

FIRST CRUSHES

The Act of Hot Pursuit

Finding a girlfriend is difficult when you're a kid. Picture a six-year old boy riding shotgun in a station wagon; his head hanging out the passenger window like a puppy's as his mother navigates the tight turns of an apartment complex parking lot. He is determined to deliver a birthday gift to Mrs. Austin, his first grade teacher and one true love, and nothing will stop him. In 1973, that boy was me.

With no fear, I got out of the car and walked toward Mrs. Austin's door. In one hand, I held a rose. In the other – a poorly wrapped bottle of Charlie cologne spray. I'm not sure what I expected to happen. I had no plan for what I would do after I presented the gifts. It never occurred to me that Mrs. Austin's existing marriage or our 28-year age gap would prevent us from starting a relationship. Of course, it was over quickly. She acted suitably surprised and grateful and then politely excused herself; closing the door and leaving me on the front stoop wondering what had just happened. Devoid of an invitation to come inside, I schlepped back to my mother's car having just learned the first rule of love: some relationships are doomed from the start.

Fortunately, second grade arrived like a new poker hand and I stood ready to put my chips down again. This time, I set my sights on someone more age appropriate – Julie Cardell – who was in my class and unmarried from what I could tell. Still new to the game, I had no qualms about immediately professing my undying love for her; an approach that rarely works I would later discover. Julie, however, seemed flattered and always met my words of affection with an enthusiastic smile. Things looked promising and I began to make plans for our future together. I even looked up Julie's address in the phone book and had my mom drive me by her house – a technique I hadn't given up on despite the prior debacle at Mrs. Austin's place. This time, I stayed in the car and asked my mom to loop around the circle that led to the Cardell's driveway. To me, it was reconnaissance. Today, I suppose they'd call it stalking. Either way, I was convinced Julie and I would be together forever.

In retrospect, I never saw my competition coming; namely Steve Parker, a fellow classmate. Suddenly, I wasn't the only one vying for Julie's attention and my insecurity began to show. Every day, I asked Julie who she liked better – Steve or me. And every day, she told me that she really liked both of us but, if forced to choose, she would have to pick Steve. Continuing for months, her rejection gave me a complex. How could she like him more than me? It made no sense. Sure, Steve had hair the color of corn silk and looked like the offspring of an Icelandic Viking and a Swedish supermodel, but the Julie I knew wasn't impressed by physical appearance or other shallow considerations. After all, I'd driven by her house and was certain that its modest, understated exterior was an accurate gauge of the values being taught inside its four walls. Apparently, I was wrong

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and by the age of seven, I understood all too well the pain of being in love with someone who isn't in love with you. Overnight, all the songs on the radio by Bread and Roberta Flack made sense to me. My only relief: Julie Cardell moved away the summer after second grade.

Entering third grade and feeling disillusioned about love, I exiled myself to the romantic hinterlands. Having struck out twice, I decided to ignore girls and focus primarily on my studies; a good decision considering the challenging curriculum ahead of cursive writing, times tables and snack time. Love would have to wait until I learned enough marketable skills to attract and retain a wife. Of course, the best laid plans rarely proceed without a hitch and mine were no exception as I soon developed a crush on my teacher, Ms. Richardson, who was sweet, sophisticated and, curse my luck, engaged to be married. Prepared to fight for her 'til the death, I gave up immediately once she announced she was joining the Peace Corps and moving to Uganda. Even I knew we didn't stand a chance with a continent between us; a point made all too poignantly when she showed me how to paper-mache a topographical map of Africa during our geography unit.

Heartbroken and questioning my will to carry on, I reluctantly showed up for fourth grade. By now, a career in the priesthood sounded appealing and, when asked to draw a self-portrait for parents' night, I depicted myself in a brown robe and sandals. Uncertain if I was well-suited to a monastic existence as a non-Catholic, I started sitting alone at lunch and giving my dessert away to see how good I was at sacrifice; a practice I kept up for a solid four days. Lonely and a few pounds lighter, I experienced a miracle when a new girl arrived at school and I instantly fell in love with her. All I knew about Casey Cross was that she was beautiful and had moved to Rochester from a foreign country called California. Renouncing my plans for the priesthood, I made it my sole purpose in life to make her mine.

Getting close to Casey proved a challenge. We were in two separate classes that rarely interacted so I was limited at first to gazing at her from across the lunchroom and wondering whether she liked bologna and cheese with the crusts cut off as much as I did. Not long after her arrival, the gods smiled down on me when it was announced there would be something called an Activity Night for the whole fourth grade. I had never heard of an Activity Night but if it gave me a chance to spend time in proximity to Casey without having to do any math, I was all for it.

As it turned out, Activity Night was nothing more than an evening spent at school taking part in various gym activities such as dodgeball, square dancing and roller-skating. Upon arrival, I took my place on the far side of the gym with all the other boys and began scouting the line-up of girls assembled 200-feet across from us. There, in a green sweater and black-n-white checked skirt, was Casey. My heart thumped as Mrs. Livingston, the gym teacher, divided us into groups for square dancing. Please let me be in her group, I silently pleaded. Of course, no such fortune befell me. So while Casey dos-y-doed Richie Resnick and swung Jack Bartholomew, I watched helplessly from my adjacent square and began plotting Plan B.

