



Cheryl

Chapter 15

Parking

Fall, 1964

Boys, beware of older women; they are enticing. When I was a teenager, I fell for one. Our relationship was doomed from the beginning, but it was great while it lasted. Here's what happened.

“And who are you?” she asked as she presented the numbered pin. She smiled when she asked the question, revealing pearly white teeth that contrasted sharply with her tanned skin. She was one of six pretty senior girls, all newly elected cheerleaders, who came to the pool more to be seen than to swim. Clad in revealing two-piece swimsuits, they attracted a throng of admiring young males on the deck between the pool and the basket room, where I sat watching. I was working in the basket room, giving pins in exchange for baskets full of street clothes the swimmers wanted stored until their swim was over.

I had a job at the municipal pool that summer before high school began. It was a very low-paying job. I was volunteering in fact, but Bob, the rec director had offered me free pool access in exchange for a few hours of work each week. More importantly, the job provided the opportunity to flirt with girls when they dropped off or retrieved their baskets.

She stood out from the others. She may not have been the prettiest, but she was compelling. In addition to her healthy good looks, she had an inner quality that drew others to her, even those who were uninvited. Unlike the other girls who flirted openly and with little discrimination, she deftly deflected the advances of unwanted suitors. She left little doubt in the mind of Rex, a handsome senior and the quarterback of the football team, that he had no chance with her. I couldn't keep my eyes off her as she talked, laughed, and parried Rex's advances with skill and ease.

“I'm Jeff,” I replied. “And you are?” I asked, knowing full well who she was.

“Cheryl,” she replied. “I haven't seen you before.”

I told her I would be a sophomore when school started the next week, expecting that to be the end of the conversation.

“Will you try out for the football team?” she asked, with yet another warm smile and without any of the attitude normally associated with a senior cheerleader addressing a lowly sophomore.

“Yes,” I replied, “I'll try out.” I didn't add that I was not relishing the thought of being a tackling dummy for the varsity team. “I hope our pass defense is as good as yours,” I stammered nervously, looking quickly at her and then away.

“What?” she asked. She looked at me strangely, her head twisting slightly in confusion, causing a strand of wavy dark blond hair to fall across her blue eyes.

“I mean you were doing a good job of deflecting Rex’s pass just then,” I answered with a weak smile. My stomach twisted itself into a tight knot and my palms began to sweat. “In football I mean...I hope our pass defense is as good as yours,” I added quickly.

“Oh,” she said with a comprehending smile, putting the wayward strand of hair back in its place. “Well, good luck,” she said as she picked up her basket. “I’ll be cheering for you,” she shouted over her shoulder, loud enough to be heard by her friends on the pool deck thirty feet away. She turned and walked toward the entry to the women’s locker room.

I watched her walk away, then turned my attention to the collection of senior boys and girls she had just left. Rex was glaring at me. I quickly focused on the pack of eight- and nine-year-old boys clamoring to be the first in line to retrieve their baskets.

Later that afternoon, after finishing my shift and while walking home, a beat up ‘48 Chevy pickup pulled up beside me. I turned, and to my surprise, Cheryl was driving. Shouting to be heard above the rumble of the truck’s decaying exhaust, she asked if I wanted a ride. Her image had repeatedly flashed through my mind since she had disappeared into the women’s locker room, and I was dumbfounded to be looking at her now. I stared at her through the open window of the passenger door, mouth open, not moving.

“Well?” she asked, her blue eyes sparkling and her mouth twisting upward in a half-smile at my sudden paralysis. Needing no further encouragement, I opened the passenger door, jumped in, and held on as the truck rumbled away.

After regaining my wits, I thanked her for the ride then asked, “Aren’t you afraid someone will see you with a sophomore?”

“I’m not worried about that,” she replied. “You look like you need a ride. Where are you going?” She smiled, her white teeth sparkling.

