

Fred Astaire's ROSES

by Nicki Huggins

Recently, I had some time before a hair appointment in Beverly Hills and so I ducked into Il Pistaio, a neighborhood Italian bistro near Rodeo Drive. In an effort to stay out of Christian Louboutin, the high-end high heel salon, I'd grabbed a book before I left the house. Bodyguards in black suits and headsets mingle outside the entrance and, as I pass them, three-dozen over-sized black sunglasses look up to see if "somebody" is behind my frames. Oops, mistake, I think. But, I enter anyway, and ask the maitre d' for a seat in the back.

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Passing by Sylvester Stallone and Donald Sutherland, I'm given a table next to an older woman who's reading a book on a portable stand. Before I'm even seated, the woman, without looking up, attempts to pull her table away from mine. "A complainer," I think, and plop my book down as I pick up the menu. Ready to order, I glance up to find the woman staring intently at me. "Well, you're feeding your mind," she says, "I just picked some old book out of the drugstore."

Tell her I've heard the restaurant's pasta is a "religious experience" and ask her for a recommendation. She says she's not comfortable with the expression becoming so commonplace. A religious experience to her is going to visit Fred Astaire's roses. "They must be old cultivars. Where are they located?," I ask. "On San Ysidro." I'm stunned and instantly jolted back to a day nearly

five years before when, driving through Beverly Hills, I spotted roses spilling over a garden wall. Stopping to photograph them made me late for an appointment. Since my own roses were prettier, I couldn't explain it to myself. Could they have been Fred Astaire's roses?

My new lunch companion Terry tells me that she'll soon be 85 and she owns Nate 'n' Al's Deli, a Beverly Hills institution just a few doors down. I tell her that she makes the best coleslaw in town, next to mine, of course. "I eat it nearly every day; it has a secret ingredient." Instantly, the chef in her is aroused. "I've made it the way my mother made it my entire life...." "Every day, you say?" She wants the recipe, but culinary custom prevents her from asking. We talk poetry, gardening, and child rearing. She cautions me not to give my child too much; "That private school thing. Let them work for it."

We segue to the hard stuff: mates, choices, regrets. She tells me who is left in her family and who she's close to. She says that she's practically a hermit and likes it that way. I admit that, even though I'm married, I like my alone time. She nods conspiratorially and pats my hand. "You don't have to say anything else, I know."

Terry says that after fifty years in business, she's seen things in this town that I would not believe. She says, "I mean everything," and nods to the sidewalk outside where a celebrity du jour with a mini-entourage passes. Each time our waiter comes toward our table, Terry quickly motions him away.

Despite decades that separate us in age, we gab like two close girlfriends who haven't seen each other in a long while. Encounters like this are commonplace in the South, where you meet someone in the cleaning supply aisle of Piggly Wiggly and the next day you're guest of honor at their child's birthday party. But I haven't had such an intimate conversation so quickly with anyone west of the St. Louis arch, ever.





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It's time to go, and I really mean it when I tell Terry that meeting her was the highlight of my day. I lean forward, speaking in a low voice, "I've never told anyone this before." Terry moves in, expectantly, "Cumin," I explain, "just a dash in the dressing smooths it out." We chuckle heartily, startling diners nearby who check to make sure their Hermes bags are still at their feet.

As I exit, the maitre d' pulls me aside. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a waiter hurriedly excuse himself from Sharon Stone's table and scurry over to join us. "Do you know who she is?" the maitre d' asks. In the highly competitive world of Beverly Hills restaurateurs, Terry is clearly their reigning star. "She's been coming here four or five times a week for years, and I've never seen her speak to anyone else," he offers. They hunger for one scrap, one morsel of our conversation, but I only give them a grin. Our meeting has become my new definition of a spiritual experience. Glowing with special-ness, I think: this is it. This is what I'm going for. These are the meetings and moments by which I will determine my days now. There is some unknown, mysterious and highly meaningful sub-exchange going on just below the surface. I'm not sure what it is, but I know it's important and has to happen.

Sitting in the hair salon, with a hundred highlighting foils in my hair, I reflect on my new soul sister Terry and suddenly realize it was my book that first interested her. Turning it over, I find that I grabbed the wrong one. Instead of something from the perennially unread section of my bookshelf, I had pulled "Emerson's Essays." I opened it randomly and read from *Mottoes to History*:

There is no great and no small
To the soul that maketh all:
And where it cometh, all things are;
And it cometh everywhere.

For Terry: We all have a little Southern in us. Tessie "Terry" Mendelson died Feb. 2007. She was 96.