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David McGrath: How I found love and meaning one Christmas



Marianne McGrath holds her daughter, Janet, circa 1981. (Family photo)



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She was the first woman I fell in love with, and I had just told her so on a brutally cold Chicago afternoon. We were walking to her car in front of the old teachers college building where we had both attended our last class before Christmas vacation.

Bundled in a red parka with a fur-lined hood and wearing gray woolen mittens, she was hugging an oversize textbook as she turned to face me. A strand of auburn hair had escaped being tucked inside the hood and partly covered her questioning smile.

She stepped sideways, bumping me playfully, and continued walking, saying we'd better hurry before freezing to death.

The next time I saw her was Tuesday afternoon at Jewel where we both worked. She waved to me from behind the service desk before quickly turning back to a customer.

She must be dumping me — I knew it. It felt like a death. I should never have said those words.

This year was supposed to have been my best Christmas: In January, I would graduate and get my degree and a good job. No more cramming for exams till 2 a.m. No more living in a smelly bedroom with three brothers in my parents' basement. Most importantly, no more endless days as Mr. Lonely since I finally had a serious girlfriend.

Before Marianne, my only dates were when Zeke or Tom set me up with girls who at least showed kindness.

"Mish liked you," Tom said, "but said she wants to concentrate on school."

"Nora said you're nice but too quiet," Zeke said.

With Marianne, though, I didn't have to read between the lines. She immediately said yes to our first date at Ali's Coffee House for open mic night. I had brought my guitar to perform three songs, two of them ballads, in the smoky cafe. She sat in the audience with my brother James and sister Rosie, and afterward, she said she had the best time and that I was different from the other boys she knew.

Our next date was a party at the home of Marge, another cashier. Marianne and I arrived separately, and when it grew late, we kissed behind the workbench in the basement. Vicki, also from Jewel, asked her why she was with the standoffish bag boy.

Another date happened on a Saturday it snowed all morning. Talcum powder snow drifted as the winds grew. It was bad for snowballs but perfect for sledding, as Bob and I used to do, sneaking through a hole in the fence at the Evergreen Park Country Club.

Bob had been my next door pal ever since we were kids. We rode bikes, built snow forts, played catch and wandered the vacant lots and alleys with his giant dog Blackie.

Saturday night, he and I were tying the same wood toboggan in the trunk of his father's Ford Galaxie before picking up his girlfriend, Peggy, and then driving to Marianne's.

But our first stop was my grandmother's, where he and I shoveled the walk and driveway while the girls waited inside, sampling homemade Polish coffeecake and Mogen David wine with my grandparents Rose and Joe.

It was 9 p.m. before we got to the golf course. A three-quarters moon lit up the snowy hills and the faces of Bob and Peggy, who were charmed by Marianne and her questions and curiosity.

Icy air burned our cheeks as Marianne and I sailed downhill between trees, huddled close, the smell of coconut wafting from her hair and from the bar soap I had rubbed on the toboggan runners. I was falling fast for her, amazed that Christmastime could still feel this way past childhood.

Was it all an illusion?

That Tuesday evening after work, it was below zero when I walked home alone. Strings of festive lights in the distance made it that much darker along the railroad tracks.

I should not have confessed my feelings that day at school. Or maybe it didn't matter, and Marianne was yet another girl being kind.

Her green Chevelle parked in front of my house stopped my breathing. The dome light came on, and she gestured for me to get in.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I was just so stunned by what you said."

Her face was so close and beautiful that I wished the light was off. It was going to be hard enough.

She explained how she had needed time. And how the more she thought about it, the more she realized she loved me, too. That when she saw how my grandparents, my siblings, my parents, my boyhood friend and everyone in my family circle were all so obviously important to me, she

realized I would not have used the word carelessly. That I knew the meaning of love.

“I want to be part of that.”

Not trusting my voice, I leaned in to kiss her, when something slammed against the car, startling us both. Blackie’s bushy paws pressed against the safety glass. The big mutt was out for a walk with Bob’s mother, and I rolled down the window.

“This must be Marianne,” she sang, sticking her head through the opening. “Blackie just wanted to say hi.”

We were smiling and shivering as I rolled it back up.

“Maybe now you want to change your mind about the family circle stuff?” I said.

She laughed. We held each other.

It was funny. But no, Marianne would never change her mind. We got married, and family was much more than siblings and friends and cousins and wives. It was need and love and closeness.

And that's why family is Christmas, the true meaning. It is everything to both of us. And to everyone.

Merry Christmas.

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