

Smitten

There's no question about it. I was smitten, as my grandmother would put it. Grandma had the oldest vocabulary of archaic words and phrases I'd ever heard, but each of them told a story if your ears were tuned in to them. And they did a much better job than all the 'shun' and 'ate' words I learned in college. You know, like my atten-shun was equaled only by my devo-shun to the girl and I was invigor-ate-d by the thought of her. Nah ... I was just smitten.

I walked up and stood next to her in the small college library, waiting for old Mrs. Stack to come over to our side of the checkout desk and stamp our books. Having seen her in the hallways, this was the closest I had been to the young woman. I hoped my chest wasn't thumping too loudly. My book was a frivolous novel by Arthur Hailey, hers was a large tome devoted to the analysis of business cycles, I think, but I didn't want to be too obvious by leaning over and peering down the front of her to see the title. I do not know what has always prevented me from any obvious expression of interest in a girl. It's like: I'm interested in you, but you're the last person I would want to know it. I'd like to date you, bed you, marry you, father your children and be buried someday in the same grave, but I may not tell you until our 50th wedding anniversary. My attitude was surely the reason why I couldn't get a date. I wouldn't ask. I might as well have said, "What are you doing this Friday night? Not that I care." I couldn't possibly imagine myself going through all of the rigmarole (Thanks, Gram!) of courtship ... the highs, the lows, the expense of flowers and haircuts and oil changes and TWO tickets at the wrestling matches. Was all that fuss and bother really necessary? I'd "throw up the sponge" before I'd "go through the mill" just to get a date. I mean, all I was asking for was a lifetime mate to raise my children and love me forever.

"Would you like to marry me?" I turned and asked her. She didn't even acknowledge me, but continued to stare straight ahead, evidently at the wall calendar produced by the National Librarian's Association. It carried a photo of a pleasant young woman bending over a child reading a book. It was probably Mrs. Stack 70 years ago on her first job, threatening a child with a massive library fine if he didn't behave.

I waited for the girl's answer, hoping to "beat the band" that she wasn't ignoring me. Maybe she had a hearing aid and the battery was dead. I began to feel sorry that without fresh batteries she'd never hear the organ play as we marched down the aisle at our wedding, nor our baby's first cry, unless I remembered to stop at the drug store for a six pack of Double A's on the way to the hospital. When I thought of it, marrying a hearing impaired woman might not be the best idea in the world for a poor college student, but she was awful pretty and I was no "namby pamby." I could always get extra work to help pay for the batteries.

Lost in thought, I became dimly aware the girl had turned and now stood staring at me. Oh well, in for a penny, in for a Hong Kong dollar, as Gram would say. (Gram was a minor gambler and a dreadful good Bingo player. The back seat of her 1959 DeSoto was always filled with gaudy prizes.)

I cleared my throat and managed to say, "I said ..."

"I heard you," she interrupted, but continued to stare at me.

"Well ... it's simply a theoretical question," I said, backing off to my usual position of non-interest. "I'm taking Psychology 101 and we're supposed to ask ..."

"I took that course last semester," she interrupted again.

"Yes, well" I mumbled.

"And there's no experiment where you accost someone."

"Uh, it's my independent project" I explained.

"Aren't you the guy who used to wear the orange shoes?" she asked?

"They weren't orange, they were "Buckwheat"

"They match the flags you see the men carrying when they're working in the road," she continued.

"Pure coincidence," I said.

"Wherever did you buy them?" she asked.

"I didn't. My father gave them to me. He didn't want them. Someone gave them to him. But they're comfortable. If you don't walk a lot. I try to sit as often as I can. Not because of the shoes, of course, but it's easier to study while seated and ..."

"I think they're great!," she said.

"You do? Then you'll marry me?"

The librarian came over to us and the girl passed her book across the counter along with her library card.

“Can I have an extra day on this?” she said to Mrs. Stack. “I’m not finished with my term paper.”

“Well, I suppose so, Carolyn,” said Mrs. Stack.

Carolyn! My new favorite name! You seldom hear a name like that anymore. Gram would like that name for certain. It’s old fashioned and rather out of use, but maybe we could proliferate it (sorry about the ‘ate’) by naming all five daughters Carolyn. With different middle names, of course, for identification purposes. I like it! I can imagine a photo of the seven of us appearing in the newspaper when we come back from our Round The World Tour. Here they are disembarking their ship: David and Carolyn, Carolyn, Carolyn, Carolyn, Carolyn and Carolyn.

“So what happened to your shoes?” she asked, again interrupting my thoughts. “You always wore them, all the time.”

“I painted them,” I said. “Green.”

Carolyn stepped back and looked down at my feet. Mrs. Stack leaned way out over the counter and stared down at my toes.

“Young man,” said the librarian, “I told you just this morning, and I’ll tell you again that you are not to parade around here in your stocking feet!

“My shoes are too small and they hurt,” I said.

“I can’t help your inability to choose the right shoe size...”

“The green paint shrunk them. I didn’t know paint could do that,” I explained.

“You painted your shoes...?” said Carolyn.

“I really didn’t like the orange...”

“Green...?” she asked.

“To match my pants,” I said.

The next time I saw Carolyn she all but bumped into me in the Philosophy and Psychology book stacks. Being a gentleman, I was about to turn and run so she wouldn’t have to, but her face lit up with a smile.

“Hey,” she said, “aren’t those new shoes?”

“Yes, they’re called Black Beauties,” I said. “They’re from Spain, I was told.”

“They’re really shiny,” she said, “and they’ll probably never need painting.”

“And the zippers work both ways,” I said.

She didn’t appear anxious to call for help, so I calmed down a little.

“Are you busy this Friday night?” I said.

“You don’t want to marry me first?” she asked.

I laughed, “You have to admit it was funny.”

“Not really,” she said. “I had imagined a very nice man might someday propose to me in a more serious manner.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Will you still go out with me?”

“Yes, but don’t take your time becoming a nice man, because you have a long way to go.”

We don’t have five daughters, only one, plus a son. We never went on a world tour with our children and I’m not sure I ever became a nice man. But I never painted my shoes again, and I stopped reading Arthur Hailey when I had read enough to feel sorry for the man.

Grandma up and croaked a week after my graduation. She was all vim and vigor the day before, having just won the Octogenarian Trifecta at the Bingo Palace. There was hardly room in her car for all the new prizes, although I didn’t know how she’d use three food dehydrators and a gift certificate from the bowling alley. We stopped by her house a few days before and I introduced Carolyn to her.

“You take care of this boy,” she told the girl. “He’s an odd stick, but he’s no coffee boiler.” Carolyn looked puzzled.

“She means I’m not lazy,” I said.

“I mean I hope she can do somethin’ with ya,” said Gram. “Ya dress like a dumb galoot. If I had any more ‘a that green paint, I’d take it to those silly black shoes myself.”

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The Windswept Press
Saugerties, NY

www.windsweptpress.com