced and disfigured by growing up in Pittsburgh, call a "nebbly nose."

Sunday a week ago, I faced my father-in-law's past. Carey died last year at 92, and my wife is the executrix of his estate. We were cleaning up his house and keeping our eyes open.

She took his bedroom dresser; I took his office desk. She found a cigar box full of handmade, pre-WWI marbles—shipwrecks, Benningtons and aggies, both carnelians and flints.

I was looking for unpaid bills, financial records, vehicle titles, insurance policies and winning lottery tickets. I found something else.

Carey and I organized the rigmarole of life in much the same way. We are very orderly within what may appear to a casual pedestrian in permanent joint residence as an anarchy of books, paper and detritus. It was easy to locate his tax returns for the last 40 years, business records, two boxes of awards and plaques, annual folders of notes and correspondence, a 1971 pistol permit...and something else.

An old photograph of a young woman. Even for a nose less nebbly than mine, it was hard to miss. It rested on an elegant stand in the middle of his desk, under an adjustable, clamp-on lamp with a 5x magnifier and three fluorescent bulbs.

It was not, however, a photograph of the woman he married and with whom he had four children, though he displayed photos of them as well.

The other woman was pretty and dark-haired. She didn't smolder, but she was intriguing. She looked complex.

Her black-and-white snapshot was taken in hilly, barren country. Italy, probably late winter 1943. Around Naples, a few weeks before Carey landed at Anzio on January 22, 1944 where he spent the next four months, followed by a year in France and Germany.

He had been billeted in her house. They were in their mid-20s. They fell in love. Life was precious and intense. Chance ruled. Bullets decided. No one could assume tomorrow. They had moments when they could.

I've heard that his parents -- a socially prominent couple in a North Carolina city where they owned the daily newspapers and a printing business -- were not gushingly enthusiastic about the idea of their only son "bringing home an Italian war bride." So he didn't.

Carey's wife and children knew that "Daddy had an Italian girlfriend in the War," which is how it was presented to me.

Long after his wife died, he reconnected. She had never married.

In his late 80s, he flew to Italy. Her first words to him after 65 years were: "I'm still angry with you."

Her younger brother who remembered Carey from the War drove them to her home—a castle, no less. She owned farms, vineyards, factories.

Walking up her steep, unfamiliar steps, he stumbled and fell. When he told me this, I asked whether he thought that his subconscious had had him do it deliberately, a Freudian slip so to speak,

because he was fearful of what he might be getting into.

"It was certainly a useful metaphor," he allowed.

Carey's Italian was pre-school. Her English even less. I wondered how this could work, even though it had worked just fine once upon a time.

Later, he told me that he could not support her properly, either here or there. I said that she didn't need to be supported. He said that I was missing the point. I said that he was missing a more important point. He said that his point was bigger than mine...to him.

Maybe romances in our 20s have more power than we understand at the time. Love is clear, not yet fogged up with failure, obligations and disappointment. Most of a life's past has not yet happened. Toes can still be touched, and an occasional star, too.

Maybe they just couldn't find again what they had when they were 25 and ducking bullets. They had a hundred reasons to leave things as they were—good reasons, sensible reasons, practical reasons, geographic reasons, age reasons, all on top of linguistic reasons.

I was rooting against all of them.

He told me that "IT had been in the air" during his visit, once his forehead had been patched up from the big splat on her castle's steps.

He apparently didn't ask, and she apparently didn't offer.

I wasn't sure whether this was a case of too little history or too much.

But this time, they made a decision together, and probably...the right one.

So he came back and kept her picture on his desk, front and center, amid his computers, bills, stamps and the paper clips of daily life.

Only in "Casablanca" can you have Paris again once it's gone.

But a rank sentimentalist like me thought, No try, no pie. Give it a shot. At least you'll know.

And now I've been wondering what should be done with her picture that meant so much to him.

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