

THAT FACE

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I knew that face.

She was the girl illustrated on the covers of all the sheet music from the gay 'Nineties in the pile next to my grandma's piano. Although twice my age, Candace Dennett was the first woman I ever fell in love with. At 18, she had that 'Nineties woman's oval face and tiny chin, the pursed, garnet lips, limp lids, and casually cumulous brown hair piled against gravity all about her head.

Kenny Dennett and I had become best friends that September day, my ninth birthday, when I moved to Gomer and unloaded my belongings onto the front lawn of our new house. We were moving there so both my parents could start teaching at Sugar Creek High School. Kenny straddled his flimsy, short bicycle and watched. He had never met a kid before who had a four-inch magnifying glass, a prism, a cat's leg preserved in a jar of formaldehyde, a box of quartz crystals, and a three-legged cat.

"Scientist," he had pronounced me, his first spoken word of our acquaintance. Kenny thought I was the smartest kid he'd ever seen and I thought he was the strangest. I had never before met a skinny, scabbed kid who could ride a bicycle while carrying an unbroken rotten egg in the pocket of his shorts, who whistled through his nose when he breathed, who said Heyyawannaknowwhat? before every utterance, whether statement or question, and who smelled like he had carried a rotten egg in his shorts once before.

Kenny had turned nine earlier in the summer, establishing an unspoken seniority.

Once school started I learned that Kenny was indeed strange, a fringe member of the fourth grade, maybe even a little behind in his development. To the rest of the school he was more a mascot than a classmate, and I entered fourth grade society at the doormat level for befriending him. I chose my friends then, as now, though,

for the things that mattered. Kenny was loyal, trustworthy, and fun, without malice or guile, incapable of deceit. When I hurt myself, I could cry and Kenny would never tell. What's more, he enriched my world in ways he'd never know.

For the next eleven months I glimpsed Kenny Dennett's sister Candace almost daily when I went to his home. I was barely aware of her in all that time and hadn't noticed the resemblance, even though I had flipped through that pile of old music dozens of times out of boredom in years of monthly visits to my grandma.

The thing is, Kenny and I did stuff that kept us out of Candace's, not to mention his parents', way. Our playground started at his house and ran the length of an unlined, undulating blacktop to a creek half a mile away. It included a couple of farms that lay in that stretch, where we were free to play hide-and-seek in the corn, chase the roosters, and help hoist hay into the lofts where we could later stack bales to make forts where we played summer and winter. We could sit high on idle tractors, shoot slingshots at cans and bird nests, and, when we had exhausted our imaginations, beg milk and cookies at screen doors.

At the creek we weren't supposed to go near the water, so we played in it unsupervised. It was lined with oaks and willows and in the summer proved to be the coolest place to get out of the heat. I think it was no more by design that we went there to get out of the heat than it is a cat's conscious design always to seek the greatest comfort, even when that means climbing into the engine compartment of a car where amputating blades stand deceptively still; we just went because it suited our whim as the most interesting place to go that day.

We discovered a mess of intriguing junk under the short bridge that carried the road beyond our playground and into agricultural sameness. The junk yielded useful things like spent wooden match sticks and a battered cooking pot. One day we discovered we could, in one pass, scoop fifteen baby catfish into that pot. When we pedaled our bikes back toward Kenny's house, taking turns with the sloshing pot, we discovered what happens when a black, cricket-sized catfish hits blacktop that has been bubbling under the noonday sun. When we

arrived to face Kenny's father with our dwindling catch, we discovered that we were lacking an explanation, since boys who don't go near the water like they're told don't catch fish.

Kenny solved it in a flash. "Heyyawannaknowwhat, Dad? A man gave them to us."

"And where was this man? Sitting in his car?"

"Know what? Well, he was stopped for something. Like he had the trunk open, fixing the muffler, and he said: 'You boys want to see something...'"

I bought into the lie and corrected Kenny. "No, he said: 'You boys ever see anything like this?'"

"He showed them to us," Kenny concluded, "and we said – Donnie said – 'cause Donnie isn't used to seeing fish – Donnie said: 'Are they bugs?' and the man just gave them to us."

Kenny's father evidently found our story authentic and left to go help the man with the muffler in his trunk. He never said another word to us about it.

I could brag about what we did with some of the fish. We had already spent untold hours tossing grasshoppers into the webs of giant garden spiders, those fat ones striped with yellow, black, and white that string webs capable of holding a tennis ball. We thought we'd see what a spider would do with a wriggling, bug-sized fish. (Not much, as I recall; left it hanging and returned to the center of the web.) We put some into a canning jar and tried to feed them grass. They starved before they'd eat it.

Kenny thought he'd frighten his sister so he put one in the bottom corner of her underwear drawer. A week later she still hadn't noticed it, and Kenny could hardly find the shrunken, crisp remains. I just had a real funny feeling about Candace's underwear, so I didn't go in with him to hide it. Kenny dreamed up other notions for using fish to excite his sister, ideas that would have us first catch a shark in the creek.

