

## WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

Becki O'Loughlin/ December, 2016

I was a physically awkward teenager. At five-nine, I felt that by eighth grade I towered over most of my classmates; and, in the era before woman athletes were cool, when we played half-court basketball in our blue bloomer uniforms and were forced by “women’s rules’ to pass after dribbling the ball twice, I had no idea what to do with the legs I considered freakishly long. You could spot me in any group photo, if you looked, hunched over in the back row. Plus, I wore glasses.

By high school the boys had, no doubt, changed; but I did not notice most of them in a romantic sense. My “gang” consisted of kids who today would be called nerds. We wrote and edited the school newspaper, the *Beacon*, hanging out individually or in small groups to work in the office set aside for us instead of sitting in study hall with the masses; and roaming the corridors freely “in search of news.” Once a month we accompanied our advisor and our creations, now reproduced on newsprint galley proofs with each headline carefully counted out in m- and n-spaces, to the nearby print shop where we proofread the final edition and “put the paper to bed” around 8:00 pm. We stayed at school until well past dinner time most other days, hotly debating religion and politics. We did *not* date each other.

One of the boys in my chemistry class did catch my eye. Steven Loth was an athlete, but not the gaudy type. He ran track. He was not part of my usual crowd. Unpretentiously handsome, he was about an inch taller than I; and he wore glasses! He was also excruciatingly quiet. Unlike the boys I was used to bantering with, Steve and I had exchanged only a few words, mostly about chemistry, which may have given him an aura of mystery.

Perhaps I had heard that Steve planned to attend the annual Spring Hop, because I can’t imagine why else I would have found myself facing him across the dance floor one mild Milwaukee evening. I didn’t go to dances, didn’t know how to dance. My parents’ very strict religious tenets forbade dancing. This had never been much of an issue for me, because I had never really *wanted* to dance. (See comments above about my height, awkwardness, lack of boyfriends, etc.) However, here I was at a school dance. I must have imagined that people sometimes also *talked* at dances.

So, here I stood in my new blue dress with the full, swing skirt and puff sleeves, tapping my toes in my best *flats*; with my cat’s eye glasses (all the rage); my hair painstakingly curled after an afternoon wrapped on pink foam curlers. The high school gym was festooned with half a ton of paper streamers and tissue flowers, and the lights were low. The DJ was playing the romantic song of the moment, I’m sure. And here came Steve, wearing a tan cardigan over his button-down shirt and narrow black tie, pushing his glasses up on his nose; not to chat, but to ask me to dance.

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If my younger sister were telling this story, the ending would be entirely different. She’d have twirled off into Steve’s arms, and they’d have danced the night away. They’d have dated all through senior

year, perhaps even married and raised a family. But I – still in my compliant, good girl phase – colored and mumbled something about not being permitted to dance. Steve shrugged and walked out of my life.

I went home and cried into my pillow – but not for too long. I had to get up to edit the article Suzy wrote for the Beacon about the Spring Hop. Deadlines loomed.