

## **My Best Girlfriend**

Lake Braddock, one of Fairfax County's three secondary schools, opened in the autumn of 1973. Along with dozens of other students in the Class of 1979, I was one of the original seventh graders. Forty years ago, Burke was a rural town. I remember the general store, the fire station, and how everyone admired Silas Burke's antebellum home. Whenever a Southern Railway freight train passed through the town, its solitary whistle could be heard in my Annandale neighborhood five miles to the north.

Development was encroaching on the remaining forests and pastures quickly, exposing the rusty-clay soil until construction projects were completed. Further south, farm roads divided Fairfax County's remaining fields like rolling black ribbons. Two opposite worlds met in 1970s Burke, the last of yesterday and first of tomorrow. At the region's newest school, surging hormones pushed the junior high students into puberty. Outward change gained momentum. Inward discovery awaited us all.

Everything about my seventh-grade English class curriculum has been forgotten. Except for meeting Linda, I don't recall another student who sat near me that September morning. With eyes like Paul Newman's and hair as blonde as Marilyn Monroe's, Linda stood six inches taller than most of the boys. We made friends with other peers, but it soon became obvious that no other student would challenge what Linda and I would become to each other.

Linda soon discovered the opposite sex, but I was more interested in playing left wing on the soccer field and playing Scott Joplin on the piano. Drooling over teenage idols was not for me—but I had yet to understand the reason for this. As my senior year ended, none of the boys in my class asked me

to be his date for the prom. Instead, my dateless friends and I had dinner at one of McLean's nicest restaurants. A stranger took a picture of our group that night. I still have a copy of that photograph. We had a wonderful time.

After graduation, Linda escaped an unhappy childhood by marrying the first man in her life. Although a Cinderella ending wasn't meant to be, Linda fabricated her own happiness by starting a family. For her, raising three beautiful children made up for what her marriage was not.

I entered college in August of 1979. It soon became clear why I wasn't drawn to boys the way that Linda and other girls were. At eighteen, I began fighting for my place in a world that expected me to love a man the way I wanted to love a woman. Rejection by my family was a consuming fear, but once I understood such feelings were innate, destiny awaited.

In 1983, I embarked on my newly graduated life with the woman I was certain would stand beside me for the rest of my life. Four years later, she walked away—and I deserved it. Today, I'd like to think that girlfriend would understand I was too immature to be a good partner. In 1987, I learned one of life's most important lessons—that love is not enough.

Most years that followed our high school graduation, I sent Linda an annual Christmas card. Busy raising her children and surviving her disappointing marriage near Culpeper, she rarely replied. As a Northern Virginia native, I resided in my "hometown" of Annandale, then in Alexandria and finally in Newington during those years. While Linda was changing diapers and attending PTA meetings, I dated a few forgettable women, finished graduate school and enjoyed my average existence. The bulk of my leisure time was spent pitching for my softball teams.

Linda left her husband in 2000, and we reconnected in person. Beneath emerging wrinkles, graying hair, and seventh-grade ghosts, a true friendship was rekindled. We were like blood sisters, but without the drama. Linda was the first person beyond my college world to know my sexuality. I revealed the truth to her right after we turned nineteen. To my surprise—and to Linda’s credit—her acceptance was immediate and unconditional. Considering it was 1980, it was a gift I never expected.

In 2001, Linda was diagnosed with breast cancer. Through the surgeries and treatments, I spent as much time with her as I could. As I tried to support her, more often than not I was the one in tears, and Linda comforted me. When Linda went into remission, our lives returned to normal—whatever that might be. Both of us believed we were going to grow old together.

When Linda’s cancer returned in 2009, it appeared in her bones. A short time later, it metastasized to her most vital organs. I knew what that meant, and so did she. As she fought to enjoy the time she had left, Linda concentrated on her children and her second husband—a man she began dating after she went into remission. I remained in the shadows ready to support her—and that’s exactly what I did.

When she turned fifty in April of 2011, I called to wish her a happy birthday. After a few pleasantries, she said that her second marriage was the greatest fulfillment she’d found outside of raising her children—and I loved hearing that. Before we hung up, I asked her when I could drive to Leesburg for a visit. She replied that she’d call me when she returned from North Carolina. Her voice was light and thin, as though a time machine returned us to 1973

when we were brand new friends. Of course, that wasn't it at all—her illness made her sound like a woman far older than fifty.

A few weeks later, I called again and left a message. Linda sent me a text that read, "I love you", and nothing more. Do I regret not driving to Leesburg the very next morning? Yes and no. Linda protected me because she didn't want me to witness her life ebbing away. Without a doubt, I'm grateful the words "good-bye" were never spoken between us. In the end, my heart broke for her children most of all.

In the three and a half years since her death, I've thought of Linda every day. It's easy to canonize the meaningful people we've lost because we miss them so much, but I won't do that. Linda made mistakes in her life—just as I have. I enjoy remembering us as teenagers most of all—living a life that wasn't a perfect Mayberry, but wasn't terrible, either.

Our friendship spanned thirty-eight years; and yes, I count the time we didn't correspond. While I was grateful for the companionship, I'm more grateful for what our friendship taught me. With the exception of our love of athletics, Linda and I could not have been more different in our political views, personal tastes, and life trajectory. Nonetheless, our friendship transcended every one of our differences in a way I've never experienced with anyone else. Once Linda remarked that if I were a man, we would've fallen in love in high school and shared a wonderful life together. After a sideways grin, I pointed out that if she'd been a lesbian, our ending could've been the same. She gave me a *touché* smile; her vivid blue eyes were bright and sharp.

Although I miss Linda very much, I'm fortunate to have many other wonderful friends. Through the years, they've been male and female, straight,

lesbian and gay; each with an existence as unique as my own. These friends have enriched my world so much—just as Linda did. Even the people who’ve left me in a less permanent way have taught me something about myself and about life. Ideally, everyone would have a friend like Linda—but fate will never provide for her citizens equally. Accepting that truth has made me appreciate my friendship with Linda even more as time has passed. Regardless of one’s background, ethnicity, or where one might fall on the Kinsey Scale, the love and the loyalty of a true friend is like nothing else. There’s no doubt in my mind that if Linda were still here, she’d agree with me one thousand percent.

—Ann E. Fowler

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