

Reunion

by Erik O'Dowd

I stationed myself at the far end of the ballroom. Not a real ballroom; rather, a blue-and-gold streamer-and-balloon festooned conference room at the North Toledo Holiday Inn. I kept myself partially hidden behind a pillar, but maintained a constant view of the check-in table. It was rumored that Joey Millar would finally attend one of our reunion parties—the Saturday evening dance for our thirtieth reunion—having failed to show up for the celebrations of our tenth and twentieth.

I was trembling. The sharp-edged plastic cup of cheap white wine that they dispensed at the no-host bar hadn't calmed me, not one bit. I hadn't bothered to examine all the reasons why I'd arrived so early this evening, or why I was hiding behind the pillar, waiting for her, watching for her. I knew only this: I yearned to see her without discovery, to view her without interruption as she entered the room. It didn't matter that I'd be seeing her at first only from a distance. Indeed, that made it better, because I could take it all in: her friendly, wide smile and the calm, athletic grace with which she moved, as well as the universal reaction of my classmates to her—the same reaction they'd displayed in high school when she glided down the hallways—greetings of glad hails and genuine warmth.

Yes, I wanted to see that—to behold Joey in full glow, and, without disruption, to relish it. And then sometime after that, when I had a chance during the evening, I wanted to take her aside and ask her one question, just one, that had burned within me for thirty years. I wanted to ask her why she'd picked me as her date for that wondrous near-eternal night: the graduation dance of Toledo High, class of '58.

I hadn't laid eyes on Joey since I dropped her off after the last of the post-dance parties, when, receding into the soft stillness of that early-summer dawn, she turned on her front porch, waved back to me and called out in a sweet, conspiratorial hush, “Good night. Or should I say, ‘Good morning?’” But no matter the three intervening decades: When she entered the ballroom there wasn't an instant's doubt it was she. Somewhat thicker of form and face, perhaps, but beaming with the same luminous radiance of her teens, giving rise to the same resounding swell of “hi's!” and “hello's!” from the crowd that rushed toward her.

I first knew I was in love with Joey in eighth grade, when in P.E. class she beat all the boys in the fifty-yard dash and I realized I'd been secretly rooting for her, even against a field that included my best friend, Bobby Howell. By ninth grade, I'd taken to surveilling her house from a vacant lot across the street, a lot with a gigantic oak at its center, from behind the crotch of which I had an unimpeded view of...of what? During all those afternoons of straining to spot Joey through the Venetian blinds that shielded the windows of her house I saw her only twice: once vacuuming a hallway and once ironing in the kitchen.

I never questioned either the propriety of my behavior, or its sanity, although the stakes of engaging in it were enormous. Should Peggy, Joey's good friend who lived next door to my oak, have caught me lurking behind it, my eyes fixed on Joey's front porch and the adjacent rooms of her house, my romantic life—indeed, my entire life (so it surely seemed at the time)—would have been doomed.

By sophomore year in high school, however, my surveillance ceased because I started football practice after school and, more to the point, because Joey started going steady with Dick Dawson.

She couldn't love him, of that I was certain. He was a senior, sure, but he was just a jock: a thick-necked, noisy jock, always wearing his letter sweater, always surrounded by fellow jocks, gathered at their lockers and moving between classes in a hooting, grunting herd. Joey would often call to him as they passed by the girls' lockers and he might, sometimes, pull apart from the herd long enough to lean down to listen to something Joey said—she, lifted on white-socked, saddle-shoed tiptoe, her hand cupped to her mouth, whispering into (touching!) his ear. What she said to him on those occasions it pained me too grievously to imagine. I'd have died for a whisper from her, but Dick Dawson? He'd simply emit a dismissive, exasperated grunt and stride away to rejoin his herd.

