

LOVE AND THE VALENTINE'S DAY VACCINATION:

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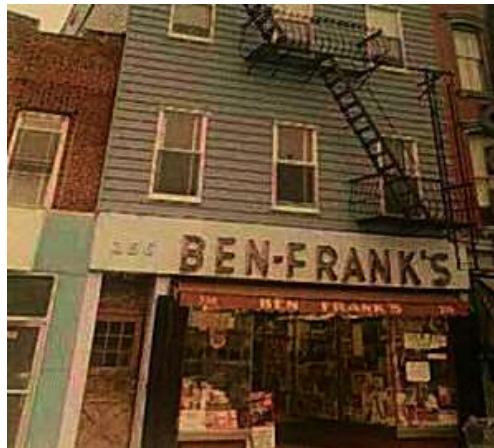
Most people can't imagine anywhere in New York City as being a small town. But I can tell you with heartfelt conviction that my little town of Greenpoint-Williamsburg in the borough of Brooklyn New York was once a place where you were just minutes away from the spot where you had your very first kiss and just up the road from the church where one day you'd marry that very same gal.

Susan was almost a cliche of an Irish Catholic schoolgirl. She had thick glasses, freckles, and yes braces too. She wasn't the prettiest girl in the class but her kooky, off-beat smile gave her a whimsical charm that was secretly irresistible. I say secretly because as we're all aware no neighborhood Italian boy worth his weight in Sunday meatballs and Pixy Stix powder could ever admit to being smitten by messy-haired Susan Farcley! After all, we were much too worldly by then.



St. Anthony's Church, Brooklyn

By 1970 we had already seen a man walk on the moon; we witnessed as world leaders were assassinated and read our older brothers homesick letters sent from across the world in Viet Nam. As for matters of the heart we learned the anatomy of a crush from Greg and Marsha Brady, and pretty much everything else was covered by ABC's Love American Style. However, there was one thing that had yet to be explored – how to find your Valentine? – and Sister Margaret Miriam was about to remedy that with her version of a Valentines Day Kris Kringle. Before I knew it right after morning prayers and the pledge of allegiance my crisp white school shirt was elbow deep inside of a long red sock revealing my Valentine – Oh my goodness! It's Susan Farcley! ... to coin a phrase of the time – Good grief!



Ben & Frank's variety store, Brooklyn NY

The very next day my mom took me to the neighborhood variety store, Ben & Franks where we usually got everything from oak tag poster board for school projects to boxed costumes for Halloween, and mass cards for the neighborhood wakes. But this time it was for a red sequin heart, filled with Brach's Valentine candy and a gift set of Jean Nate' perfume. Hey, I would have been fine giving my Valentine a few strips of paper-backed candy buttons and maybe some of those Pixy Stix, but my mother insisted on the body splash and perfume gift set. Although I did draw the line at that stupid Scooby-Doo cupid greeting card.

That night at the Valentine's dance with my heart racing and thankful that there was no mistletoe type kissing ceremony associated with this exchange I approached Susan from behind. Then with a quick stealth tap to the shoulder and a muttered greeting I handed over the frilly red bag - and quickly got the hell outta there! But just short of my retreat I noticed something that I'd never seen before on the face of a girl. It was a kind of glow, a

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radiance, a warm slow-motion sort of a sparkling mirror-ball moment. She was suddenly stunning or maybe just stunned - Now I really hadda get the hell outta there!

Soon after being stricken by all of this unexplained luminescence and completely confused, I couldn't tell if I was unintentionally avoiding Susan or intentionally avoiding her in order to unintentionally walk past her to avoid her. Huh? Oh boy! Then, in a sudden moment of mercy, either for her or for myself, as she sat alone in the corner and as the band played on I walked over and asked her if she wanted to dance.



Oh how we danced



...and danced



...and danced

A few days later Sister Margaret decided to put up a slide show of the photos she had taken at the dance. Suddenly there I was in living color. Projected six feet across the blackboard in a full-blown boogie-on-down with Susan Farcley! Our arms flaring, our upper teeth clamped like gophers in an overbite across our lower lip. Forever captured in a stop motion moment that would leave me wide open and vulnerable for every future taunt and tease and rank out session for the rest of the school year and most likely the rest of my life!

In the midst of all of the laughter I can recall regretting ever asking Susan to dance; ever handing her that stupid heart! Even disgusted by the scent of the perfume I had given her. This was pure and painful, adolescent humiliation - for both of us. I thought that the jeering of that day would never end -- but then like a glimpse, in a flash it did end. It was over—and it was suddenly fifty odd years later.

Decades past Watergate, Pac-Man, and AIDS and market crashes and Oklahoma City; beyond Monica, Microsoft and the falling of the towers and the walls. Suddenly it was shelter-in-place, quarantine, face masks, and social distancing. The world had plunged into the grips of the great pandemic of 2020.

I'll admit that those fifty odd years were somewhat hard and evident on my health, and I was the poster child and top of the heap of those prioritized to need the vaccination. But with over 100 million cases being reported around the world no matter how hard I tried and to wherever I turned from physicians to social media the vaccine shortage was prevalent, and I could not get an appointment anywhere. Then suddenly I got a message on Facebook:

"Dear Joe. I hope you're doing well. It's been a long time. I saw your post on Facebook about not being able to find a place to get vaccinated. I hope it's OK and you don't mind but I was able to go online and make an appointment for you for next week not far from your house in Brooklyn. Take care and good luck, Susan Farcley".



The Facebook message

Oh my goodness! It's Susan Farcley! – I recalled using that phrase before on the subject of Susan. It had been over fifty years since I said it as I pulled her name out of that long red sock. Fifty years since our dance together. I was overwhelmed and truly touched by her message.

I will admit now that handing that frilly red bag of candy to Susan that night did get my young heart pumping. I suppose if things had worked out differently these many years later that sharing sweets with her would probably now send my A1C soaring as well. But we never did have that very first Brooklyn kiss or end up together up the road from the church where most of our old friends had long been married. Susan did tell me that I was the first boy to ever give her a valentine – of course I never did admit that she was my first valentine too. I did tell her how grateful I was to her for the way she had reached out to help me, and we did get at least to share a hug. We occasionally chatted online and exchanged holiday cards for a while, but gradually we lost touch again not long after.

As I reflect on those wonderfully confusing days of youth I now wonder if I had to come up with a clever title for a story that would follow suit with that network romance sitcom "Love American Style", I think that I'd most definitely call my episode: "Love and the Valentine's Day vaccination"

