

1962

FIRST LOVE

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“First love is only a little foolishness and a lot of curiosity: no really self-respecting woman would take advantage of it.” George Bernard Shaw

There is no greater challenge to the erupting hormones of a young lad than his first love. With no reference in his brief history on this planet, a young boy is faced with trying to understand at the same time he is learning to control his emotions. A first love can be quite an trial of terror.

My first love was Kay Higgs.

At the time, my mother, brother and I lived at 7420 SW 21st Street, in southwest Miami, Florida.

It was a classically middle-class neighborhood where neighbors knew each other, keeping a polite distance while keeping watch to ensure the safety of the neighborhood. One wanted to be near enough if needed but far away enough not to interfere.

The Higgs were my next door neighbors. I called the adults Mr. and Mrs. Higgs ‘cause that’s what we called adults in that day and age.

Kay Higgs was their daughter.

The first time I saw her, my heart beat so fiercely that I thought my brother was practicing his drums. She was walking up to her home from the street. She said something, but I just stared.

Moments after she disappeared through her door, I realized she must think I’m a mute — a deaf and dumb mute.

Arlene Higgs, her mom, was the nicest mother I ever knew personally. She was kind, considerate, and loving — all this and more. She was the perfect role model for a perfect daughter.

And Kay Higgs was perfect in every way.

My family, on the other hand, was going through some really traumatic times. We no longer loved each other; we just tolerated existing in the same home.

My Daddy was in West Virginia, and I was left with just my Mom and my brother. I could have used a male role model, but I divorced the only one I ever had when I got conned into moving to Miami.

Kay Higgs was a majorette — and she was a great one. She practiced long hours, in her back yard, often unknowingly being watched by her Number One admirer.

She had the slender, long lines required for a majorette and had a figure like an hourglass. She would twirl that baton and toss it in the air. Always, she waited patiently for its return to her hand.

On the few occasions that it missed her hand, she would quickly pick it up. Then she would repeat that throw — again and again — until she got it right.

Both my brother, Durant, and I felt an instant attraction to Kay. He wanted to “score” while I wanted much more.

I remember, particularly, an incident that confronted those feelings.

In spite of the size of our yard — about $\frac{1}{4}$ of an acre as I recall — our home was just 2 meters (about 6 feet) from the Higgs’ home. Kay’s window was almost across but just a little to the left of our window facing their home. Sometimes, she and I would talk back and forth talking through the windows. (Why we didn’t just go out to the fence that separated us, I’ll never know.)

Anyway, on this afternoon, Kay mentioned that she needed help with her math. I offered to help. After all, I was taking advanced math: I had Geometry I in 10th grade, and was taking algebra in 11th grade.

She mentioned that Durant had offered to help. Since I knew he was taking Remedial Math and — more importantly — just trying to get “into her shorts”, I replied, “Why, Durant gets stumped trying to count the fingers on his right hand.”

What I didn’t know was that Durant had walked into the room behind me. He had an evil temper, and he leaped across the bed to punch me.

Knocked over backwards, I felt him grab my shoulders.

Since I was quite a good wrestler in those days, I threw him over my head and — retaining my hold on him — ended up on top.

To make a long story longer, I place a “sleeper hold” (a kind of choke hold) upon him until he passed out briefly.

When he came to, he jumped up and ran away from home. (It took 3 hours to find him walking toward our aunt's home. She lived 30 miles away.)

To get back to Kay, I was always embarrassed by that display of two bulls fighting over an angel.

She never mentioned the incident, and neither did I.

Kay and I would walk to the school bus stop every day. She would tell me about her thoughts and dreams and I would tell her about my actions.

She understood emotion; I was scared to death of intimacy. I was so shy, in those times, that I could never find ways to really talk with anyone. And, believe me when I tell you, I was *madly* in love with Kay Higgs.

Yet there were no words in my vocabulary to describe emotions. I was so emotionally scared by that point in my life that feelings led to tears, so I avoided emotions.

(That may have been why I could kill in later years, during the Vietnam War, without emotion, compassion or regrets.)

On weekends, we'd walk a mile to catch a bus to go to the movies in downtown Miami. I remember the first time I decided to put my arm around her. It was in that theater.

First of all, it took over 30 minutes to work up the nerve. When I did put my arm around her. She didn't object.

Then, I was faced with a real Dilemma: My arm began falling asleep and my shoulder ached. I *knew* — based on no empirical data at all — that if I withdrew my arm, she would *know* that I was angry with her. So, I sat there, suffering in silence for the rest of the movie.

The pain was so great that when she talked about the movie during the bus ride home, I had to pretend I knew what she was talking about. I was so overcome with pain that I could not — in spite of my efforts — concentrate on that movie. What fools we are in our youth.

I remember her Mom made home-made ice cream on several occasions. The Higgs invited me over just like I was family. I would take my turn turning the handle to convert the mixture into ice cream. That may have been the most delicious ice cream I ever ate.

At one point, Kay got some on her nose. I reached over, wiped it off, and put my finger in my mouth. She laughed. I was so embarrassed that I had to get up and walk away. I just couldn't understand that sharing an embarrassing moment was all right to do with those you loved.

I remember that I got to drive her home from a football game one time. Our school, Southwest Miami High School, was playing Miami Beach High School. On the way home, another car honked, "Beep, beep — beep beep." I honked my horn, "beep, beep" in reply. The next thing I knew, when we stopped at a red light, a group of guys got out of that car — that was right behind us — and, while swearing, ran toward our car. Instinctively, I checked for traffic and ran the red light. It would take combat in Vietnam, four years later, before I would be that terrified again.

We never talked about that incident. Kay may have wanted to, but I couldn't.

Sometime after that, I offered to drive Kay home from our school's football game with Homestead High School. She would ride to the game with the cheer leaders and football players, and I would pick her up after the game.

Unfortunately, my Mom's car spun a leak in the radiator and all the water drained out. I didn't know anything about cars. I was a dreamer; not a hands-on kind of guy. In high school, I took typing and briefhand (a kind of shorthand) rather than wood shop and auto mechanics.

In desperation, I put drywall compound all over the front of the radiator. While it did not fix the leak, it did block any air from getting into the radiator causing the radiator to overheat even more quickly than it had before. (My Mom had to buy a new radiator the next day. Was she ever mad at me!)

I never told Kay why I didn't show. I was so embarrassed about being so stupid that I could never confess and have her know. I'll bet, to this day, she thinks I just didn't care.

Shortly after that, she met a young, good looking guy in junior college. Our romance was over; her life had just begun.

She introduced me to him once. Immediately, I was impressed that he stood erect and spoke assuredly. Why, if I had been a girl, I would have dated him.

Oh, and he had a car.

We remained friends after that, but life had changed.

She remained the sweet girl I had fallen in love with. I had grown into a sullen, devil-may-care adventurist who focused too much on fleeing from the life I led instead of dealing with it.

She was a virgin when I met her, and she was a virgin with she left me.

She married that man while the boy she had known, next door, joined the Army.

In my heart-of-hearts, I'll always regret losing such a wondrous woman. I used to wonder what would have happened if I had married Kay, but it's OK because she knew what she wanted, and she went for it.

We never get a second chance with our first love but I wouldn't, for a second, give up the adventures I shared with her.

Kay was my *then* love; Peggy is my *now and forever* love.

Now that I'm married to Peggy, I strive — every day — to avoid making the mistakes I made with my first love.

IF I had only known then what I know now, but that's another story for another time.