

Tietam Brown

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She had wanted me to kiss her. No doubt about it. The realization hit me as I navigated my dad's '79 Fairmont through the back roads of Conestoga, New York, a small town about thirty miles south of Syracuse.

To tell the truth, a high school senior with one functioning hand really had no business operating a motor vehicle in the first place, let alone a one-functioning-hand high school senior without a license or even a half a thimbleful of experience behind the wheel.

Unfortunately, my father had refused to drive me. Not out of meanness, however-no, my dad felt like he was doing me a favor. "Hey Andy, a kid only goes on one first date," he'd said. "You've gotta make it count. Besides, kid, it's kind of tough to cop a feel in the backseat when you've got your old man behind the wheel." Maybe it was that last bit of paternal sentiment that sold me on the driving idea, and at approximately 7:40 p.m. on a cool autumn evening, I held the door open for Miss Terri Lynn Johnson as she slipped ever so gracefully into the cracked burgundy interior of the piece-of-crap Fairmont that my dad had insisted on lending me. No, a feel was not copped on that night, nor was one even attempted, but that didn't make the night any less glorious, because after all . . . she had wanted me to kiss her. And that was a fact, or at least a pretty strong gut feeling that was worth celebrating . . . with music.

A red light at the intersection of Elm and Broadhurst, only a half a mile from Conestoga High, where I'd met Terri only six weeks earlier, gave me the respite from my driving duties that was necessary in selecting the perfect postrevelatory music. Unfortunately, even a red-light respite isn't much good when trying to fumble with some clunky old eight-tracks with a hand that hasn't closed, clasped, grabbed, or done anything meaningful since Gerald Ford was in office.

I had barely managed to clear my dad's blue fuzzy dice from the glove box when the light turned green. Yeah, my dad had fuzzy dice all right, only they didn't usually reside in the glove box. No, those bad boys swung proudly from the rearview, and served to separate my dad's machine from all other pieces-of-crap '79 Fairmonts on the road. So with the light instructing me to go, and a late-model Ford pickup truck's blaring horn adding to the urgency of such a moment, I reached into the glove box with my left hand, the good hand, and pulled out the first eight-track I felt. Then, with a hint of defiance, I popped that mother in, pushed my curly dark hair back in the general vicinity of where my right ear used to be, and stepped on the gas, as the opening strains of Barry Manilow Live drowned out both the horn of the Ford and the shouts of the driver within.

What's wrong? Oh you don't think Barry is appropriate for such an occasion? Sure, it might not have been my first choice, or even in my top couple hundred. And true, the sky blue jumpsuit Barry sported on the cover of the live album, or eight-track in this case, may have been a tad inappropriate. But don't try denying that "Mandy" and "Could It Be Magic" are classic compositions that still hold up well today. Jumpsuit or no jumpsuit, they held up just fine on that night in 1985, and as my voice joined Barry's in belting out, "Baby, I love you now, now, now, and hold on fast, could this be the magic at last," I reflected back on what was at that point the greatest night of my young life.

Terri was several leagues out of my ballpark. Not that I was a horrible-looking guy or anything, but a missing ear and a useless hand tend to cramp a guy's style at that age, and the style-cramping perpetuated itself in an awkward shyness that had invited a lifetime of bullies to boost their self-esteem, or at least try to, at my expense. Sometimes they succeeded, sometimes, as I'll explain later, they didn't. Come to think of it, a lifetime of foster homes, orphanages, and juvenile detention centers hadn't done a whole lot for my sense of self, either.

Terri, on the other hand, was drop-dead gorgeous. Just a beautiful creature. Her beauty was beyond compare, with flaming locks of auburn hair, ivory skin, and eyes of emerald green. Actually, that description is straight out of the Dolly Parton song "Jolene," but that was Terri. Statuesque, but not slutty like some of the other girls who graced Conestoga's halls, she carried herself with a maturity that belied

her years. It was really only on game days, when the cheerleading squad sported their official blue-and-orange Conestoga cheerleading sweaters, that her physical attributes really screamed for attention. And in doing so, made me think of the word "maturity" in a whole new light.

She literally could have had her pick of any boy she wanted. Any man for that matter. Her father headed up the local Assembly of God, where his fiery demeanor and hell-and-brimstone sermons contrasted sharply with her gentle nature and overall acceptance of everyone not as fortunate as herself-which pretty much meant everyone.

Her father's vocation, combined with her natural gifts, had given birth to a rather unusual challenge that was spoken of in almost reverent tones among the boys at Conestoga High. No one, it seemed, had gotten into Terri Johnson's pants, or for that matter anywhere even remotely close. Personally, I found the whole subject of Terri's pants to be disrespectful. A creature as beautiful as she deserved better than to have her pants, and what was underneath them, a subject of horny teenage speculation, let alone a prize to be claimed.

