

SOUL MATE: OUR SECOND LIFE TOGETHER

I don't believe in coincidences. Things happen for a purpose, like Wendy and I spending our life together—our second life.

We met on a Saturday morning in the fall of 1958 at Stanford University. My friend Rick and I were leaving the Phi Delta Theta fraternity house when a white, two-door 1957 Ford pulled into the circular driveway.

Three girls got out. I knew Betsy and Peachy. They waved and I waved back. I didn't know the driver, but there was something familiar about her. She was tall, five-foot-eight, fair-skinned, wore her blonde hair in a ponytail, and walked on the balls of her feet like a ballet dancer.

My whole body began to tingle, like an arm or a leg does when it's been in one position for too long. Adrenalin surged through my veins. Then my mind was flooded with a memory. I was at the reins of a horse-drawn wagon, crossing a meadow of wildflowers. A woman was sitting beside me, and children were riding behind us in the wagon bed.

I couldn't take my eyes off Betsy and Peachy's friend. She moved like a model—which I later learned she was—full strides, arms swinging, a subtle movement in her hips, perfectly proportioned legs and ankles. She wore a white, short-sleeved blouse, tight-fitting faded Levis, and sneakers with no socks. Her turned-up nose, perfectly rounded chin, full lips, delicate ears, and high cheek bones gave her the classic look of a Nordic Goddess.

"Rick, do you see that blonde?" I said.

"Yeah."

"I'm going to marry her."

"You're going to what?"

"I'm going to marry her," I repeated as I bounded down the steps, taking two at a time.

"Do you know her?" Rick shouted after me.

"Not from this life!" I hollered back.

"Hi, Betsy. Hi, Peachy," I said, trying not to show my excitement as I approached them. "What brings you down from Mills?" They attended Mills College in Oakland.

"We're here for the party," Betsy said. "My roommate gave us a ride." She turned to her friend. "Wendy, this is Jim Griffin."

"Hello, Wendy," I said, taking her hand.

"It's nice to meet you," she answered.

"Wendy is spending the weekend with her aunt and uncle in Atherton," Betsy said.

"We saw you on the porch when we were showing Wendy your fraternity house, so we stopped to say hi."

Wendy's hand was soft and warm, not calloused like mine from tennis and golf. She had a full, firm grip, though, unlike most girls who shook hands with only three fingers.

Not letting the opportunity pass, I said, "Wendy, would you like to join Peachy and Betsy at our party?"

Her smile faded and her eyes went blank, as if the invitation presented a dilemma. I found out later that it had. My blood pressure shot up while waiting for her reply. After what seemed an eternity, her smile returned.

"Sure," she said. "What time?"

"6:30."

"Okay."

When I realized Betsy and Peachy were staring at us, I reluctantly let go of Wendy's hand.

"Bye," Betsy, Peachy, and Wendy said before returning to Wendy's car.

"See you later," said Wendy. "Nice to meet you."

I returned to the porch where Rick, who had overheard the entire conversation, was waiting for me. "What's going on?" he said.

I wasn't prepared to answer Rick's questions. He would think I was hallucinating. So, I said I would explain later. For the next fifty years, until Rick died of cancer, he never missed an opportunity to tell the story of how Wendy and I had met.

I wandered to Stanford's inner campus, a turn-of-the-century courtyard of low, long, sandstone block buildings connected by arcades formed in a double-quad. I sat on a bench in front of the chapel and recalled the memory from my past life with Wendy. The scene of Wendy sitting beside me in the wagon had flashed before my eyes during a "near death" experience, when my brother, Ted, was driving and momentarily fell asleep as a four lane roadway funneled into two lanes at the entrance of a mountain tunnel. I couldn't make a visual comparison of the two Wendys, since the faces of the people in the wagon were abstracted — but their essences were identical and elicited the same responses in me.

I must have looked at my watch a thousand times until Wendy showed up at the party. When she arrived, I was at the door with a friend who had agreed to be her escort; my grandmother wouldn't approve of me ditching my date, and I didn't want one of my fraternity brothers to make a move on Wendy.

It took some doing, but I finally got Wendy alone. I asked her if she would join me for lunch the following day. I told her our fraternity cook would prepare a picnic. She didn't answer immediately, as before. My blood pressure shot up again, and I prayed to myself, Please, God, even though I didn't believe in prayer.

"Yes," Wendy said, then added, "Are you okay?"

I assured her that I was. I hadn't realized I was hyperventilating.

Wendy left the party early. An hour later, I walked my date to her dorm because I wasn't up to coordinating the Volkswagen's clutch and gears. Exhausted from trying to orchestrate myself into Wendy's life, I had drunk too many beers. That night, I dreamed of Wendy dressed in a wedding gown, sashaying across a ramp, with her hair bouncing off her neck and a raucous crowd cheering wildly.