I didn't share his resolve to agitate Candace Dennett. In all the time I'd been there she had never said an unkind thing to me or about me. I never heard her say anything to Kenny any worse than an observation about his odor or his filthiness, which observations I heartily endorsed even though my more abstract thoughts, such

as that, rarely found voice.

Candace was not my enemy, and the more I thought of playing tricks on her the more I recoiled inside. She may have been nearly ephemeral, but her ever-cheerful, if largely unseen, presence was part of the attraction at Kenny's house. I never knew a moment of tension in that home.

What's more, as the summer crested and descended into August, I began to take notice whether Candace was home when I came over. If she wasn't, I found myself disappointed. To my relief she was usually somewhere in the house, but her activities seldom gave rise to any occasion to cross paths with two little boys.

By design I began to steer Kenny more toward indoor pursuits during the hottest part of the season, to the minor irritation of his mom. I wasn't even trying to see Candace, just to be somewhere that allowed me to keep track of her. When she did enter the same room, usually the kitchen, I was careful not to look at her but made an effort conspicuously to be occupied with whatever Kenny was willing to do there with me. Before long he began wordlessly to abandon me inside the house in order to revert, alone, to our customary organic pursuits.

The day I fell in love, Candace was everywhere at once in her family's little house, getting ready to leave for college in another month; searching, collecting, sorting, piling, humming softly, and packing. I was here and there under foot, not intending to encounter her. Abruptly, though, it happened. We came face to face in a doorway, and she paused to regard me openly. Kenny's sister, owner of actual underwear, blithe spirit of the house, grown woman, frankly held my gaze and conferred a petite smile of eternal acceptance. I remember I stared back. We were alone. She wore denim shorts and a white tee shirt, same as me.

That was when I saw the face. There stood the girl from the monochrome sketches on the sheet music.

My grandma must have wanted to look like that. Maybe she had. Obviously the girl in all the illustrations was supposed to be the most beautiful woman of her time, some sixty years before. And if she were the epitome of beauty back then, she could be no less so now.

As I stared I noticed that Candace Dennett was not much taller than I and probably had no prospect of

attaining greater height. I failed to notice much more that would later matter: her contours and the color of her eyes, her fragrance and the shape of her hands and her bare feet.

But I do remember the voice. Candace commanded my gaze with hers, stretched her lips to one side in a sort of half grin, blinked those eyes, and broke the silence with: "I love you, Donald. I just love you." A few moments later, from across the room, she interrupted my statue imitation with: "You're so good for Kenny. Which is good for me. Now go on back out and get dirty again."

Kenny never detected my miserable infatuation. I was miserable for all the right reasons but at the precise wrong decade of my life. From that day forward I couldn't leave Kenny's house to walk home without yearning to know where Candace was at that instant and what she would be doing until I returned. I sat in my own room at night and wondered what time she would be turning off her light, out on the edge of town. I ran to his house as soon as it was decent every morning for the rest of August and sometimes saw her not a minute after she woke up, when she padded to the kitchen and poured coffee. I began to study her more and more openly. These times, with her flowing hair arbitrarily arranged by her pillow, she was the woman. I knew that face.

I couldn't talk directly with Candace, but I was a real conversationalist with Missus Dennett when the three of us, (four if Kenny was up too), sat in the kitchen over breakfast.

Candace never again said that she loved me, but once meant forever to me. I didn't know a thing about love, of course, except that it was something which engulfed me like sinking in a lake, something that filled my body and made me ache in a way that I couldn't stand and couldn't get enough of. There was no future to think about, only the moment. The most beautiful woman in the world loved almost-ten-year-old me. I was not awakening to a physical attraction either. Didn't know I was supposed to, I suppose. It was only the face.

It wasn't long before we visited my grandma again. While the rest of the household sat about in the kitchen and outside it, I sat on the living room floor, beside the piano, and sifted and re-stacked the pile of music,

leaving the choicest pieces on top.

I wished I could play the piano, because I would have memorized all these songs and played them back for Candace Dennett, if her house had had a piano, which it did not. Instead, I tore the bottom quarter from one of the brittle covers and kept her folded picture in my pocket for at least a week. Then it went through the washing machine.

It was about the day after that when Kenny had an idea. "Hey, ya wanna know something?" he began slowly and portentously. (I never answered this. It wasn't intended that I do so. The information or question he had in mind always followed anyway.) "Candace has a boyfriend."

The sweaty weakness and nausea that swept over me at that tidbit, that turned the sinking-in-a-lake sensation to a sinking-in-poison feeling, I now know was shock.

Kenny went on, oblivious. "Ya wanna know something, we could play a trick on her. Not on her, on her boyfriend."

I must have acceded, or else he forged ahead anyhow. "She writes him love letters," Kenny snickered. In a sing-song he added: "She says she's gonna miss him and she wants to feel his hand in her something, her hand I guess, and he better come see her in B.G., and other stuff."