How we got together is beyond me. It was actually all her doing. It was she who laughed at my first dumb joke in Mr. Hanrahan's social studies class. It was she who had gone out of her way to say "Hi Andy" in the halls. It was she who insisted on studying together in the library, where she showed off such unique talents as wiggling her nose and ears while I fell hopelessly in love. I know, you're not supposed to fall that quickly, and that the L word should be used sparingly, if at all, during the high school years. But in the fall of 1985 with Terri Lynn Johnson in the library, between the wiggling nose and ears and the sweater, and the wonders that lie beneath the blue-and-orange wool, my heart offered very little resistance. I was a goner. A one-eared, one-handed goner.

And in the one day it took from when Terri asked me to the movies until the entire student body of Conestoga High found out, I went from being a nobody to being the most hated kid in school.

Sure, it was Terri who had laid the foundation for that first date, but in my own defense, it was I who acted on it, and went into overdrive in

order to give this vision of loveliness a date she would never forget. The other young lovers were heading to the new mall over by the river, to "the Seven Valley Twelve," as the theaters were officially known, but I had different plans. The Twelve may have been new, enriched with stereophonic sound and equipped with a state-of-the-art snack bar that served different foods from around the globe, but it didn't have the character of the century-old Lincoln Theater, named after, you got it, President Lincoln, who would soon go on to play an unlikely but important role in my life. Yes, when it came to a first date, nothing came close to character as a prerequisite. Except for price, which of course was miles ahead of that whole character thing, especially for a guy who'd come into town with exactly nineteen bucks to his name. My financial woes looked to be easing soon, courtesy of a glamorous minimum-wage dishwashing job at Frank 'n' Mary's diner, a venerable establishment that was home to a myriad of small-town life-forms, from blue-collar locals, to drunk college kids, to on-the-road truckers who needed a little shot of caffeine or cholesterol.

So with my finances in mind, the Lincoln's 85-cent admission made even the specter of seeing Rambo: First Blood Part II on a first date sound pretty good. The Lincoln's price policy, you see, was derived directly from whatever year happened to be taking place. In 1984, the price was 84 cents; in '85, it was 85. Guess what it was in '83? If you guessed 83 cents you'd be wrong. Back in '83 when the Lincoln was still the only game in town, a flick cost four bucks, but with the advent of the multiplex, the ancient cinematic institution was forced to make changes to survive. They stopped showing first-run movies. They lowered their prices. They cut down on the variety of candy and on the freshness of the popcorn. And they stopped doing the little things, like cleaning the floor.

So after spending \$1.70 on two admissions, and the total of \$3.50 on two Cokes and a medium popcorn that we decided we'd share, I escorted the most beautiful girl I had ever seen into a dingy cave of a theater, where she would see a plethora of people perish on-screen in the ensuing ninety-five minutes. But her smile never waned, and she somehow managed to be the picture of class, even as a previously chewed piece of gum formed a bond with her designer jeans, and her slim and gorgeous feet got acquainted with a floor that had known no mop in quite some time.

My mind began to wander at about the time the eleventh person died in the first coming-attraction preview. My father had been so happy for me on the eve of my first date. He had wanted to make sure that everything was perfect. The car had been a very nice gesture, fuzzy dice or no fuzzy dice. "Andy, my boy," he'd said with a big grin and an "I've got a secret" wink in his eye, and a secretive hand held behind his back. "Hold out your hand and close your eyes and I'll give you a big surprise." So I held out my hand and closed my eyes, and I'll be damned if my father didn't give me a big surprise. "Just a little something to make sure that you and your girl have a good time tonight," he said with a laugh that sounded as if it had been lifted from a used car salesman.

When I first closed my hand around my dad's surprise and felt the rustle and crinkle, I had a premonition that a ten-dollar bill had found its way into my hand. My premonition was wrong. A ten-dollar bill would have placed me and Terri inside the Seven Valley Twelve, where people on the screen might actually do things besides kill each other. A ten-dollar bill would have spared Terri the union of her ass and a wad of chewing gum. But it was not to be.

I moved my foot slightly and found it nearly glued to the floor. At that point I experienced what can only be called a flashback, as the sticking of my shoe at the Lincoln gave way to the memory of the sticking of my shoe at the Pussycat Cinema in eastern Pennsylvania two months earlier, although I'd be willing to bet that the substances causing the stickiness were altogether different.

