

Notes of a Mad Girl #3 - Photo Film and Boy on Bus

I heard him before I saw him. It wasn't like the bus was quiet or that his voice travelled easily in a hollowed out metal shell packed with teenagers. Everyone was talking at once, moving about, laughing, and stupidly acting relieved that another school day was over. It was what he was saying that distinguished him from the afternoon noise. I hadn't ever heard anyone speak like him before.

I wasn't riding my regular bus that day because I had to take a roll of film to Greensburg after school.

His conversation wasn't the "pass the ketchup" or "stop it" or "set the table" or "that's my chair" kind of talk. It was softer and it expected generous and thoughtful dialogue between both parties. When the vehicle stopped to let him off I jumped up and followed him off the bus.

My first words to him were "do you always talk like you think?" He simply smiled and said "yes, I do". We continued to speak non-stop for the next four years and I was blindly in love with him for seventeen.

Perhaps my mom was the one ultimately responsible for my Carpe Diem moment.

I was a voracious reader because of my mom. She was a wacky, enthusiastic, and devoted "contestant". My ever-hopeful Mother filled out every contest form that crossed her path. Nothing made her eyes sparkle more than a chance to win a prize or the lure of a huge jackpot.

She cooked creatively for Betty Crocker, wrote "ditties" for T.V. and filled out dozens of 3" x 4" index cards for prizes on the radio. She stumped Joe Negri and Johnny Costa on "Name that song"; won a bowling ball on TV's "Meet your Neighbor"; a case of peanut butter; inexpensive gold jewelry; and a chance to win a weekend in New York. No one in my small little valley of a town ever seemed surprised at her

ability to swiftly answer a question correctly, write a witty poem, or fearlessly sing medleys on the radio.

One of my favorite “mom-wins” was a small square piece of colored linoleum printed with roads, buildings, and trees with a set of three-dimensional small cars and trucks. Sadly she put this wonderful piece of art next to our stationery tub and wringer washing machine where it was hard to play on a cold floor between mountains of laundry continually produced by two adults and five kids.

More important, if not less colorful, were a complete set of Encyclopedia Britannica and the collected works by famous authors. It is safe to say that I was the only person in Penn, Pennsylvania to have read the complete works of Tolstoy, Poe, Lamb and Hugo at the age of thirteen +. Reading these writings didn’t necessarily make me smarter than my town inhabitants but my reading did affect how I conversed in my head. I became privy to protagonist’s feelings or a heroine’s angst while my daily conversations with my family in no way resembled the words written by my buddies on paper. My parents may have said they were angry, happy, or troubled, and easily laughed or cried in front of us, but you never glimpsed the detailed conversations circling their souls. But Dostoyevsky or the “Portrait of Dorian Grey” swam around in my young head and found a pretty good nesting spot.

That simple conversation overheard on a school bus was for me the equivalent of discovering America. Steven’s thoughts perched easily on his lips and his maturity was like a full body halo. He didn’t say anything he didn’t mean. Books now made sense and my family, relatives and small town did not.

When discovering a new route of travel you run the risk of driving on a road without familiar traffic or the company of your family and childhood friends. It is not until you’re older that you can intelligently look back and assess the high cost of the trip. But even with noticeable losses and many sad familial estrangements, I am still amazed at myself that I could so greedily grab and brilliantly identify one exceptional moment in 1967 and irreparably and so decisively change my bus route through life.

I seldom see him now and with every December Christmas card sent from Boston I stare hard into his face. He wears the same type of brown corduroy pants with his tucked in buttoned down oxford shirt that he wore in high school and the few times I've seen him he smells the same. It is a sweet and musty scent that in one whiff can transport me back to my teens and the passenger seat of his snappy yet corroded convertible Austin-Healey 3000.

Or maybe I am simply my mother's daughter after all. Maybe she unwittingly trained me to grab at an opportunity that unknowingly altered my future with a prize much more substantial, rewarding and more severe than a small square of linoleum and a much loved collection of red books filled with some potent and mesmerizing magic.

I sincerely thank both of them.