

My First Crush

My first crush was a little blond-haired girl we shall refer to as C. She arrived at Barker when we were in 5th Grade, and I was smitten from the start. C. was pretty and smart, and always wore a serious expression. I suppose she must have smiled at one time or other, but I have no memory of it. My first notable encounter with her was in Mr Rinaldo's Math class. He had called C. up front to solve an equation on the blackboard. She was stumped by it, so he asked me to come up and help her out. In my imagination this would have been a perfect chance to leap heroically out of my seat, dash to the blackboard, write the solution with a flourish and saunter back to my desk, basking in the light of gratitude shining in her eyes.

But the sad reality, of course, was that not only was I utterly hopeless with numbers, I was also the victim of a crippling shyness. The thought of actually standing next to C. sent such a bolt of fear through me that I was struck dumb and motionless. I couldn't get out of my chair. I couldn't speak. I just sat there silently, helpless and miserable, until Mr Rinaldo called on another student to rescue her.

Over the next few years I worshipped C. from afar, as the saying goes, even though we were often assigned seats very close to each other. I would listen in as she talked with other classmates, but I can recall only a very few occasions when we actually spoke to each other. She was not at all unfriendly towards me, but I think she simply didn't notice I was there. I wasn't handsome or charming in any way, and I was definitely not a person who drew much attention to himself, at least not willingly.

Other than a brief infatuation with the popular and dark-haired M., I remained loyal to C. throughout 5th and 6th Grades. I daydreamed about her, wrote her name on the inside covers of my textbooks, and stole glances at her from the corner of my eye. But I was too nervous and tongue-tied when in her presence to attempt anything like a real conversation. I merely hovered nearby, orbiting around her like a satellite, always waiting for the perfect opportunity and hoping I would have enough courage to speak when it arrived.

The desks in Mrs Schmitt's 5th Grade English class were arranged so the students could sit together in groups of three or four. C.'s desk was diagonal to mine, which should have been a wonderful situation. Alas, the desk next to hers, directly across from mine, was taken by a snip of a girl who...well, let us be kind and simply call her The Snip. I'll probably never know why, but The Snip absolutely despised me throughout our school years and rarely let a chance slip by to remind me of it. She was very friendly with C., always chattering away to her about this and that; once even bringing in vacation snapshots from home to show her, while pointedly refusing to let me even get a glimpse of them.

So I was the designated pariah of our little group. I might have made some progress with C. if The Snip hadn't always blocked my stammering attempts to speak by hurling some choice bit of abuse at me. It's difficult enough trying to talk to the girl you like without your every word being consistently shot down in a withering blast of scorn by the girl seated next to her. I didn't hate The Snip; indeed I don't think I even disliked her. But I would have cheerfully murdered her if given half a chance. As it was, I had to be content with trying to knock her head off whenever the class played a few rounds of Mum Ball.

The next year C. and I were in Mr Bertha's 6th Grade homeroom. Her desk was on the opposite side of the room, but at least in homeroom us students had some daily free time to mingle with each other. Mr Bertha ran a tight ship and tolerated no nonsense; but he was fair and honest, and even had a sense of humor. After I got over my initial terror of him I enjoyed being in his room. He practically saved my life once. I had to stand up before the class and give an oral report. A deadly combination of shyness and the awareness that C. was looking

steadily at me from the front row sent me careening into a massive case of stage fright.

I began to fumble through my little speech in a wooden voice, my written notes fluttering in trembling, sweat-damp hands. I mispronounced words and lost my place and was close to tears. It would have been a disaster had Mr Bertha not noticed my distress and come to my aid. From his desk he smoothly took over and expanded on my topic with great enthusiasm. He ended up telling us stories of his boyhood, taking all the attention and pressure off of me. Enormously relieved, I was able to walk back to my seat, a little shaky on my legs, but still upright. On that day at least, Mr Bertha was my hero.

The Blizzard of '77 was an adventure. We got snowed in and had to spend the night at school. We watched TV and ate popcorn. The mom of one of my friends was a high school cafeteria worker, so he and I snuck down there after supper for an extra slice of pizza. Back in Mr Bertha's room a custodian came around to grab a bunch of boys to help set up cots in the cafetorium. (The elementary school "cafetorium" was a combination cafeteria, auditorium and gymnasium.) After they left C. got my attention from across the room, and the following farce of a conversation happened:

C.: "Didn't he pick you, too?"

Me, startled: "What?"

