

Her hair smelled like rhododendrons

Call it stupid love.

In the 1970s, I was in grad school, studying English in Washington state. She was an undergraduate poet who I saw at writing functions around campus. She was pretty and clever and her poetry was good. She also had long auburn hair that, when she thought you weren't looking, she would pull over her left shoulder and then slowly brush it with her right hand. I know that sounds awkward, but it was anything but. She looked like she was playing a harp.

This was stupid love. My logical brain had shut down and my emotions were wide open and making all the decisions. And this girl was saying all the right things. I remember that she told me she made “love” bread. That while she was kneading the bread, she would think loving thoughts. And then later, when somebody ate the bread, they would feel those loving thoughts.

And I remember nodding, “Yeah, that makes sense.”

I also remember her telling me that she'd experienced an orgasm while laying, by herself, on a stony beach next to the Puget Sound.

I didn't ask any questions. I just listened to her stories and thought, "That is really freaking cool."

Even then, I should've known that things don't usually work out the way you hope that they will. Even then, I should've known that sometimes things don't work at all.

But did I mention that her hair smelled like rhododendrons?

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She was too young to go to bars, so we spent most of our time together at coffee houses drinking coffee and talking. I didn't drink coffee, but I drank it with her and even learned to control the expression on my face when I did.

Some of the places even had public readings where we could whisper wisecracks during the breaks between the poets and storytellers.

It was fun. For me, there was nothing to not like. For her, there was one big thing to not like.

I smoked. And she hated smoking. She hated it so much that it became the main subject in more and more of our conversations. One night, during a coffee house conversation no doubt, I agreed to quit. I was into her so much that I agreed to quit smoking.

She suggested that I visit a hypnotist. She even knew a hypnotist to recommend.

The walk-up hypnotist's office was a cliché. A lava lamp. Incense. Soft sitar music. Spider plants with tendrils that seemed to reach out into the room. It was also the first, and only, time in my life that I'd seen an actual beaded doorway curtain. You had to pull the strands of plastic beads apart, duck through and then let the strands swing back behind you. After you went through, the beads kept clicking against each other for what seemed like forever.

The hypnotist was a man who spoke in a slow, rhythmic way that made you lean forward during his pauses, anticipating what he was going to say next without really knowing why.

“So why,” he asked, then took a deep breath, “do you wish to quit smoking?” I thought “wish” was an unusual word choice.

But I told him the story anyway. About how I was in love with a girl who made love bread. I told him about her orgasm-on-the-beach story and the coffee shops where we spent time because she couldn’t drink beer and how she wanted me to stop smoking.

“Good,” he said, then stopped. It was a full stop, so full that I wondered if we were finished. “Then we’ll start. There.”

Where?

“With the woman,” he said. “Close. Your eyes.”

I closed my eyes and he talked to me, in the most soothing voice that I’d ever heard, about how I couldn’t smoke if I wanted to have a relationship with the love bread girl. And I did want the relationship. In short, he connected my smoking to the girl. Want the relationship? Quit smoking.

I heard every slow word that he said but I didn’t feel like I was hypnotized. Was this the way this was supposed to work? Because I didn’t feel hypnotized.

Really? It’s that easy?

“Yes,” he said. “Easy.”

I paid the guy and walked back down the stairs to the street. Behind me, I could hear the beads in the doorway still clicking against each other.

And here’s the weird part, I didn’t want to smoke anymore.

But that’s not the end of my story.

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A few months later, she called me on my big yellow plastic wall phone. She was living in a rented house, just off campus, with a couple of her friends. I had a room, with a yellow plastic wall phone, in a little graduate school dorm on campus.

A few of my grad school friends were with me. Something was on television, but the volume was turned down. We were laughing and drinking beer and telling funny stories that probably wouldn't have been that funny if we weren't drinking beer.

We didn't have cell phones. So when my big yellow phone rang, I had to stretch the cord through the door and out into the hall for quiet and privacy.

She was asking me to come over. I didn't want to come over. It would be kind of embarrassing, wouldn't it? I was supposed to tell my friends that my girlfriend had called and that the party and the drinking and the laughs were over.

"Why do you want me to come over?"

There's a Peeping Tom in the neighborhood, she said. We're nervous. She sounded nervous.

I didn't hesitate, not even for a second. "So call the police," I said.

The conversation suddenly turned frosty. She hung up and I went back to my friends.

Now on second thought, I'll admit that telling her to call the police wasn't the best move that I ever made. But although I may be a jerk from time to time, I'm not a total jerk. I did feel guilty. A sober funk settled over the party. Suddenly, the funny stories didn't seem as funny anymore. If they were funny to begin with.

Now usually, when you make a mistake, you just make a mistake. There's no turning back and you live with the results of your bad decision. But this time, I decided that maybe I could make this right. I chased my friends away and I went down to her house, a big two-story place that loomed in the darkness about six blocks away.

I went toward the front porch, but before I went in, I decided that I'd take a walk around back and have a look for the Peeping Tom she had been talking about.

Take a few seconds to consider the ramifications of that decision. Because I didn't.

Actually, I'd just gotten around back of the house when a flashlight told me to stop.

I stopped.

"What are you doing?" the policeman asked.

