

THE HEART OF INNOCENCE

Memoir by Ted Sorgan

I'm known to my family as Teddy. My hometown in Tenafly, New Jersey is a thriving, affluent bedroom community by the woods just west of the majestic Palisades overlooking the great city of Manhattan.

It was late summer of my sixteenth year. Tall and slender, my dental braces had finally been removed after four tortuous years.

I was clearly in the shadow of my older brother Eddy. Taller than I and athletically gifted, he was college bound with a scholarship to play basketball at the University of Richmond. I too planned on attending college the following year. My priority, however, was to stand clear of the raging war in Vietnam. I was sure (with a draft lottery number of 53) one misstep would land me in a rice paddy.

Back on the block, our small but growing community of young teenager 'baby boomers', were finding their voices cracking and socially engaging the opposite sex in playful ways for the first time. With the country and the world about us in such upheaval there were many more questions than answers. It was hard to speak out politically, because it was difficult to articulate what we stood for.

It was at this time I was reacquainted with a younger girl I had met at our town swimming pool.

Karen, the girl whom I'd been introduced to, was far too young to approach previously that summer. A one-piece royal blue bathing suit, I recall, made no statement. Her body language was that of a blonde-headed child - though very cute-looking at first glance.

Now having been reintroduced at the close of a late August afternoon, something had changed. Karen had matured. This fourteen year old spoke to me of her excitement and anticipation of her entry to freshman year at our newly constructed high school.

When she knotted her white blouse at mid-waist, revealing her new curves, I held my breath as she looked me in the eye and asked me to walk her home, high upon the east hillside where we both resided.

"Yes . . . Yes!", I exclaimed. We talked and laughed all the way. Walking along the curving tree-lined streets to her home, I became very aware that my pulse was racing.

Karen had the prettiest smiling brown eyes with high cheekbones and a gorgeous mouth. She possessed an athlete's body with a dancer's gait that was very seductive. Karen had a throaty kind of New York City laughter. She made me laugh just hearing her respond to some of my early attempts at whimsical humor. It was all fun and innocent.

When we arrived at her screened front porch, we both joyfully agreed to have our first date within the week. Our parents (we agreed) would provide the transportation.

I learned that although Karen was the oldest of three sisters, she had her own issues of being overshadowed. In her case, by her mother Dorothy. Her mother was quite stunning and theatrical.

Dorothy was an extroverted retired Broadway dancer. She was a redhead with mischievous grey-blue eyes and an infectious smile that reminded me of the movie actress Jill St. John. Dorothy had boundless energy, red lipstick and legs and chest of a racehorse. When watching her kiss her kids, she literally lifted them off their feet. She adored them.

As a backdrop to our lives, the events that occurred during the following year 1968, would affect all Americans deeply. Assassinations, war, and racial upheaval left us all feeling somewhat

insecure. We clung to one another for comfort and reassurance. ‘The Times . . . They were achangin’.

Karen and I came to be inseparable. We were innocent and vulnerable. We knew our families loved us but our lives were indeed changing. We were riding the wave of parental influence and family expectation.

I enjoyed walks in the woods and was known for my love of biology. My family took to calling me ‘nature boy’. Karen was being prepped for Broadway dancing and was begrudgingly weighed every morning by her doting mother.

As Christmas approached I became fully aware of the financial affluence of Karen’s family. We would drive in her father’s Fleetwood Cadillac for window shopping along Fifth Avenue and would dine at the City’s finest restaurants - Chandler’s, The Top of the Sixes, The Russian Tea Room, The Brazerie and Casa Brazil. I was cared for as if I was their only son. With the knowledge that their daughter was safe and in good hands, they watched over us.

Back home the evenings would melt beneath the warmth and glow of the season’s Christmas lights. Under a magnificently decorated tree and fireplace mantle, Karen and I were falling deeply in love.

Those were the nights of our life. We sat alone on the sofa playing the best hits of The Temptations and Four Tops on the record player, over and over again, long after her parents had retired for the evening.

There was never a question of sex at our age. We were way too naïve and vulnerable for such an aggressive physical act. We were our own first love. I feel, however, we went well beyond the act of sex. It was as if we had discovered pure intimacy and affection - “The Kiss”. It was here where Karen and I embraced in unimaginable mutual euphoria. It was our bond. When it came to our embrace, I believe there was nothing the French need teach us that we hadn’t learned on our own.

There were still nights to come when I would place my father’s construction ladder under Karen’s bedroom window so we could talk and kiss through the screened windows under the night sky. It all seems so crazy. But it was pure innocence, and yes, romantic.

During the next several months college applications and Senior exams kept the pressure on. My parents were very supportive when I expressed doubts about the future. They trusted me as well.

Meanwhile, my escapist behavior with Karen was not being overlooked by her mother. It was at this time that Dorothy seemed to be bubbling over in her interest in our perceived intimacy. Whether it be the flush in our cheeks or our breathlessness, she needed to know more. Eccentricity and inquisitiveness defined Dorothy’s nature.