C.: "Aren't you going to go with them? He picked you, too."

Me, a deer in the headlights: "D-Did he?"

C.: "Yeah. Go on. Go after them."

I went after them. Well, first I had to get past a teacher in the hallway who wanted to know just where I thought I was going; but eventually I caught up with the other boys and we had a good time hauling army cots around. We all slept in the cafetorium, two kids to a cot, head to toe. It was weird, but fun. After a lot of fidgeting and joking about smelly feet, we all drifted off to sleep. I doubt if my last waking thoughts were of C., who was just a few feet away in a nearby cot, but I like to think that maybe they were.

And then we entered 7th Grade, and the new and confusing world of Junior High. In between going to the wrong class (and being marked absent for an entire week because of it) and the daily forgetting of my locker combination, I still maintained my crush on C. By now it began to dawn on me that perhaps this continual state of dumb yearning was not going to get me the girl. Somehow I needed to overcome my diffidence and step up my game. Two years had already gone by, and we weren't kids anymore. We were practically teenagers now, and it was just a matter of time before someone else fell under her spell and swept her out of my reach entirely.

But my luck didn't improve with the passing days. Through some administrative lapse of wisdom I was placed in all Regents level classes in 7th Grade. I don't know what they were thinking; mine was a solidly non-Regents intellect. With the exception of Mrs McGreevy's English class, I was soon caught in a nightmarish struggle to get passing grades. Teacher-issued warnings and parental threats of punishment were of no avail. I failed Mr Mufford's Math class entirely, and barely squeaked by in my other subjects.

I think History was the only class that C. and I had together that year, though she was again on the other side of the room. I wished that just once we could be seated next to each other. Over in Mrs McGreevy's class I sat in front of a friendly little bookworm of a girl, and had a fine old time teasing her and stealing her pencils. She was fun. But back in History class, the person assigned to the desk in front of me was, to my dismay, none other than The Snip, my old 5th Grade tormentor. She hadn't changed much, but luckily she had limited opportunities to turn around and put me in my place.

I did not enjoy History class. Our teacher, who shall remain nameless, was not a likable person. Even then, at

age 12, I could tell that she was too immature to teach. It was apparent that she didn't like her job or her students. She seemed to have a special dislike of C., and I shall never forget one terrible day when she humiliated her in front of the class. This was followed by an altercation between them in the girls bathroom, during which the teacher received a slammed door in the face. I silently applauded C.'s spirit; but it was a troubling time, and I was sorry for her. More than ever I wanted to be friends with this girl.

But now another formidable obstacle arose before me, for about this time C. started palling around with a wild hellion of a girl we shall call the JD. I don't know exactly when the JD arrived on the scene, but her brief sojourn in our school was vivid and memorable. She was a fun-loving girl in the most casually shocking way. Her colorful language alone was something many of us had never heard before. I found her fascinating and even attractive, but in the same way that I find an active volcano attractive: from a safe distance. In close proximity the girl terrified me.

The JD once ran off with my lunch bag while we were on one of those March Of Dimes walk-a-thons that were popular at the time; and taunted me from the middle of the street to try and take it back from her. I politely declined, not due to any chivalrous notions against striking a lady, but because I knew she could effortlessly flatten me and wouldn't hesitate to do so. C. was present, watching quietly from the sidewalk; and I clearly remember that she didn't seem amused by the JD's antics, and was merely waiting for her to stop goofing around so they could continue on their way.

And so, what with the stress of Junior High, my ongoing awe of C. and my utter terror of the JD, another anxious year of watching and waiting passed by. It was almost surreal the way our paths continually drew us near to each other, yet circumstances and my own appalling diffidence never allowed us to make any real connection. At the shadowy edges of my mind lurked a growing suspicion that C. was perfectly aware of my interest, and was indifferent to it. Probably she had always known and simply didn't care. I knew I was being a fool, but I couldn't give up on her.

And then, abruptly, none of it mattered anymore. In one sudden swoop every hope was dashed. C. moved away. I never saw her again. I didn't even learn until many years later what had happened or where she had gone. I only felt the sudden loss, and the emptiness that was left behind when she went away.

There would be other girls and other crushes, hopeless and otherwise, in the years to come; and my daydreams of C. would fade, but I never quite forgot her. Even now, whenever I reach back in thought to those somewhat innocent days long ago, it is an image of the little blonde-haired girl, the girl who never smiled, that my memory brings forth most often. A person I never really got to know, but somehow still miss the most.