The next day, when I picked Wendy up in Atherton, she was wearing sneakers, slacks, a white shirt and button-down sweater. Her pony-tail bounced off her neck like it had in my dream. We drove into the hills above the Stanford golf course. I found a ridge where we could see across the campus and to the lower reaches of the San Francisco Bay.



Wendy and Jim in Atherton (1958).

We spread our picnic blanket under a giant crimson-leafed oak. While we ate, Wendy told me that her mother had died when she was eleven. She had graduated from the Bishop School in San Diego. She was an art-history major and a sophomore. She sang in a touring trio, swam on the Mill's synchronized swimming team, modeled professionally, had had a marriage proposal from a professional baseball player, and was dating a Stanford student who was away for the weekend (I later found out he was a star hurdler on the Stanford track team). I now understood Wendy's hesitation in accepting my two invitations.

I told her I was on the Stanford tennis and ski teams. I was majoring in philosophy. I did not have a steady girlfriend, and I was leaving for Marine flight school at Pensacola, Florida in January. I did not tell her I had already decided to give up the Marine commission, because I wouldn't risk losing her to another suitor while I was at flight school.

Wendy appeared to be genuinely interested in me, but she gave no indication that I was in any way familiar, as I felt. As we talked, I tried to think of a way to verbalize my feelings without frightening her away. Finally, I just blurted out, "Wendy, you and I are destined to spend the rest of our lives together." My outburst was a mistake.

"Is that a proposal?" she asked.

"Yes, I guess it is."

"How can you say something like that when we hardly know each other?"

"I know," I said, realizing I had just embarked on a long, uphill battle.

"Please take me home."

"Okay, but I won't be far away."

That evening I called Wendy's dorm, but she refused to talk to me. I tried again on Tuesday and was told she had gone to the library. Over the next few days, I got the same answers. By Sunday night, my stomach was in knots and I couldn't study or sleep.

That Monday morning, I drove to Mills hoping to catch Wendy before she went to class. She had already left, so I waited in the lobby of her dormitory. When she returned for lunch, I tried to approach her but, when she saw me, she ran up the stairs.

At the moment, it wasn't looking good, but I decided to wait and see what would happen. The dorm proctor had to kick me out at lock-up.

The next morning and every morning for the rest of the week, I "held court" at Wendy's dormitory. She passed me going to and from class. She wouldn't make eye contact, and I didn't try to approach her.

By mid-week, I knew most of her dorm mates. They were sympathetic, particularly because I helped them with assignments and gave bridge lessons.

Then the following Tuesday afternoon, instead of avoiding me, Wendy came over to where I was sitting. "What can I do to make you go away?" she said.

"Go out with me, and if you don't want to see me again, I'll get out of your life," I said, though I had no intention of keeping that promise.

"All right. When?"

"Are you free Friday night?"

"I can be. What time?"

"How about 5:30?"

"Fine. What should I wear?"

"I'll be wearing khakis and a navy sport coat."

"I'll see you Friday."

She turned without saying another word and went upstairs to her room. I returned to Stanford.

Wednesday, my professors gave me curious looks. I hadn't shown up for classes in nearly two weeks. Luckily, attendance was not a factor in grades. I was taking twenty six units, a double load, and needed every credit to graduate in December.

Wendy was in the lobby Friday evening when I arrived. Stanford girls had always kept me waiting. She wore a plaid skirt, white blouse and sweater, and high heels. She had on a pearl necklace and a gold charm-bracelet. Her ponytail was now wrapped into a bun. She looked gorgeous.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"The opera, Tannhauser. But first we'll stop at the Hungry Eye for something to eat and listen to a live show with a singer called Barbara Streisand." From the Hungry Eye, Streisand had gone on to become a leading vocalist in the last half of the twentieth century.

"I've never been to the opera on a date," Wendy said.

The evening couldn't have started any better. I had made the right decision—having learned that Wendy sang in the touring trio.

"I love the opera," I said. "I hoped you would like it."

Actually, I hated opera. An enormous woman pretending to make love to a barrel-chested man half her size really turned me off. Worse, I couldn't understand a word they sang.

We had something to eat at the Hungry Eye, while we listened to Streisand sing and strum her guitar. Then we went to the San Francisco Opera house. The curtain parted, and there was no more conversation. Wendy's eyes remained riveted on the stage.

As we crossed the Bay Bridge on the way back to Mills, I detected a positive response in Wendy's body language. Her smile—the smile she had shown me when Betsy

introduced us—returned. I took a chance and put my arm around her. She immediately lifted my arm off her shoulder.

"I don't let boys put their arm around me when they're driving."

"I'm not a boy," I said and put my arm back around her shoulder and pulled her close.

She turned and looked into my eyes, and made no attempt to pull away, not even when I ground the gears while shifting with my left hand.

