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The Romance a Teenage Camper Couldn't Have Today Summer of Love

Judith Levine, Village Voice, by , July 3 - 9, 2002

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This is an innocent story. In 1967, the summer before my 15th birthday, I fell in love. It was my first intense erotic love, and its object was the photography counselor at camp -- a lean, bearded, blue-eyed guy I'll call Jake. He was 26. Nothing sexual happened. Still, I think of those two months as the summer of my *panouissement*, a French word meaning blossoming or opening, which also means glow. Jake took hundreds of pictures of me, and his affirmation and his camera opened me to myself. They helped me begin, sexually, to glow.

If the same events had occurred in 2002, they would not be viewed as innocent. The adults around me would write my chaste romance as a perverse tale, casting Jake as a predator and me as his hapless, clueless prey. Had I started my sex education with good-touch-bad-touch lessons in kindergarten or listened for a decade to media reporting on a world allegedly crowded with sexual malefactors sniffing the world for young flesh, I might even have believed that my friend and mentor Jake was one of them. That sweet idyll would have been, instead, the summer of my victimization. And instead of opening me, Jake's attentions might have closed me down in fear and confusion.

The photographs were another kid's idea. Jake and I and a few other campers were messing around in the dining room after supper early in the summer, and a boy named Ezra suggested I model for Jake.

"Judy would make a gas model," he said.

Gas, in 1967, meant cool. And looking back, I have to say, I was a cool kid. I wrote poetry; I played guitar and piano pretty well. According to the adults who knew me then, I was precocious and perceptive. My friends remember me as witty and impassioned. I affected a late-beatnik-early-hippie look: skimpy tank tops worn without a bra (I didn't need one anyway), low-slung bell-bottoms that revealed the curve of my belly where it dipped between my hipbones. Come to think of it, the clothes weren't so different from the ones today's parents (who wore them as kids!) condemn for prematurely "sexualizing" their daughters.

The clothes were sexy then; they are sexy now. And to this day I can almost taste how good I felt in them. Before that summer, I still considered myself a little ugly and plenty awkward. In my high school, girls like me, who didn't have pageboy haircuts and didn't wear mohair sweaters with matching knee socks -- and worse, who were smart -- were untouchable.

At camp, though, I had suitors to spare. That summer several boys pursued me. One wore wire-rimmed glasses -- avant-garde at the time. Another kept pleading with me to take my first acid trip with him. I was unmoved. I idolized the glamorous Jake, who had spent a year photographing guerrillas somewhere in Africa, who drove a battered Volkswagen, who meditated at an ashram. And he -- miracle of miracles -- liked me, a lot.

He liked me, I felt, and he saw me -- saw the person I was beginning to know as myself. I could read his recognition in the photographs. They are straightforward, not arty, not pushy. I posed as I wanted; he shot. My body in them is at that heart-stopping stage between baby plump and adolescent fleshy. My face varies from picture to picture: Here I am a giggly kid, here a dreamy near-woman. One photo, which still hangs on my mother's wall, shows me holding Queen Anne's lace, gazing into the distance. It's a bit hokey: I'm working hard at looking soulful. But Jake's camera didn't mock. It's as if he believed I really was thinking deep thoughts.

What I was thinking about was sex. I tried to seduce him. In the flowery fields where we often went, I struck what I thought were enticing poses, leaning back in the long, scratchy grass, arching my back to reveal a bit of belly, dropping a shoulder so that a strap would fall invitingly off. In the little hand mirror I kept in my bunk, I rehearsed sucking in my cheeks and pouting my lips. And in the evergreen-smelling nights, I fantasized the day Jake would ask me to take my shirt off, brush his lips over my nipples, then pull down the short zipper of my pants. I imagined the bristles of his beard as he kissed me there.

He never did. In fact, he mentioned sex only once that I remember, as I sat on the counter in his darkroom, watching his red-lit face concentrate on the images emerging in the trays (the smell of developing fluid is still erotic to me).

He said, "There are two things I know I can't do while I'm working here: smoke pot or make love to a woman."

Was that woman me? I closed my eyes for a second and imagined I was, pictured him stepping between my dangling legs, taking my face in his hands, and kissing me. I opened my eyes, unknissed.

Maybe Jake considered me a little girl, not a woman at all. But somehow, as he gazed at me through that lens, I began to see myself as a woman, at least a little. One hot sunny afternoon, shingling a roof with Jake and some other campers, I admired the muscles of his tan, bare back flexing with each hammer swing. The bitter-salty odor of his sweat drifted toward me on a breeze.

"Hmm," I said to myself, smiling as I noticed that I liked the smell. "This must mean I'm growing up."

Once, skinny-dipping, I felt my body go as liquid as the lake as I watched him climb onto the shore, the red-blond fuzz on his body beaded with water.

Today, camp policy, like that at many schools and community centers, might forbid Jake and me to spend those hours alone in a dark little room. The camp director might pull him aside and ask pointedly what we were doing out in the fields. A counselor might interrogate me about his actions and insinuate that he was exploiting me. She might even persuade me it was true.

Of the dozens of rolls he photographed, there are a few shots of me with my shirt off, folk-dancing in a downpour with some other girls. I remember stepping back toward him, breathless and ecstatic, my face hot in the cool rain. "You're amazing," he said, and raised his camera again. Today those photographs could be called child pornography, and Jake could be arrested for taking them.

He never touched me, except to drape an arm over my shoulder or sit close to me on a bench. He kissed me on the lips only once, mouth closed, on the last day of camp -- and gave his boots to another girl, throwing me into paroxysms of jealousy. But he made me feel beautiful. He made me feel desirable.

Recently, the publication of my book *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children From Sex* lit a conflagration among conservatives, who called for its suppression -- and called me an apologist for, even an advocate of, pedophilia. Why? In one chapter, I suggest that statutory rape laws are often unjust and unrealistic. They not only criminalize consensual teen relationships and categorically deny teens the right to consent to sex, they erase the very possibility that young people might desire -- or initiate -- sex at all, especially with an older person.

At the same time, the book says, we've come to suspect all adults as sexual con artists, cajoling kids through popular culture and advertising to want sex, or seducing or coercing them to have it, before their time. It's as if adults, should they find a young person sexually appealing, could never control their impulses.

My book acknowledges that kids desire -- and I know they do, because I did -- and this apparently makes me a pedophile's patsy. Writing the book, I often felt lucky that I came of age during the brief moment when young people's sexuality was considered lovely and good and when adults who appreciated it were not regarded as perverts. In the summer of '67, a man gave a girl the innocent gift of her emerging erotic self. I wonder if I could receive it with such happiness and grace were I a girl today.

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