The Pussycat had been my dad's idea, when he showed up at the Northern Virginia Juvenile Detention Center near Richmond on my seventeenth birthday, after an absence from my life of only sixteen years and nine months. I'd received a postcard a few months earlier that in its entirety read, "See you in a few . . . Dad." A few. I had no idea what "a few" meant, so I waited a few hours, then a few days, then a few months, and then finally, on the day of my release, without a clue as to what to do with the rest of my life, I set eyes on my father, Antietam Brown IV. "Come on, kid," was all he said. "I'm taking you home."

I had no idea the "home" of which he spoke meant Conestoga, New York. Home to me had always been Virginia, with the exception of my life's first three months, which had been spent in a suburb of Tampa, until my dad got tired of the Mr. Mom routine and shipped me off.

We drove on through Maryland that first night, with my dad insisting that I drink my first beer, and then my second, and so on and so forth until I was so drunk that his words became increasingly incoherent, which was probably a good thing. He said nothing about his work, and even less about my mom, opting instead to spend our inaugural night together regaling me with details about his past sexual conquests. As the miles flew by and the beers, at his urging, flew south, those details became fuzzier and fuzzier, until the fuzzy dice started spinning in unison with my stomach and I mustered the fortitude to blurt out, "Pull over," which my dad did a split second before those birthday beers came barreling up my throat, and into the green grass and wildflowers that bordered that particular section of Highway 95.

"Thatta boy," my dad laughed as the vomiting process reached its conclusion, and a thick stew of spit and puke adorned my chin, like some strange new goatee. "Never let it be said that ol' Tietam Brown doesn't know how to show his son a good time!" Then, after a pause, "I'm proud of you, boy," with a rugged slap on the back for added emphasis.

The Pussycat Cinema was the first thing I saw when I awoke that next day. "Look over there, kid," my dad said as the Fairmont screeched to a stop, kicking up a cloud of dust and jolting me awake to find that I was in the middle of nowhere, with a massive headache and the vile taste of stale vomit to remind me of my Happy Birthday.

"Where?" I asked, which seemed an appropriate response, as from my vantage point, all I could see was a ramshackle trailer enhanced by the timeless beauty of a rusted-out Pinto on cement blocks on display in what passed for a front yard. "Not there, kid . . . there," he said, and with that he was out the door and headed for the Pussycat at a trot. I followed suit, afraid to be seen but a little intrigued.

"Andy, these babies are a dying breed," my dad said, his voice heavy with nostalgia. "Might as well check one out before they turn it into a hardware store or some damn thing." And with that I headed into the plush surroundings of the theater itself, my feet sounding like quacking ducks as I made my own way down the aisle, while a lone man in the back appeared to be furiously cleaning his glasses underneath a long trench coat on a hot August afternoon.

There we sat, father and son, estranged no longer, watching a pretty but not beautiful blonde, with a face that was somehow far too sweet for that line of business, having odd deeds done to her while Antietam Brown IV nudged me in the ribs and doled out words of wisdom like "That's what's known as the 'money shot.'"

Two tickets . . . ten dollars. A flat Coke and a box of stale Juju- fruits . . . four dollars. Spending an afternoon with your dad in a scuzzy porn theater . . . priceless.

I was jolted back to the present with the gentle touch of a manicured hand on the knee of my tattered jeans. "Andy . . . Andy . . . are you all right?" I glanced quickly at the screen to see a ripped and pumped Sylvester Stallone, who by all accounts seemed to have adapted well to the rigors of chain gang life. "Andy, are you all right," Terri repeated, and her hand gently squeezed my knee in a gesture of concern. "Yeah, oh, uh, yeah," I said, and at that very moment, with her hand upon my knee and all her attention directed right at me, the truth was, I had never been better. "I was just thinking."

"And what, may I ask, were you thinking?" she said.

I opened my mouth, and my voice cracked. Honestly. A legitimate Peter Brady voice crack. Then, mustering all that was left of my pride, I opened up my mouth again and gave that talking thing another try. "Um, um, Terri, I was just thinking that maybe you would have liked another movie better at another theater."

She smiled and her gentle clasp on my knee became the softest of caresses. Then she squinted in mock Clint Eastwood toughness, sneered a bit like early Mick Jagger, and said, "First of all, I love Rambo," and then, with her voice losing its humor, continued, "and second, I don't care about the theater, I just like being with you."

My Adam's apple suddenly turned into an Adam's watermelon, and I couldn't speak. Hell, I couldn't breathe. I think all my body functions stopped. All except my tear ducts, which produced enough water in the next few seconds to irrigate the Sahara. God, I tried not to let those tears fall, as, after all, crying isn't really crying unless the tears actually leave the eyes. My eyes had welled up many times over the years in Virginia, but it had been ten years since I'd actually let one fall. But try as I might, and believe me, I tried, that ten-year dry streak came to an end at the Lincoln Theater as Colonel Trautman sprang Rambo from the clink in order to aid his country in a double secret mission.