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28° windows open

I have thought about her all my life. She is the first girl I loved, as a boy loves a girl. I have never forgotten a thing about her.

We met at Astor in '70. She lived in a group home along Route 9 in Staatsburg with ten Setonite girls. When we took the Greyhound down to Port Authority for visitations or holidays we always sat together and held hands. I remember holding her hand in the dark, crossing the Tappan Zee and everything all tingly like stars in my belly.

We talked of things, of life, and of dreams. She spoke of her grandma in Bootin, in Jersey, and of her best friend, Marilyn. They were inseparable. They'd both come to Astor to see their therapists. When her session was over, she'd come find me on the blacktop shooting hoops or sitting on the old wall just thinking about things.

Then she'd plop down beside me and we'd talk. But mostly, we just smiled at each other a lot. Near the edge of the blacktop was the hill that sloped upward to a long line of tall pines. She whispered to me, her dark eyes sparkling in sunlight, 'Let's go up there, Johnny boy.' I'd swallow hard and shake my head. She started up. I followed. She smacked the basketball from under my arm. 'Don't need that, John boy.' She'd giggle and chew her thumb. I was 12 and on fire.

She pulled me behind the pines. The smell was so sweet. The floor was soft with pine needles. We stood in the dim light, the silence of the forest pressing in. She took my hands and stepped toward me, softly smiling, her dark hair aglitter. My heart was all over the place. I couldn't feel the ground.

"Kiss me, Johnny," she teased, glancing to her left, through the pines. She was absolutely beautiful, the hair, the eyes, the soft lips, her sweet voice, all sparkly charm. I couldn't move. She stepped closer, just an inch or so. Something below began to really hurt. I needed to adjust but could not adjust. So I leaned in a bit...the children playing and screaming on the blacktop, bicycle bells ringing, basketballs echoing off the backboard, and the creek rumbling in the distance. She closed her eyes and leaned forward, too. I closed my eyes...

Then I heard, "Dontcha want to?" I thought our lips had already touched. They hadn't. It was all in my head. She got tired'a waiting, with a tsk, she just

pulled me forward, her hands behind my head. Her wonderful lips on mine. She smelled heavenly. We opened our eyes. “Nice, Johnny.” She pulled me forward again and again. I could barely walk. Then she said, “Let’s go into town.” “I’m on restriction. I’m not allowed.” She giggled, “Neither is this altar boy.” She took my hand, “Tough titty said the kitty. Let’s go.” A nun’s whistle sounded to head in. We sneaked down the back path into town just as the church bells struck four.

We waited to cross Route 9 before holding hands, just in case. Then we went to Schemmy’s for ice cream and to shoplift a gift for each other. I got her candy cigarettes. She got me a *Creedence* cassette. Then, the driver, Betty White, came and found us. The agency car was idling at curbside.

A Vista Cruiser station wagon with the curved green tinted windows on top. The little bell chimed, Betty stuck her head in, ‘Lovebirds, let’s go.’ She glanced my way with a grin, “I believe you, handsome, are in some trouble. Want a ride?”

I shook my head. “Trouble can wait, please.” She turned for the door. Lori spun quickly and kissed me on the lips. “Mmm, nice, John boy.” Then with a cute hand wave, she skipped to the door and off she went, leaving me dazed and smiling like a fool.

There was the time when we came back from the city and her ride was late. I’d already gone up to my room at the top of the stairs. Sister came to my room. “Your little friend is downstairs. Her ride’s delayed. Come down.” I looked at my blue pajamas. “I gotta change, Sista.” She laughed. “Come on. There isn’t time.”

Lori was sitting on the staircase waiting. She saw my pjs. “Oh. How cute. Johnny.” I blushed. She patted the step. “Sit.” I sat beside her. Her face was still red from the cold outside. “Come closer,” she whispered with a wink. “Not allowed.” She scooped over, our legs touching. The nuns did not allow that. Even for the Saturday dance socials in the gym; bodies cannot touch when dancing. It was painful for us Marist boys. Lori’s pinky touched my pinky. I felt the heat again and that warm, painful rising. Sister came back and eyed us. “Too close.”

I slid away. Lori giggled. “Come on, Sister, he’s such a good boy.” Sister leaned in, “Yea, right. Hands okay. All else, no-no.” Lori waited for her to turn away and rolled her eyes, playfully making the sign of the cross. A minute or two later, the car pulled into the drive out front. She pulled on my arm. I turned my head. We looked right into each other. She smiled, looked into me, “Will you

marry me one day, Johnny?”

I was so gone. Thunderbolt. Sister called out, “Ride.” Lori stood, touched my face, and followed Sister out, glancing back with that funny little wave. I hadn’t answered. I couldn’t. I was lost somewhere in my head, my heart and body. The door closed. I listened to her steps on the rock salt. Sista had to snap her fingers several times to bring me back to Rhinebeck.

“Well just look at you, emerald eyes sparkling. Bedtime.” I floated up the stairs beside her and crawled in bed. She paused, her hand on the light switch. “Your friend is pretty.” “No. Beautiful.” She nodded and clicked off the light. “I doubt you’ll sleep, but try.” I couldn’t sleep for days, my mind filled with wild imaginings of a 12-year-old boy; kisses, marriage, a long table of children and fighting to protect her, slaying dragons, monsters, and such.

The following summer, I was in the cottage by the creek, waiting for transition to the next place. Jill and Bud were our group parents. In August of ’71, they took us cottage boys to a lake in Ellenville. Lori and the Staatsburg girls would be there, too. We were so closely supervised that it was tough to get more than five minutes alone to hug or smile at each other.