I repeated his question. What am I doing? I'm a friend of one of the women who live here, I told him. I'm sure I stumbled over my words and, from watching police shows on television, I know that when people stumble over their words, they sound guilty. But that didn't stop me. I blathered through a longer-than-usual version of the love bread story and the orgasm-on-the-beach story and how she didn't like me smoking so I went to a hypnotist with a beaded curtain in his doorway. And amazingly, I quit smoking. And then tonight I was hanging out with some friends on campus when she called me on my big yellow wall phone and asked me if I would come by and protect her and her friends from a Peeping Tom.

It was more than he cared to know.

"So, she'll vouch for you?" the policeman said.

I nodded. We walked back around the house and up onto the front porch. He knocked on the door and after a few seconds, my girlfriend stepped outside. Her friends crowded together on the other side of the screen door, front row tickets to the show.

"This guy says you know him," the cop said.

Now, she could've just admitted that she knew me. It would've only taken a few seconds and then we could've laughed off this obvious comedy of errors.

She could've made this easy. But she didn't want to make this easy.

She looked at me hard, up and down, like I was a horse that she was deciding if she wanted to buy.

"Can you make him turn around?" she said.

What?

The cop twirled his finger in the air and I turned around backwards. One thousand one. One thousand two. One thousand three.

"Okay, yeah, I know him," she finally said. She was laughing. She thought this was all very funny. Her friends were laughing too.

The cop left. Nothing to see here.

How come you made me turn around?

"I wanted everyone to see what an asshole looked like," she said. Then, even though it wasn't really that clever of a line, she couldn't stop laughing -- like she had just said the funniest thing ever. In fact, she and her friends were still laughing when I walked down the sidewalk and back into the night.

And that could be the end of my story. But it's not.

Our relationship never did pick up speed after that. Jokes fell flat. Small problems bloomed into arguments. She rarely initiated meet-ups. And when I wanted to spend time with her, she said she wasn't available.

She didn't think I was amusing anymore. Here's an example: I was the editor of the school's literary magazine. For our 1976 edition, the bicentennial year, I thought it would be funny to do a B-I-S-O-N-tennial issue. Get it? For the cover, I asked an artist friend to draw a bison and we were off and running into what certainly would be slam-dunk literary magazine history.

Except she didn't think it was funny. She didn't think it was funny.

Then, I thought that I had a brilliant idea. Paul McCartney and his new band, Wings, were going to perform in the Kingdome, Seattle's new domed stadium, as part of their new Wings over the World tour. And I bought a couple tickets. Seattle was an hour or so away, so there would be plenty of time for us to talk, tell jokes and iron the awkwardness away. This was going to be perfect.

At the time, "Silly Love Songs" was McCartney's hit. A stupid, but catchy song with a really cool bass line. It was everywhere. It was always on the radio. It was playing every time I went into a grocery store.

I asked her if she wanted to go.

Now I did know that Paul McCartney wasn't her favorite act. But this was the biggest tour of the year. It's hard to understand now, with McCartney tours coming through pretty much every year, but this was a big deal. This was his first tour since the Beatles broke up.

Of course, she'd want to go.

She didn't want to go.

I asked again.

She didn't want to go.

But this was Paul McCartney. Silly Love Songs. And if that wasn't enough, the Kingdome had just opened, and domed stadiums were new and interesting back then. I was getting desperate and, out of context, I know that it sounds clunky. Do you want to go with me to see a domed stadium?

Finally, on the day of the show, I asked again. She didn't want to go.

This was over. I had to come to terms with it. Anybody who wouldn't take a free ticket to a Paul McCartney show in the Kingdome must REALLY not want to be with you. This was over. I found a friend and offered him a ticket in exchange for a ride to Seattle and back. He accepted immediately. Of course.

On the way to Seattle, we stopped for some food at a convenience store. I bought a doughnut and a couple hot dogs.

The doughnut was hard. And the hot dogs looked like they had been turning for days on their heated metal rollers. They were so dry and cracked that even a pocketful of condiment squeeze packets couldn't bring them back to life.

But it didn't matter.

What I really wanted was a cigarette.

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That's the end of my story. There isn't much else to say and there's certainly no tidy conclusion to tack on.

In 2000, they imploded the Kingdome. I watched it on a television newscast from states away. Domed stadiums, which once seemed cool and incredibly modern, had started to become

boring. Retractable domes, which could be closed on rainy days and opened on sunny ones, were now cool and incredibly modern.

I didn't quit smoking again until 2008, and then only when a heart attack shoved me into finally giving it up.

I didn't keep in touch with the love bread girl, so all I can really say is that I don't know what happened to her. Life is complicated and it can also be sad. Sometimes things don't have clean endings, or even endings at all for that matter.

But the stories still pop into my mind sometimes, like old picture postcards. Most often, there are sensory prompts. Like when I taste fresh-baked bread. When I try to drink black coffee. When I walk past people smoking cigarettes outside bars and restaurants. When "Silly Love Songs" comes on my car radio. When I see burned hot dogs rolling in a convenience store.

When I smell rhododendrons. Or when I hear clicking sounds -- like the kind that a beaded curtain makes long after somebody passes through it.

from Arts and Letters, Georgia