How could teeth be so white? I wondered as I passed my tongue over my own hoping no sesame seeds from the hamburger I had at lunch were lodged there. Satisfied that my smile was not harboring stowaway seeds, I said, “I’m heading home. Take Washington Avenue north towards the brickyards.” I looked at her again and then stared through the windshield not knowing what else to say. Fortunately, the din of the exhaust offered little opportunity for conversation and allowed me to think.

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“What’s the worst thing she can say?” I asked myself, struggling to muster some courage from deep inside. My stomach tightened and my palms began sweating—for the second time that day.

The truck roared up the hill, moving north away from the swimming pool and the center of town. The sun was falling quickly behind the front range of the Rockies. The cool air of the early evening, scented heavily with the sweet smell of freshly cut hay from the fields just beyond town, filled the cab of the truck. Knowing the short ride would soon be over, I rehearsed the question several times in my mind, seeking a tone that would convey a level of confidence I did not feel.

“Turn left on 5th street,” I said. “Four blocks to go,” I thought. The truck turned left. We passed Jackson, Arapahoe, then Cheyenne. I knew that the time was near. “It’s the house on the corner,” I said pointing to the brick one-story house with a white clapboard addition at the rear.

She pulled the truck to a stop in front of the house and killed the engine. An unexpected silence replaced the rumble of the truck, but I was already in mid-sentence and unaware that the roar was gone. I shouted, “WHAT ARE YOU DOING FRIDAY NIGHT,” loudly enough to be heard several houses away.

“NOTHING, WHY?” Cheryl shouted back, beginning to laugh. A neighbor’s dog began barking, awakened by the rumbling truck, the shouting, or both.

Surprised by the volume of my question and even more so by Cheryl’s loud response, I smiled and began laughing too. “Because there’s a dance at the Methodist Church and I was wondering if you were going?” I had forgotten the line I had practiced and it came out all wrong. Recovering quickly, I added, “What I mean is, will you go the dance with me?”

Cheryl looked at me, paused for a second, and then looked away. She stared in rapt attention at the neighbor’s old collie as he ambled toward the truck, his tail wagging slowly and his mouth open as if in a welcoming grin. At the same time, my mind filled with an image of a wounded fighter plane, hurtling to earth, trailing thick black smoke, and emitting a resonant howl. “Mayday,” I thought.

After a minute, she turned back to me. My heart was pounding and my chest tightened as I struggled with the stick of the imaginary plane, the earth rushing towards me. “OK,” she said, “I’d like that.” Miraculously, I regained control, pulling the plane out of the steep dive just seconds before a fiery crash. The plane and I soared skyward, doing barrel rolls in a cloudless sky.

“But how will we get there? You can’t drive.” The engine in my imaginary plane coughed and sputtered mid-barrel roll.

“I can drive, just not legally. I guess we can meet at the dance.”

She thought for a second or two. “No, I’ll pick you up.”

The sputtering engine smoothed out as my imaginary plane flew between shafts of sunlight, piercing the orange and purple clouds delivered by the setting sun.

Precisely at seven p.m. the following Friday, I heard the pickup before I saw it. The muffler suffered from years of hard service, resulting in a roar that trumpeted Cheryl’s arrival before the truck came into view. The minute I heard the truck, I jumped up from the sofa and headed outside. I surely didn’t want Cheryl to come to the door for me. It was bad enough that she was driving at a time when boys always drove on dates and pretty girls didn’t go out with younger boys. Mom was right on my heels as the pickup thundered up our drive. She was suspicious of the older woman coming to pick up her young son, but she shouldn’t have worried. Two minutes later, Cheryl and Mom were chatting away as if they had known each other forever.

We headed to the dance and a block away from the house, Cheryl pulled over. “You’re driving,” she ordered. “You can drive a stick, can’t you?”

“I learned on a stick, but what if we get stopped? I don’t have a license.”

“We can say I’m teaching you to drive.”

