

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

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GOODBYE to THE SECOND FRET and ALL THAT

It was an easy walk and a cheap date. From my apartment at Tenth and Clinton Streets I would walk two blocks west to pick up Kerry, and from there we would walk to Nineteenth and Sansom Streets, where The Second Fret was located. (I don't mean to say that Kerry was cheap in any sense, only that The Second Fret was a cheap place to take a date.) Philadelphia's Center City, where I lived and where I was employed, seemed like a small town planted in the center of a great city. Everything was within walking distance of my apartment – not only The Second Fret, but the Academy of Music, where the Philadelphia Orchestra performed, and Franklin Field, home to the Philadelphia Eagles football team, and the Italian Market in South Philadelphia, birthplace of the immortal Philly Cheesesteak. I did have a car, a sickly English Ford, but everything that I needed, including Kerry, could be accessed on foot.

This was a long time ago, during the years 1963-1966, when I was training as a resident neurologist at Pennsylvania Hospital in the heart of Center City. The folk music revival reached its zenith during those years, and The Second Fret established itself as the preferred venue in Center City for that sort of entertainment. Kerry, like most of the young women I dated during those years, was deeply into folk music. As for myself, I didn't really care that much, but I would accompany Kerry to the club for a couple of hours, where I could nurse a beer or a weak G & T while Kerry dreamily sang along with the performers on stage. She never failed to become totally immersed in the predictably wistful and sometimes melancholic music. My hope, always, was that Kerry's music-inspired rapture would endure until later in the evening when we reached her apartment, where she might permit me to enjoy a rapture of my own.

The Second Fret booked a new act every Tuesday, with performances scheduled every evening from Tuesday through Sunday. On Mondays, between acts, the club used to be dark -- until, after a period of slumping attendance, management decided to schedule an open-mic evening for amateur musicians on Mondays. The response no doubt exceeded management's expectations: the club began to attract a crowd of wannabe folk singers every Monday evening. Almost all the performers were young White females with straight hair hanging down nearly to their waists, who would strum their guitars and sing plaintive songs of true love, lost love, hopeful love, or just plain *weltschmerz*. Best of all, from management's point of view, was the entourage of relatives and friends that each performer would bring with her to the club. Attendance at the club on open-mic nights steadily grew and soon exceeded the attendance on other weekday nights.

Kerry and I chanced a visit to The Second Fret for an open-mic evening one Monday in September, imagining that we just might be witness to the arrival of the next Joan Baez or Judy Collins. That didn't happen. What did happen, though, was a total surprise. After several singers had taken their turns at the mic, a young Black guy jumped onto the stage – and talked. He didn't sing, he didn't strum a guitar, he just talked. And his talk was really amusing. About kids in his neighborhood, like his brother Russell

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and his friend Fat Albert, and about Noah's conversation with God. Very funny stuff. He wore a sweatshirt with a big "T" on the front, and he explained that he played halfback on the football team at Temple University.

I didn't catch the young comedian's name that evening, but afterwards I made it a point to visit The Second Fret for the open-mic evening whenever I could. I would even go alone if Kerry couldn't join me, just so I could hear more stories about Fat Albert and the rest of the kids in the hood. And I did eventually learn the name of this droll, witty football player from Temple University: Bill Cosby. I left Philadelphia for London later that year, shortly before Christmas, and I never returned. Someday, though, I would like to revisit Center City Philadelphia, the town within a city that I remember so fondly. I wish I could see Kerry again, and I wonder if The Second Fret might still be there. And sometimes I wonder, too, what ever became of that funny and engaging young performer named Bill Cosby. Gosh, was he ever funny!