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The last activity of the night was roller-skating in a large circle around the gym – a perfect opportunity for me to engage my target. I knew the school would do nothing to assist me such as dim the lights or play slow, romantic music but, undeterred, I strapped on my skates and set out to find Casey; entering the traffic circle as it swirled in front of me. Soon, I saw her and her friends making their way around the loop; occasionally using each other as support and laughing the entire time. Slowly but surely I closed the gap until she was no more than ten feet ahead of me. Round and round we went; the bright lights and blaring sounds of ABBA adding to the drama.

Suddenly, I had my opening. One of Casey's friends peeled off toward the water fountain, leaving Casey's right flank open. Just a few more feet to go, I thought; willing my skates to move more quickly. To pull even with the girl of my dreams, I needed one single burst of energy. A poor skater, I had no business trying to go faster, but it was now or never and I chose now.

Focusing all my concentration on my skates, I pushed off harder than usual. First with my left skate – then my right – left – right – left –right. But with adrenaline shooting through me like rapids through a riverbed, I pushed too hard. And instead of generating enough speed to pull even with Casey, I knew right away I was going to shoot past her. Attempting to salvage the operation, I called out to her breathlessly as I whizzed by: "Casey, would you like to skate with meeeeeeeee?" Unfortunately, the opportunity was blown. Losing control of my speed and my skates simultaneously, I flew out of the circle and crashed into the gym's cinderblock wall. My helmet-less head took the brunt of the collision; leaving me dizzy and disoriented on the hardwood floor. Next thing I knew, I was being carried to the nurse's office by a group of teachers and chaperones. My humiliation was eclipsed only by my feeling of failure.

Activity Night was on a Friday so I had a whole weekend to mull what went wrong and contemplate what I could have done differently. Anticipating judgmental stares and cruel jokes at my expense, I didn't want to go to school on Monday. But when I climbed on the bus that morning with the encouragement of my parents, something wonderful began to happen.

"Hey, O'Dwyer," Eric Olson, a fellow fourth-grader, said. "I hear you're going out with Casey Cross."

"What?" I asked.

"Going out" was the phrase used to indicate two people liked each other and had agreed to be boyfriend and girlfriend.

"I heard that you asked her to go out with you at the Activity Night and she said yes," Eric continued.

"She did?"

“That’s what I heard,” he said. “Nice job.”

“Thanks,” I said, completely bewildered.

Now going out with someone was a very big deal. So big, I found myself on the horns of a moral dilemma. I knew what Eric Olson was saying wasn’t true, but I didn’t see the harm in letting this fantastic rumor percolate awhile longer.

Once at school, I experienced the same thing repeatedly as one person after another congratulated me for successfully convincing Casey to go out with me. Could it possibly be true? Could she have interpreted my request to skate with her as an invitation to be my girlfriend? This wasn’t so far-fetched. Having misheard my question, perhaps she said yes, but was drowned out by the sound of my head hitting cinderblock. These were all distinct possibilities. And as the day went on and neither Casey nor any of her representatives corrected the record, I chose to believe that we were indeed going out.

I felt elated. After many years of searching, I had my first girlfriend at last. Unfortunately, within a very short period of time, my elation evaporated as the uncertainty surrounding our coupling began to haunt me. In my heart, I didn’t know whether Casey was my girlfriend or not and I felt both powerless and afraid to find out the truth. Back then, the strange thing about going out with someone in the fourth grade was that you never talked to them; especially if they weren’t in your class. And since Casey had a different teacher than me, and Twitter, text pages and cell phones didn’t exist, my communication with her was limited to sneaking glances when we’d pass in the hallway.

Admittedly, I could’ve called Casey from home at night, but that would’ve required me to speak to her parents; a mountain I was nowhere near ready to climb. Besides, a big part of me didn’t want to give her the opportunity to break things off. And so I began avoiding her; a move that only made me feel worse as the weeks went on. Several months later, a friend told me that he had heard from a friend of another friend that Casey had broken up with me. It hurt, but I tried to be philosophical about it. When it comes to love, I’d heard you never know what you’ve got ’til it’s gone. But in this case, I still didn’t know.

A year later, in fifth grade, I met Kathy Collins who became my first official girlfriend; one that I talked to, took to the movies and eventually kissed - on a hill behind the school under an armada of stars after sneaking out of another Activity Night. This time it felt just right. Love had triumphed once again.

(Excerpted from the story collection How To Raise A Good Kid, by Starbuck O’Dwyer)

Starbuck O’Dwyer, a native of Rochester, New York, is a writer whose work has been described as “comic genius” by Kirkus Reviews. His novel Red Meat Cures Cancer (Random House/Vintage) won two national writing awards for humor and was a featured

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