

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

*David Sapp*

### **Kissing Patty McCalla**

PATTY, PATTY, PATTY. When I was seven, all I could think of was Patty. Kissing Patty McCalla. Patty was the tiniest girl in our class, an itty-bitty version of Mary Tyler Moore. Dark hair, impish eyes, the best giggle. For picture day she wore a bright red jumper with chartreuse green leotards and white glossy vinyl Mary Janes. She was the first in our class to wear glasses, but I liked her anyway, maybe more so because of them. I chased her around the playground at Elmwood Elementary, around the slide, monkey bars, and teeter totters. In the winter, when the slide iced up, the boys crouched at the top and let our hard slick shoes and gravity carry us precipitously down the metal and across the blacktop. Fledgling ski jump Olympians. (Not the girls as at that time all the girls wore dresses every day.) Some kid was always getting hurt. As skinned knees were a daily occurrence, the teachers kept antiseptic and Band-Aids at the ready. We played jets and parachutes on the swings, and once I fell out the back of a swing and passed out from whacking my head. My ejection seat failed to deploy. I wondered if Patty was watching. Mom was called and I ended up spending a night at Mercy Hospital with a concussion beside a boy a little older who had a heart murmur. I threw up twice in one day: once outside the car on the way to the hospital when we took my sister to Grandma Dearman's. Mom wasn't keen on leaving my sister there as Grandpa Dearman was a "mean old bastard." (He was!) And later, because I threw up cherry Jell-O in my bed, it looked like I was bleeding to death. It gave the nurse a fright. I was amazed at how the nurse could change the whole bed while I was still in it. I was even more surprised when the nurse didn't seem to mind at all unlike my mother under the same circumstances when I had the flu.

Every recess, Patty was there and those fifteen minutes twice a day were bliss. Though I was equally in love with my second-grade teacher, Mrs. Hennell, and wanted to please her by making paintings and practicing the cursive letters lining the borders of the chalkboards, my mind wandered to Patty two rows over and three seats down. I tried many strategies to sit near her in the reading circle. But at recess, there was Patty, right there beside me. I wasn't interested in shooting marbles in the dirt or playing kickball with the other boys. The competition was too fierce. And dangerous. Running towards home, Tom Auger, a boy on my bus route, slid under the chain-linked fence, broke his leg, and spent the next six weeks in a body cast. Though he got behind in school, Tom would later be a high school football star. I was happiest playing with the girls and the other less athletic boys. Girls were more interesting more mysterious, than boys. Why play kickball when there was Patty?

In return for my affection Patty kicked my chins. I came home once too often with black and blue and variations of purple and green legs. But I endured the pain because it was Patty, and she was my girlfriend – as far as I knew. Even though I begged her not to, Mom called Patty's mom and they laughed together over the kitchen phone about our courtship. The shin-kicking eased up, but I rather missed the bruises. Mom said Patty probably liked me well enough but was just fickle. All I could think was fickle rhymed with and reminded me of pickles. I liked pickles, especially the little sweet gherkins. As usual, Mom did not define the new word or offer up a dictionary. There were other words like belligerent, incorrigible and insolent that stumped me, though no other grownup I loved used those words describing me. I had a notion of what the word unruly meant. Nine years later when I was driving and Dad was out of the house, on the last day of

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living with her, Mom threatened to declare me an unruly juvenile according to the Ohio Revised Code, Section 2151.002 – when she was “on strike” and wouldn’t cook, do laundry, or look after my little sister for weeks – wouldn’t allow me to do the laundry – when I tried to get out the door with the laundry baskets and detergent – when I shoved her. (Years later we learned that during Mom’s strike a budding molester down the street attempted to lure my little sister inside his house with candy.)

In the summer I missed Patty terribly. We exchanged letters even though we lived only three miles away. These were brief and repetitive as there wasn’t much to talk about in the dog days of summer and our large loopy handwriting didn’t allow for much elaboration. I wanted her to visit so that I might kiss her under the wild cherry tree in the meadow. I implored Mom and Dad to let me ride my bike down Martinsburg Road, a busy highway, to see her. After all, I rode to Gambier to get a haircut once, over that rickety bridge spanning the Kokosing River. It was a very bad haircut – crooked bangs, but I also stopped at the candy store on Wiggins Street and loaded up with Bazooka Bubble Gum and Three Musketeers. But then, maybe that trek occurred when I was ten or eleven. Kenyon College was there in Gambier and my grandmother was a cook at the dining hall for many years serving the long-hair kids from the East Coast. Grandma and Grandpa had a little dairy farm just outside the village where I spent much of my summers.

My bike was an embarrassment as Dad bought it for me new just before the Sears Spyder and the Schwinn Sting-Ray models with the banana seats and the chopper handlebars came out. Mine was a gearless stylistic remnant of the 1950s – fire engine red with coaster brakes, too much chrome, and whitewall tires for god’s sake. None of the other boys in the neighborhood ever commented on my bike as they were generally polite kids, offspring of professors who taught at the very protestant and very evangelical Nazarene College just down the hill. John Taylor, who played a viola in the orchestra and would become a weather forecaster, had a gold Spyder Mark IV with caliper brakes, a leopard print seat, and a gear-shifter like Steve McQueen’s sportscar. I felt somehow that I was just a little less cool and was required to work harder at popularity as I was also Catholic and went to catechism on Sundays rather than Bible school. Their evangelical parents were suspicious of Catholics. No, in actuality, prejudiced. Maybe it was because I knew fewer rules and players’ stats in football – though I liked the Jets and Packers for some reason. Maybe it was because I was the only boy in the neighborhood who knew how to swear properly.

I lost track of Patty after fourth grade as, of course, there were other girlfriends: Brenda, Sherry, Robin, Melanie, Penny, Linda, Barbie. But Patty McCalla was my first obsession, and I was indebted to her for that emotional opportunity, the instantaneity of love, the purity of adoration before the animal desire of adolescence took hold. I am not sure I actually kissed Patty when we were seven – even on the cheek, let alone on the lips. I doubt we fully comprehended the procedure even though there was plenty of kissing on television in the old black and white movies at 4:00 on *Big Ten Theater* and even on *Bewitched* and *The Brady Bunch*. I am fairly certain we held hands a bit until it was no longer practical to do so. After high school, I heard she married Tom’s cousin, Dave Auger, and like everyone else suffered the tragedy of adult life. They had a little girl who ran out onto Sycamore Road.