"How'd you see all this?" I finally managed.

"She writes one or two a day and I find them in her room. She hides them but I find them."

I had never seen her with a boyfriend. Never heard of one. Never guessed that she might be that kind of woman. I thought she was the girl in the illustrations: always placidly posing and waiting for nothing in particular. Gazing into my world and loving me.

"She'll be mad if she sees you," I warned.

"She'll just yell at us and tell us to go get dirty."

(Us!?)

"What do you mean 'us'?" I croaked at Kenny.

"Ya wanna know what? Ya wanna do something? Let's write her boyfriend a love letter and stick it in one of her envelopes."

"She'll tell your mom and then we'll both..."

"Yeah. Well, ya wanna know something? Mom doesn't know she has a guy. I heard her say she isn't writing letters to any boy, even when she really is."

"She won't tell on us."

"She won't tell."

I warmed to this sort of sabotage, although my inward image of Candace was going to tatters like the scraps that had emerged from the laundry.

By the next day Kenny had procured one of her decorated, pale pink envelopes and a sheet of her writing paper. Kenny had it all composed in his head, but insisted that I put it on paper because I could almost write like a girl. So we began, and with some unexpected help I am able to quote all of it:

Dearee sweetiepie Paulee, [I knew how to spell Paul; it was my middle name...]

Kissy kissy lovy dovy smoochy hoochy woochy hony!! I miss you so moch all ready!! And I'm still waking around in my house with toast crumbs on my bathrobe and on my lips. On my lips. Get it? I want to kissy wissy you and marry you and see you in september. Or maybe never!! Just kidding.

*With love and hugs and kisses and feely weely and be my hony,
Candace, you one true love*

I folded the letter into a tight little lump, the size of the one in my throat, as Kenny declared his sister always did with the notes she sent to this Paul. To our good fortune, Kenny was able to creep into her room

while she was off taking a bath, and he found yet another envelope already stuffed with a note. Hers was sealed but not stamped and needed only to be addressed. We refolded our letter to match the thickness of hers, sealed ours, and Kenny crept back in to give her a perfect substitute in one of her own fancy envelopes before she reappeared.

I don't know what Kenny did with the letter he stole. It might have made a difference then. But it may be better that we didn't know. It might have shaken my world more than the mere, crushing realization that she loved someone else. If Kenny read it, he didn't let on. I suspect that he wouldn't have made sense enough from it.

Candace went on to Bowling Green a few days later. Kenny and I entered fifth grade. Halfway through that year my parents moved us again. Not that far. Back to Lima, the town we'd left to come to Gomer. But that was the last I saw of Kenny and Candace.

Forty years have passed. My father died last fall. It took my siblings and mother and me all winter to sift through his clutter and boxes of effects. This *mélange* included two large grocery sacks stuffed full of letters.

"I don't know who he thought would ever read those again," Mom complained.

Pulling out handfuls and scanning the envelopes, we could guess that here were all the letters we had sent home from camp and college and the army, letters from Dad's mother, letters from old family friends. I brought the two sacks home with me and promised to make them my evenings' reading for the rest of the winter. I said I would photocopy any that would be interesting to anyone else in the family and return to my brothers and sister the letters each had sent so long ago.

Late one evening, after everyone else in the house lay asleep, I sat myself on the living room rug, dumped both bags before me, and began a reminiscence with the old letters. I had barely begun turning the envelopes right-side up when I glimpsed the corner of a decorated pink one, and that face thrust itself before my mind's eye, still trying to appear innocent and adorable. Kenny's love note, drafted in my girlish script, wasn't the first

to emerge from the pile. It didn't have to be. A different one came out first. For many moments I held a lumpy envelope in my lap without opening it, letting the shock dissipate and the horror sink in.

I shouldn't have done this alone. I'm a big man now, yet this kind of thing deserves a friend's support. But whose? Who would have understood? Kenny? Who would have come and sat with me at this hour? How could I wake my wife and explain to her this betrayal I'd discovered on so many levels?

I unfolded the note in my hand, one from Candace herself to my father – to my father Paul, her Physics teacher and basketball coach. It didn't say much, but enough. Clearly she adored him. Clearly they had met for necking and petting after school. I stirred the pile and collected thirteen more of the fancy envelopes. I scanned these until I found one written from Bowling Green on the day of her arrival as a freshman. It begged him not to come see her. It called off the affair. It apologized for Kenny and Donnie's nasty trick but credited our note for helping her see her folly.

I found our note.

Elsewhere in the pile of letters, in an envelope whose bold blue invited scrutiny, I found one Dad had started for her but evidently couldn't finish. Folded with it was a brittle piece of thick paper now over a hundred years old. The note read:

Dearest C., Even though I have had your senior picture all spring and it now sits anonymously on my bookcase at home, surrounded by your classmates', this is the image of you that I carry in my heart. I suppose you should know how I will always remember you. It's from the cover of a piece of music. . .

It was that face.

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