It seemed like a good story to me. In those days, there were no learner’s permits. People simply learned to drive with their parents or a friend, then showed up at the DMV on their 16th birthday and took the test. I walked around the car and took the driver’s seat. Cheryl sat next to me in the middle of the bench seat, and we headed for the Methodist Church and the dance.

Somehow we made it to the dance without being stopped by Officer Hal. Everyone turned to look as we pulled into the parking lot. There was no way to make a quiet entrance in that beat-up pickup. As we headed to the door, I took her hand. She squeezed mine in return and gave me a warm smile.

My friends couldn’t believe their eyes. “You’re with her? She’s your date?” Joe asked incredulously. Dude, Bobby, and Monte were equally impressed. A sophomore bringing a senior cheerleader to the dance was significant socially in small-town Golden. And, when they learned that I had driven her truck to the dance, my social standing improved even more. I could see the headlines, “Outlaw Sophomore Dates Beautiful Senior Cheerleader.” I was as cool as James Dean, the movie star, in my

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friends' eyes, but not everyone was happy about this turn of events. As Cheryl and I danced our first slow dance, I caught Rex glaring threateningly from across the dance floor.

Apparently there was an unwritten rule that forbids younger boys from dating older girls. Sophomore boys simply did not date senior girls. "Why was it OK for senior boys to date sophomore girls?" I wondered. But instinctively I knew that challenging the superiority of senior boys was little different than young bucks challenging the dominant male for the favors of the females in the herds of deer that roamed the foothills just west of town. Males compete for females. Younger males challenge older males. It was the natural order of things.

Despite the tactics of Rex and others, my relationship with Cheryl warmed as temperatures fell and leaves changed. We met at school, talked on the phone every day, and went to movies on weekends. And after games, movies, or other events, we went parking.

Boys, What's parking, you ask? Golden was a very small town. The town was surrounded by two-lane dirt roads that connected farms, ranches, remote houses, and other rural locations. They were mostly abandoned late at night and what better place to park with your girlfriend for, well ... whatever.

The corollary to parking was bushwhacking. Bushwhacking involved stealthily tailing the car of the parking-bound couple until they found a suitable location. Then, after an appropriate amount of time passed and the windows in the parked car were sufficiently steamed, the bushwhacker and his compatriots would quietly roll up behind the parked car in their vehicle with the lights out. With the exception of the driver, the bushwhackers exited their vehicle and snuck up on the parked car. On command, the bushwhackers banged on the trunk, hood, and doors while the driver flashed his lights and honked the horn, thus disrupting the parked couple's activities.

Rex and his friends delighted in bushwhacking Cheryl and me, and they became expert at finding our parking spots. There was no place to hide on the roads near town, so we had no choice but to go farther afield. And so on one memorable night, in Cheryl's dad's old pickup, we headed north out of town on Highway 93. About five miles out, we took a dirt road south towards Arvada. Five miles later, after passing Arvada's water-treatment plant, we stopped the car on the crest of a hill affording a commanding view — the lights of Denver in front and the deserted road behind us. No one could sneak up on us there.

An hour or so later, it was time to head home. We both had midnight curfews. But when we wiped the condensation away from the inside of the windshield, we couldn't see more than a few feet around the car. We peered into a soupy darkness. A thick fog had rolled in, and everything was wrapped in an inky shroud. Shivering, I put the key in the ignition and pressed the starter. The engine cranked but did not catch. I pulled out the choke and tried it again, with the same result.

"Let me try," offered Cheryl. She moved into the driver's seat, and pushed the starter. The engine cranked but more slowly. She pushed once again, but this time the engine barely turned over before stopping altogether. After that, all we heard was clicks. The battery was dead. We looked at each other in shock, our stomachs knotting and hearts pounding. "What are we going to do?" she asked, with a touch of panic in her voice.

