

COMMENTARY

David McGrath: This Valentine's Day, I am surprising my wife with 'the kiss'

By David McGrath
Chicago Tribune

•

Feb 13, 2023 at 3:22 pm

Expand



David and Marianne McGrath in a DuPage County forest preserve just south of Willowbrook in 2012. (Abel Uribe / Chicago Tribune)

Last Valentine's Day, Marianne told me I am not romantic anymore.

"Not true," I said. "I was never romantic."

"Ha, ha," she said, rolling her eyes.

She got me thinking, though. Admittedly, when we were younger, I was more inclined toward romantic gestures.

A month after we started dating, I sent her flowers. But since I was making only \$1.60 an hour stocking shelves at Jewel, I took the cheap route and bought a bouquet of mixed flowers at Walgreens, which I asked my brother's friend Roy Osmond to deliver in his dad's car.

She was impressed, thinking it was from a fancy florist, and she tipped him \$1, which was more than ample in 1969.

A year later, the night before Marianne was going on spring break to Marco Island with two of her friends, one of whom was my sister, Rosemary, I left a poem in my sister's car as a bon voyage message. Again, Marianne was moved, even though I had plagiarized a couple of stanzas from e.e. cummings.

After we were married, I made the classic move of carrying her across the threshold of our new house in Wisconsin and threw out my back. I was bedridden for two days.

Tell me that ain't love!

By far, the most romantic thing I had ever done was on the night of my cousin's wake. Funeral rites and romance don't exactly go together, but that is kind of the point.

That morning, we had an argument, which back then was likely about money. This led to a period of not talking, which led to my driving to the funeral parlor on my own.

While paying my respects and making the rounds to greet friends and relatives, I kept watching the doorway. When I finally saw her across the room, I felt a stab of longing somewhere between my heart and my throat.

She was standing in the mourners' line, shoulders square, with a look of compassion or reverence, hazel eyes straight ahead, her mouth closed beneath that perfect nose. She was like Audrey Hepburn with long brown hair.

I walked toward her, weaving between two rows of folding chairs, when she spotted me. No smile. No frown. But a barely perceptible arching of her brow, a widening of her eyes. Like a question. Or a signal only I could see.

When I reached her, I put my hands around her waist and kissed her. And kissed her. And she kissed me. It was a long kiss. Too long for two people out in public. Too long for a married couple. Too long with relatives and strangers watching. Too long for a crowded funeral parlor and with an open casket 10 feet away.

To this day, "the kiss" still comes up in conversation. Marianne wonders if I had been showing off or else taking advantage of the circumstances, rather like the sailor who kissed the dental assistant he did not know on V-J Day [in the famous Life magazine photograph](#).

But I had never been more genuine. While it may have been caused by regret over our morning misunderstanding, it was nonetheless a spontaneous expression of the intense love I felt at that moment.

So, on Valentine's Day, decades later, I plan to surprise Marianne with "The kiss II." I'll have to catch her before she reads this. Perhaps, I'll approach while she's in the kitchen pouring her morning coffee. Or later, as we pass in the hallway, just before I leave for my morning bike ride.

I've been silently debating whether it would be fair to kiss her passionately as soon as she gets up. On the other hand, it feels right to take her in my arms at the start of the day.

One way or the other, I will get it done.

And then once Kiss II is consummated, we'll replay it every morning so that it's never again a surprise.

David McGrath is an emeritus English professor at the College of DuPage and author of “South Siders.” He can be reached at mcgrathd@dupage.edu.

Submit a letter, of no more than 400 words, to the editor [here](#) or email letters@chicagotribune.com.