They didn't break up as I'd fantasized: with Joey, in a spasm of lunch-hour self-revelation cursing him and hurling his letterman's pin across the cafeteria. No, they broke up privately, when Dick left for Michigan State to play football. Joey, I heard, cried for two weeks and recovered fully. It was then, during the summer before my junior year, that I had my first and only date with Joey—until almost two years later, when she asked me out for graduation night.

This date arose accidentally. I would never have simply telephoned Joey and asked, "Will you go out with me on Saturday night?" No chance of that: The dark, abysmal pause, of whatever duration, that would have preceded her response would have been unendurable. Indeed, I tried twice to call her but got no further than the second ring before realizing my madness and hanging up.

Instead, our date arose from the coincidence that only she and I, among the six of us who had jointly planned to see "Rebel Without a Cause" at the Paramount, escaped the symptoms of the Asian flu, and neither she nor I (surely not I) cancelled the resultant personal event.

So that Saturday evening, I alighted my mother's car—Mom at the wheel, since I was only fifteen—crossed the very porch upon which I'd spied all those previous afternoons, and pushed the doorbell. I waited for a seemingly interminable time. Had Joey forgotten, or maybe, while we were driving over here, called to cancel? I heard footfalls coming toward the door. Joey's? Her mother's? I wanted to vanish, to flee, before the door opened. I couldn't bear it...

But then the door opened and there was Joey, in blue shorts and a white top, her blond hair swept freely from her face by the back-wind of the evaporative cooler that blew her airy scent to me through the screen door. She stood there for a moment, glowing and beaming, then pushed open the screen door and popped out. "I can't wait to see this movie," she said, as she bounded across the porch and into the front seat beside Mom. "Hello, Mrs. O'Donnell," she said, and then, turning to me, seeing that I hesitated outside the car, she patted the space next to her and gave me the most alluring smile I'd ever seen. "You coming?"

I wanted desperately for the date to go well. No spilled cokes, no gum on the seats, no obvious smooching by near-seated patrons, that kind of thing. And well it went, both of us watching intently as James Dean and Natalie Wood and Sal Mineo wound their way through that awful night of their youth. And then, toward the end of the movie, when Natalie looked deeply into James' eyes and they kissed, Joey took my hand—actually reached across the huge hurdle of the intervening armrest and took my hand—and squeezed it, and kept on holding it for a million minutes (or was it four?) until the final scene when she pulled her hand away to cover her mouth as she cried out "Oh, no!" when Sal was shot.

Joey didn't take my hand thereafter, nor did we touch again until, turning to me as she pulled her screen door open, she stroked my cheek once—my left cheek which even now, thirty years later, flushes in fond recall of that perfect pat—and said, "Thanks, that was fun."

For almost two years, from that night until graduation, I yearned for Joey with the violent ardor of youthful, unrequited love, for I had felt her nearness, her touch. But from that touch—and perhaps from unnamed instincts of my gender—I knew she did not, would not, love me. As

she pranced before me as a cheerleader, danced beside me at parties, chatted near me (even with me, sometimes) in the hallways, the torment of this realization was as excruciating as it was constant. But I bore my aching resignation well, maintaining my dignity through the might of self-preservation of my young but manly heart: As much as it hurt not to, I never asked her for another date.

But then, on the eve of graduation, Joey slipped a note into my locker: “Would you take me to the grad dance & after? J.”

The dance and after-parties were glorious. I longed to ask Joey why she’d chosen me, but I’d lived so much of my young life in fear of hurt by her that I feared her answer—that her original date took ill or, worse, that (however guardedly she phrased it) she pitied me—would pain me beyond endurance.

It didn’t matter that for that entire graduation night we touched only to dance, because when I left Toledo the next day for a summer vacation with my family, then went off to college, then into adulthood, I carried with me—even to this reunion thirty years later—a final embrace of youthful joy that holds me even now.

And yes, we danced at the reunion; and yes, we talked about that blessed graduation night. And yes, a pause arose between us during which I might have asked her why she’d picked me for her date that night, a night too perfect ever to examine and so to despoil. And so, yes, I didn’t ask her.