Boys, I was in a tough place; ten miles out in the country in a dense fog, a truck that wouldn't start, and a girlfriend who had to be home in 40 minutes. Remember, we didn't have cell phones in those days, so there was no calling, texting, or tweeting to friends to come to our rescue.

I got out of the truck and looked back toward Highway 93. A dim light glowed in the distance through the fog. It was the water-treatment plant. I came up with the only plan I could think of.

"Come on," I said. "We're walking to the treatment plant."

"What?" she asked as if she couldn't believe what I was suggesting. "Why on earth would we go there?"

"We need a phone. I need to call someone to come get us."

"Who?" She asked in exasperation. "None of your friends can drive."

I knew telling her would not go over well. "Just trust me. It'll be ok."

She took my hand as we walked toward the water plant glow, and in five minutes we found ourselves at the locked eight-foot-high, chain-link gate.

"Now what do we do?" she asked nervously.

"We climb," I answered as I began scaling the chain-link fence. Cheryl was very athletic and was up and over the fence before me. The water treatment plant was closed to the public, but lights burned inside. I prayed someone was working nights.

I banged on the door. No answer. I banged again, then heard a voice, "I'm coming. Hold your horses!"

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An old man in coveralls and a crumpled baseball hat answered the door. He surveyed us through thick glasses, a pipe protruding through the yellow nicotine stains of his otherwise gray beard. "What can I do for you two?" he asked.

"I'm Jeff and this is Cheryl. We had car trouble and I need to make a call for someone to come get us," I answered.

He looked us over again, then, while pointing towards an office said, "Phone's in there. Help yourself. My name's Ellison, by the way."

I picked up the phone and dialed the number. A man answered.

"Dad," I started, "Remember when you told me if there was ever a time when I was in trouble, I could call you? Well, it's that time."

I told him where we were and that the truck wouldn't start and that I had to get Cheryl home soon or she would be late for her curfew. After a few seconds, he said he would be right there. I couldn't be sure, but I thought I heard him chuckling as he hung up the phone.

"You called your parents! Oh God, I'm so embarrassed! Your folks will hate me. Isn't there anyone else you could have called? Anyone?" She slumped heavily into the office chair, her head in her hands. We waited in silence, each contemplating the repercussions of our nighttime drive.

Fifteen minutes later, Dad pulled up to the gate of the water-treatment plant in his new Chevy Malibu. Mom was in the passenger seat. The fog had lifted and Ellison, who was the night manager at the treatment plant, walked us out to unlock the gate. We thanked him, said goodbye, and climbed in the back seat.

After we thanked my parents for rescuing us, an uneasy silence filled the car. Cheryl looked out the window on her side and I looked out the window on mine. We drove for what seemed like an eternity until Mom said, "Cheryl isn't the view beautiful from that hill just beyond the treatment plant? You can see all the way to Denver on a clear night." Graciously, Mom didn't mention the fog. Astonished, Cheryl looked at me as Dad added, "Son, I used to drive your mom out here on nights like this in my brother's old '32 Ford. I didn't even have a license. We loved that view." Mom and Dad smiled at each other, then began laughing. Before I knew it, Cheryl and I were laughing too.

I walked Cheryl to her front door just at midnight. Her folks were asleep so I avoided having to tell her dad what had happened to his truck. The next day, Cheryl and her dad retrieved the truck. It started right up. I never knew exactly what she told him, but I don't think he found the story as amusing as my parents did.

Three months later and on Valentine's Day, Cheryl and I had a fight. She had met someone from another high school, a senior who was asking her for dates. She ended the long conversation saying we would always be friends. Boys, when a girl you are dating tells you she wants to be your friend, it's not a good sign. We broke up. We both knew our relationship couldn't survive the distance that would separate us when she headed to college, and the difference in our ages obviously made things difficult.

I took the break-up hard for a day or so. But by then I had a driver's license, a '57 Ford, and my class was full of pretty girls. I just had to decide which one to ask out next.