While Dorothy’s eyes were on us, we surely had our eyes on her. She wore flowing gowns which displayed her expressive cleavage and highlighted her gregarious personality.

One remarkable afternoon we were all driving home from the Jersey Shore. Karen’s father, Maurice, nearly went into shock at the steering wheel on the Jersey Turnpike. Dorothy was removing her panties in the front seat.

“What are you doing?” Maurice gasped.

“It’s Karen’s first period”, Dorothy responded matter of factly.

“She needs a fresh pair of underwear.”

On another occasion, we had all driven to New York City to see the opening of a new movie The Graduate, introducing a new young actor Dustin Hoffman. As we all watched the seductive

ways of Mrs. Robinson, Maurice stiffened and barked out in the movie theater, "You've done it again, Dorothy!" We all cringed.

One afternoon I was alone with Dorothy awaiting the completion of Karen's Modern Dance Class. Dorothy, as usual, was very engaging and dressed in a nightgown. She asked if I might wish to see her photos taken when she had danced on Broadway. She made it very clear how excited she had been in her youth when she had the good fortune to have had an affair with Gene Kelly, the brilliant Broadway dancer. I told her I thought Gene Kelly was terrific and that he reminded me in a distant way of my own father's good looks.

She led me up to her master bedroom where she had spread out her photos for viewing. All I know is that her intentions were honest and I knew I could not, and would never be another Gene Kelly.

Then came the night of the great snowfall. It was getting late and once again Dorothy was to drive me home as her husband was away on business. Tonight would be different.

It had started snowing heavily by the time we left. There appeared to be at least eight inches of accumulation on the streets. Dressed as always for comfort, Dorothy in nightgown and slippers drove cautiously but skillfully to my home, high up on Wood Road, a dead end cul-de-sac overlooking the valley.

When we arrived, Dorothy turned the engine off and then turned to me. With wet snow falling heavily upon the car windshield she asked me pointblank . . . How I relieved myself with Karen?

Incredulous, my jaw must have dropped in the darkness. Time felt suspended before I spoke and then I said, "The usual way, I guess?"

Through the darkness we gazed into each other's eyes in silence for what felt like eternity. I found my voice and the car door and said, "Goodnight" jumping out into the cold. I pranced through a snow drift and up the driveway to my home on the hill.

I bolted upstairs to my bedroom, trapped in a confused dream. I didn't know what was more confounding - Dorothy's question or my response.

Stepping over to my bedroom window I peered out to the lamp-lit, snow covered street below. To my amazement, under that street lamp, descending Wood Road in nightgown and slippers, was Dorothy. I hurriedly unlocked and pushed up the window, getting a gusty face full of snow and icy air for my effort.

I yelled out at the top of my lungs, "Dorothy, where are you going?"

She heard me and turned about looking up, she cried, "The car won't start!"

"I'll have my father drive you home," I called back.

"I can't let your father see me like this!"

I answered back, "Stop, I'm getting my father up!"

I woke my parents. Dad quickly dressed and drove Dorothy home, accompanied by her great embarrassment.

I undressed, turned off the light and climbed under the covers. Lying motionless in the dark I could hear the wind blowing outside, buffeting against our home. The blowing snowflakes emitted a most delicate crystalline sound as they penetrated my bedroom window screen.

I waited and I waited for my father's return. Then I drifted and fell off to sleep.

I never asked Dad what happened that night and we never spoke of it.

After I left for college, without cell phones and physical proximity, my relationship died hard for me, along with Karen's ever diminishing use of pen and paper. Drugs, a family psychiatric profile

and a lingering question in my mind of possible early sexual abuse has always left me with concerns for Karen's well-being, wherever she may be.

Perhaps not so strangely, Dorothy continued for a brief while to send dreamy, seductive designer scented cards and notes to me in Karen's absence. The powder laced envelopes surely would have drawn the attention of the Postal Service and the FBI in today's world, but her intentions back then seemed sweet. She knew I was hurt.

A question, however, has always remained. Why did Dorothy continue to work so hard to maintain my relationship with Karen when all seemed lost? After all those years, that question remains unanswered.

My sixteen years has turned to sixty-four. I'm incredibly happy in my 34 year marriage to my loving wife Clare. We're blessed with three incomparable sons, well into their manhood.

I still think back to a moment shared with my father before he died in January 1984. It was a sunny afternoon in front of the diner of our small hometown of Tenafly and Clare and I were expecting our first child.

"Dad," I asked. "If we have a daughter, what name should we give her?"

He responded directly with not a moment's hesitation, "Dorothy. Name her Dorothy, Teddy."

For a moment I stood there, searching deep into his dark eyes. I felt a quizzical smile come across my face. I nodded in acknowledgement but didn't say a word.

I whispered to myself, "Dorothy." What else need be said.