Not to let the moment go by, I said, "When can I see you again?"

"I'm going out with Bob Saturday night," she said, "and spending Sunday with my aunt and uncle—but you can call me at the dorm on Monday evening."

"Okay," I said, restraining myself from shouting, Yes! Yes!

I knew Wendy felt my shoulder muscles relax, because she looked at me and smiled. I was making progress.

We talked on the phone for an hour on Monday, then again on Tuesday. Wednesday we went out for dinner and she let me kiss her at her doorstep. At the touch of her lips, my legs grew rubbery. I had to brace myself against the door jamb to keep from collapsing. I asked if she was free Saturday night. She said she was going to the USC game (University of California) and spending the weekend in Los Angeles with Bob.

"Where will you be staying?" I asked in near panic.

"At Bob's house—but don't worry, his parents will be home."

Yeah, I'll bet, I thought. His parents are probably in Europe.

Wendy took my hand and intertwined her fingers into mine. She said she liked both me and Bob, but she knew that wouldn't work. The word work hung in the air until she said she would decide over the weekend which of us it would be.

I was an emotional wreck by the time I called Wendy on Monday morning. Not in the mood to beat around the bush, I came right out with it. "Have you made a decision?"

"What do you want to do this weekend?" she said.

I began sobbing.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"I am now. Oh, God, I wish you were in my arms."

"Me, too," she said.

"I need to tell you something."

"What?"

"I turned down my Marine flight commission." I did not reiterate my conversation with the recruiting officer who had told me I was crazy to give up my commission, saying I would have my pick of the ladies after becoming a carrier pilot.

"Oh, no, why?" Wendy asked.

"The deadline to commit was two weeks ago, and I wouldn't take a chance of losing you."

The phone went silent. I knew Wendy was assessing my response.

Then she said, "What are you going to do?"

I told her I would go back to Tacoma and take over my family's fuel business, a company started by my grandfather in the 1880s and managed by my father until his untimely death. I hoped the Draft wouldn't catch up with me; I was eligible until I was

twenty-six since I had taken a military deferment to finish college during the Korean War. (The Vietnam War was still in the future.)

"Do you remember what I said on the picnic about spending the rest of our lives together?" I then asked.

"Yes."

"And?"

"Forever."

My, God, I thought, she has accepted my proposal. "I love you," I said.

"And I love you," she answered.

On Wednesday night, Wendy and I had dinner at a burger café near Mills. Then we talked outside her dorm until curfew. Saturday afternoon, we crossed the Golden Gate Bridge and drove through the wine country. The last of the grapes was being harvested. After the sun dropped below the horizon, we sat on a pier in Sausalito, watched the night sky fill with stars, and talked about how many children we would have.

Wendy came home with me over Thanksgiving vacation. My brother Ted was on the tarmac when we debarked from the plane. I had warned Wendy about his inclination to agitate, but neither of us was prepared for his actual outburst.

"Jim, when did you start taking out girls who wear glasses and have a flat chest?" he said.

I don't remember Wendy's exact response, but it was close to: "Ted, I can be just as ornery as you, but I hope we can get along because you are going to be my brother-in-law."

Ted was speechless, and over the last fifty years, I can't recall a single time he has not been a perfect gentleman to Wendy.



Wendy and Jim in Tacoma for Thanksgiving vacation (1958).

Wendy and my stepmother Gail became instant friends, as did Wendy and my Mom and stepfather Bill.

Wendy and I returned to our classes on Monday, but we were together or talked on the phone every day. She flew home to Scottsdale at the start of Christmas vacation, while I waited for my grades to be posted so I could pick up my Bachelor of Arts degree before driving back to Tacoma. I was not returning for graduation in June

The day after Christmas, I flew to Phoenix to meet Wendy's family. I was no sooner in her house than her father asked if he could speak with me privately. He took me to a nearby resort, the Jokake Inn. Wendy had warned me he would insist that she finish college before we married. However, Wendy and I had agreed to get married with or without his consent.

Sure enough, even before the waitress had taken our drink order, Walter said, "Wendy tells me you two want to get married?"

"Yes," I said.

"Well, she'll have to finish College first."

"Mr. Sterling, I mean no disrespect, but we're getting married in June. If you don't want to put on the wedding, we'll elope."

He looked at me for several moments, sizing me up. Then he said, "I'll put on the wedding."

Wendy returned to Mills after the Christmas holidays. I went to Tacoma and started working at the Griffin Fuel Company. Wendy and I talked on the phone every night until the end of the term, and I commuted to Oakland every other weekend.

We married June 20, 1959 at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Phoenix and began our second life together honeymooning in Hawaii.



Wendy and Jim in Tacoma after their honeymoon (1959).



Jim & Wendy (2008).