The other Marists had their own little love interests in the Setonite girls. We were all together for a week. Eight girls lived and slept on the top floor. Seven boys on the bottom floor. Bud slept at the top of the staircase in a cot. Jill slept with the girls in one room. There was one other counselor, cool Eugene and Sister Mac. She was cool. Eugene went home at night. Sister Mac snored big time and that’s good for boys who like to move about at night.

There was the Saturday evening before we headed back to Rhinebeck on Monday. I was sitting at the end of the dock watching the sun set. Lori sat beside me. I looked around: no counselors. She’d just washed her hair. It was wet and shiny and smelled wonderful: *Herbal Essences*. She scooted beside me, our bare legs touching in the cool water. I felt the rising and moved. She pulled me back.

She wore a onesie with cutoff jeans and a red flower in her hair. It was hard to talk because we smiled so much when we were near. That just rolled into wonderful bouts of laughter. Hardly any words were ever needed. It was all in our eyes. “I want you to row me around the lake, Johnny,” she whispered, her small feet patting the water. “Okay.” I got ready to stand. She pulled on my arm. “Not now. Tonight.” I didn’t understand a word she said. “I’ll come get you.

You'll see." I heard the sliding door to the deck open. "Dinner, kids," Jill called from the second floor. I glanced back; Eugene was playing checkers with a few boys on the deck. "Lori, we'll be in big shit if we get caught." She glanced up at me with a starry wink. "Tough titty said the kitty..."

She dropped the flower in my lap. Then, she skipped away, waving and swinging her arms carefreely down the path. I breathed in, eased onto my side on the warm deck and watched her loping up the steps, a silly smile on my face.

Later that evening, when the sky passed from pinkish gray into dark, I heard fingernails tapping the glass. It was her. A big smile on her face, waving me over. "Shit," I whispered and crawled from the lower bunk. I stayed dressed. Scared but dressed. I had to slip my sneakers on. Bobby Young was in the top bunk. He leaned over the side, "You goin boy? You ain't, I'm'a kiss on dat pretty girl."

I unlatched the door and gently slid it back, listening for any steps upstairs. We walked softly down to the dock. She held my hand, leaning against me, a blanket under her other arm. We quietly slid into the row boat and untied it. "Don't paddle," she whispered and set them on the deck. "Just drift." I pushed off hard from the dock and slid beside her. "Let's ease down there."

We laid on the bottom of the small boat under the blanket drifting under the stars. She snuggled beside me. I pulled her close, kissing her head. "That's nice, Johnny." We rubbed noses, kissed, and just smiled.

Then she said, "Kiss me like real people do." "Dunno how." "Me neither. But I want it to be with you." And so we tried: it was wonderful, her gentle breath on my lips. My fingers woven through her dark hair, breathing warmly against each other, cool waters beneath us and the stars above. I was bursting joy.

"Johnny, you didn't say you'd marry me that time." I thought a moment... At the edge of the lake a bullfrog broke the silence as a shooting star streaked across the night. She squeezed my arm tightly. "See! That's for us. We're meant to be. It's fated." She sneezed several times. "You know I'll be fourteen soon."

Then the screen door on the girl's deck slammed against the house. Bud shouted, his voice booming across the lake, "Bring her back, Donnellan! You hear me?" She set her arm across me. "Oh, not yet." Her eyes softly closed. Bud's steps bounded down the staircase. We kissed once more, like real people do and

held closely one last time. Then his steps pounded the dock.

We heard the splash as Bud dove in. “He’s pissed,” Lori giggled and stood, dropping the blanket from her tan shoulders. “You comin?” I looked at the dark water. “Me? In there?” “Tough titty,” she said with a cute wave and dove right in, passing under Bud as he swam towards me. I laid back on the bottom taking a last look at the stars. He pulled himself alongside and looked in.

“What the f... Where is she?” I couldn’t answer. I was stuck on Lori’s lips and her question. “Where are the damn oars?” Lori shouted from the deck, “Hi, Bud.” She held up the oars and chucked them in the water. Then she scurried up the stairs, laughing and waving. Jill was waiting with a towel. Bud towed the boat back to shore with me in the bottom breathing in Lori from the blanket.

They made the Setonite group leave right then and there. I never saw Lori after that night. Next day, she'd been transitioned downstate.

During my last year in the system, 1977, I met Marilyn in Middletown. She was a good friend of Bobby, my roommate on Hanford Street. We smoked a little near the rail tracks and headed to the pizza place on Main. Marilyn avoided all talk of Lori. I kept asking.

“Don’t ask no more. She’s so messed up. Real messed up.” I went outside, didn’t feel like pizza, to sit and think. I walked her back to the Orchard Street group home from where she was transitioned. She put her arm around me like Lori would and leaned up against me as we stood beneath a streetlight. “I’m sorry. You guys really loved each other. I loved’er, too.”

“But how, Mare?” She held my hands. “She is all gone, Johnny. It was this, that and all the other things. Details will only hurt you more. She's gone.”

Then I got it. System-speak for it all went wrong early. I gave-up trying to find her. Then her sister responded to my query through a people-finder website a year after I'd posted it. I was stationed at Aviano Air Base. We spoke once on the phone. Twenty-five years after that moonlight question and kisses in Ellenville.

“Lori doesn’t remember anything about Rhinebeck or any Astor Home. I am sorry. She just doesn’t remember you at all.” The last words of that conversation of hope, “She's in an assisted living facility...”

It became so clear to me that in the end: the system took more than I had ever imagined. All my life I have carried that unsaid answer. Carried her and others.\

But she was the one person I so desperately needed to see on the other side of that horrible journey. I wanted her to have a life. A good life. I wanted to know Lori P forever and ever.

I have thought often about her question on the staircase and beneath the stars, why I'd never answered. I didn't feel worthy of her. Now whenever I feel I got a shit deal in life, in my heart I hear, "Tough titty said the kitty." And my love goes on.

