

The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face

She gave him up—but got him back.

By Suzanne Lowe Weerts

It was a cool Sunday in Brooklyn, N.Y. The forsythias were just beginning to reveal their yellow buds, and The Drifters were singing out from the speakers of sleek Chevy Corvairs and souped-up Buick Skylarks, reminding passersby that the air is fresh and sweet *Up on the Roof*.

It was a time of possibility for the young women in their late teens and early 20s who were working their way through nursing school at Kings County Hospital.

Near the corner by the soda fountain, as some greasers sang doo-wop and others coolly smoked on nearby brownstone steps, a group of nursing students walked along Flatbush Avenue. In their starched white caps and blue pin-striped dresses under crisp white aprons, they casually puffed Chesterfields cigarettes as the smell of chili dogs from street vendors filled the air.

Dottie McGrath, just 19 years old, had been told when she graduated from St. Francis Xavier High that she had the choice between secretarial or nursing school. She chose the noblest of professions mostly because the school was closer to her parents' Bedford Avenue apartment.

Across town, a group of sailors on shore leave headed from the Navy Yard off Flushing at Wallabout Channel. They were in submarine school in Groton, Conn., and this was their first break from their studies.

One of them, Bill Lowe, was from a tiny town in East Tennessee, and this trip was his first view of the big city. He had enlisted shortly after graduation from Elizabethton High School, and the day he was given his Navy uniform was the first time he'd had a pair of shoes his actual size.

When he was a boy growing up in the hollow, Bill's father would carve notches in a stick with his pocketknife to indicate the length of his four children's feet. He walked several miles into town once a year to buy them shoes, basing their sizes on that stick. Bill's fellow seamen joked that one of his legs was surely shorter since he'd spent his 19 years walking along the sides of mountains, but the truth was, he walked taller now than ever before because he finally felt he was walking with a purpose.

A dance was cooked up for Saturday, March 2, 1963, at the local community center. The band was playing The Miracles' *You've Really Got a Hold on Me* as several sailors asked the nurses to dance. Dottie and her friend Carol twirled on the dance floor as the music segued into *Hey Paula*, and Dottie found herself in the arms of a seaman. He seemed nice enough until, over cups of party punch, he showed her a stack of dozens of snapshots of himself playing basketball. The awkward conversation stalled as Dottie tired of feigning interest. The crinoline under her red skirt scratched the backs of her knees as she squirmed in her folding chair.

When the dance ended, the girls let the gentlemen sailors escort them home. Dottie never planned to see the bumptious basketball player again, but Carol gave her number to the young man she'd danced with, a Courtney Roberts from Key West. The next day he called and asked if she and her friends would like to go out with him and his Navy buddies.

Ever protective, Dottie's mother offered to serve them all dinner at her house rather

than have these unknown young men take the girls elsewhere.

The next evening, a few sailors joined the nursing students at the McGraths' apartment on Bedford Avenue. The basketball player was not one of them, but Bill Lowe from East Tennessee was there. Shy to begin with, he was particularly quiet because of how strongly his accent stood out in the big city.



It was 1963 when Suzanne's parents—sailor Bill and nurse Dottie—met at a dinner party.

He sat in a corner, quietly smoking his pipe, and noticed the girl in the green dress with bright red lips laughing with her friends by the piano. His aquamarine eyes caught Dottie's attention, and she smiled back as she smoothed her emerald taffeta skirt.

Girls gathered around, encouraging Bill to say things "in Southern," asking questions like, "What color is Ellyn's dress?" "Yeller." "What's your favorite drink?" "Sweet tea." The sailors departed after dinner, and the ladies boarded the bus back to the nurses' residence. Carol commented on how drawn she had been to one sailor's beautiful eyes.

Dottie assumed Carol liked the quiet Southerner. Who wouldn't? "Well, you saw him first," she told her friend. "I think he is really cute, but you can have him since you met him first."

The discussion continued all the way to their destination, but as they disembarked, Dottie

came to realize that Carol had been talking about Courtney, the fair-haired Floridian. Carol wasn't the least bit intrigued by the mountain-born blue-eyed boy.

The two teens grabbed hands and jumped up and down with girlish delight on the corner by the bus stop, twirling in circles, amazed at the serendipity that brought them both potential love interests. They double-dated several times after that, and Dottie never dated anyone else.

Bill says every time he hears Roberta Flack on the radio singing *The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face*, his eyes well with tears as he remembers the girl in green at the dinner party in Brooklyn. He calls it quintessential love at first sight.

It took three trips to New York from Groton, Conn., before the Southern Baptist shared a kiss with the Irish Catholic girl. He bunked at a YMCA on every leave he could get, taking the subway to Flatbush Avenue and back each night after their visits, his peacoat smelling faintly of her Chanel No. 5.

They picnicked on Jones Beach, where vendors offered them hot knishes and orange sodas. They had no car, so they walked for miles from Flatbush to Sheepshead Bay, from Kensington to Brighton Beach.

On one trip, while Dottie was out shopping at Bickford's with her mother, Bill, with his palms sweating, asked Dottie's father for her hand in marriage and if he could borrow \$200 to buy her a ring.

On his next leave, during a walk to Coney Island, the couple stopped at Prospect Park, where the sailor from Tennessee found himself down on one knee asking the charming city girl to be his wife.

On a night when the forsythia bushes were just beginning to bloom, and life seemed languorously long, two nurses met two sailors, and the path of destiny was altered at a bus stop in Brooklyn. Carol and Courtney celebrated their 54th wedding anniversary this April. Dottie and Bill became my parents and might have been

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of the earth as the steam engine thundered by. When we closed our eyes, it sounded like the end of the world was coming at us.

The mail was another daily adventure. The afternoon train dropped off the mail for Blue River and picked up the outgoing mail, but the train never stopped. Every day all of us kids would watch this ritual in absolute fascination.

The outgoing mail was stuffed into a big canvas pouch and it hung from a metal arm next to the tracks. The bag had a cord tied to its top and bottom so it would not swing in the wind.

As the train roared by at 30 miles per hour, a hook would be extended from the mail car. That hook would snag the outgoing mail-bag and swing it into the car. At the same time, bags of incoming mail would be unceremoniously thrown out of the train onto a flat spot next to the station.

One day when an incoming bag hit the ground at 30 miles an hour, it exploded like a bomb. White envelopes and brown packages flew in all directions, helped along by the blast of wind from the passing train. It was spectacular. I still remember the look on the mail guy's face when those envelopes went flying. We all helped him gather them up. He kept muttering about what would happen if he lost any mail.

That magical summer included a movie in the churchyard every Saturday night. With one hand we ate popcorn that we brought from home, and with the other we swatted mosquitoes. Most of us kids would get bored and start chasing each other around before the movie ended. That would, of course, get us in trouble with our mothers.

One time I got to go with my dad out to where they were cutting the trees. They used silver double-edged axes and big long saws with one man on each end. They let me hold all the tools.



Charles's sister was plopped into the mail cart shortly after the mail arrived in its unusual way at the Blue River train station.

My dad said they were cutting down all the trees in a path 200 feet wide and 4 miles long. Then other people would put up power poles and run electric lines down the path. They told me that my dad was the boss.

That summer in Blue River, Wis., was a wonderful adventure for a 9-year-old. It was my first look at another part of the big world. ♦

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married 55 years this year, had she not passed away two decades ago.

To this day, Carol considers it a magical moment of friendship, that her best friend was willing to "give up" someone she thought was a potential soul mate for a friend. And Carol would have done the same for her. Fortunately for both, there were two sailors with beautiful eyes in Brooklyn that night. ♦