

# robert blaney

Robert Blaney believed that mid-summer's night eve was special, as if Shakespeare's fantasies could be resurrected precisely that night in the streets of ordinary Cotesville by a trailing group of adolescents following him in enchanted silence. There were seven of us as I recall, all students of Mr. Blaney in his special Creative Writing club. Years later when I was past middle-age I tried to contact one of us, a man named Norman Thomas Fassinelli, who had relocated to England to pursue his writing career. I wanted to ask him if he recalled that night seventy years ago, in 1953. I gave him my maiden name and some details to jog his memory, but he never responded. Perhaps he had already died of old age.

Of the others, I remember one nice kid whose name was Bruce, and the teen-age girl of his current crop, named Alice. She departed to university a year after Robert Blaney's divorce from Olivia. Her successor was named Prudence. Robert Blaney had a thing for teen-age girls as well as for enchanted mid-summer nights.

Nobody ever called him Bob or Bobby. He was always Robert, a man nearly tall, slender and wiry, as they used to describe such men, with white hair and a white moustache. If he had been a movie star instead of an English teacher he might have been described as debonair. He graduated from Harvard, and being not quite professorial, taught high school in Cotesville for forty years.

So it's all fallen on me, the memory business. Actually I don't believe events affected hardly anyone else, at least not long-term. My mother was

already what she was: overweight and slovenly. She had not become any more cultured than she had always been: a working-class girl who graduated eighth grade and yearned only to become a flapper. A failed ambition; she had four babies and her husband traveled.

Trailing Robert Blaney we wandered beneath old oaks, making our way over sidewalks upraised by tree roots, visible in the intermittent streetlamps. It was warm, still not late. At about nine o'clock we passed the street I lived on. Do you want to meet my parents, I asked Robert Blaney. We're just there. Our troop walked up the hill to my parents' house. They came out to meet him and shake hands. Before we left my mother said, Please come again. And bring your wife. Now that school is out for the year, we can visit.

Or something of that sort. I don't recall more. The followers of Robert Blaney didn't want to spend this magical night chatting with parents, and I imagine Mr. Blaney didn't either. So we went on.

My next memory is, they were there, Robert Blaney and his wife Olivia. I knew Mrs. Blaney because Mr. Blaney had recruited several of his students to paint their house. That was probably outside the borders of what an English teacher should do, but I heard no word of recrimination from any student. I didn't tell my parents. Perhaps none of the others did either. I never went up a ladder, for one thing I was afraid of heights; also in those days girls still wore skirts and ankle socks. But I remember Norman Thomas up around the attic windows, and the other boy, Bruce, down on the ground next to me. I thought he must be waiting for the Blaney girls. Mr. and Mrs. Blaney had two daughters, just a couple of years older than we. They both were named Marley. The older girl was called Marley and the younger one was called Willie. Both had yellow hair, brown eyes and pointy noses. Lovely cream skin. They didn't hang around while we high-school kids painted their house, or whatever we did. Mrs. Blaney gave everyone cokes.

I thought naming your daughters all the same name was mysterious and somehow literary, so I did the same when I had daughters. I gave each baby of mine her own first name; their middle names the same, because of Mr. Blaney's mid-summertime. But my daughters are each so different.

I might mention that I was younger than other kids in my class by almost two years. This was not my doing; it was an error of Depression babies: not enough. After starting school at age four, I received what was called a Double Promotion to make room for the next grade. Looking back I realize it shouldn't have happened, but it did, so there you are. The important fall-out was that although I was perfectly capable intellectually, loved to read and write, etc., I was always too young to comprehend whatever. Whatever was going on. Sometimes now I suspect that Bruce stood beside me on the sidewalk to protect me from any objects falling from the house. I doubt he knew what I, and probably Alice knew: Mr. Blaney liked to carve wooden erect phalluses which he showed us individually and secretly in the hallway when we left class. I knew what a penis was, I assure you; I had a baby brother. But I didn't know what Mr. Blaney wanted to tell me.

Somehow it was arranged that Robert Blaney and Olivia would come to our house for summer night visits. My father and Olivia would disappear inside the house, their voices growing fainter and fainter. My mother sat on the porch with Robert Blaney, who, to put it delicately, wasn't having any. At least, not of her. If I remained outside Mr. Blaney would eventually work me into corner beyond my mother's view. Once he took a photo of me. I still have it, a girl with her head reared back like a wild horse. He said I had a lovely neck. He said I was beautiful, which clearly I was not. I was sixteen, held a summer job at a soda fountain, and with normal curiosity determined to lose my virginity to a boy named Gordon who, as it turned out, suffered from premature ejaculation, leaving me virginal. What was wrong with Robert Blaney?

In September I left my family house and went off to college. I wrote a few letters to Robert Blaney to ask him to comment on my poems, which were emerging like adolescent trails of tears during my first few months of unsupervised freedom. Mr. Blaney responded with emotive letters of his own. What was taking place at home in Cotesville I didn't learn until the following summer. My father fell into a fierce infatuation with Olivia, she of the cream skin and long brown hair. Unlike my mother, she was literate and clever. Olivia --I don't know if she ever learned my father was dyslexic and couldn't read-- she left Robert Blaney for my father- loved to make my father laugh. Mr. Blaney was devastated, because losing his wife was

no part of his plans. Nevertheless she divorced him. He was free. He made advances to another eighteen year old girl (not Alice). Somehow I recall her name as Prudence; that seems ridiculous, doesn't it.

At home my father announced with a snicker that Robert Blaney had told everyone he was getting a vasectomy, so that he wouldn't have babies he couldn't support as a retired teacher. But Prudence was already pregnant. And then later she had three more babies.

Meanwhile, my father and Olivia carried on a hot and heavy romance. Olivia took a job as a salesperson in Filene's Department Store. What did my mother do? She got fatter and more miserable. She also called her doctor more frequently, and loved to answer gaily to her friends, "I can't meet today, I'm in bed with the doctor." In truth, she wasn't doing well.

I returned to college for my sophomore year, leaving behind this soap-opera. I was creating soap-stories for myself by then, and right after my 18th birthday, at the legal age I eloped. My father offered to pay for an abortion, but I wasn't pregnant, just unwilling to return to Cotesville. Nevertheless I did get pregnant and I did return. One day my mother fell on the stairs trying to avoid my kid's abandoned toy. She lay on the green carpet at the foot of the stairs, silent. I remember her eyes, and the silence. I called the doctor. My father returned home from work and saw her still lying on the carpet where she fell. His face went gray. The doctor called for an ambulance.

Her ankle had broken. Her bones were cancerous, and in less than two weeks time the doctors amputated a leg even though they knew the cancer had advanced into her skull. My father went to the hospital and promised to take her to Paris as soon as she recovered. The funeral took place at a Jewish cemetery, because dead people often find religion. After my mother's death, Olivia wanted to marry my father. He declined. As his reason, he told he couldn't marry anyone who wasn't Jewish. Instead he married another woman. She had been his mistress for the past twenty-five years, and claimed she was Jewish although her surname was Flynn. My father, however, had been a chain-smoker all his life and within four years died of lung cancer. His widow inherited my mother's sterling silver tableware and English china.

Eventually, Robert Blaney died. They were living in a small town in

the western part of the state where it was cheaper. Prudence wrote to ask if I would like to have returned to me letters I had sent him, which he had saved. I declined. Instead, I threw away all of his.

Decades have passed. I ask myself still, who was responsible? And for what?

—Nancy Davies. All rights reserved.