

Desire

I suppose my desire for girls was keenest as I approached adolescence. These feelings were tender, like rope burns, and the slightest suggestion from a girl had me drifting about the school yard with great yearning. I'm thinking of my "object of desire," Mary Palacio, a skinny-legged Chicana with braces who had liked me in the fifth grade at Jefferson Elementary. But at that time I was quick-witted at dodgeball and football, and didn't have time for her. When I returned from recess I was steaming and grass-stained. I chewed grass and spat the wad of green while she and her girlfriends looked on. Still, her eyes went vacant with love, despite the fact that I didn't care.

In the sixth grade, however, my desire took a turn. I was in love with her and told my pillow so as I hugged it at night. I spoke to it—private and deep things—and it spoke back: "You're a neat guy, Gary." But there was a problem. She was by then in love with another guy, a seventh grader the rumor had it, and my love for her didn't bounce back like radar, even when I gave her, by way of a friend, a valentine which had a lollipop pressed with the words "You're a cutie!" The night before I had sat on my bed shivering from fear and weighing it all, unsure whether or not she would laugh, cry affectionately, or simply nibble at the lollipop while watching *Superman* or *The Three Stooges*. Still, it was worth a risk: I slipped

the lollipop into an envelope and ran my tongue across the flap, pressing it closed. This, perhaps, was the most frightening, if not indelible, decision I had ever made. Rejection was what scared me.

The next day a friend who was in her class handed her the envelope with the lollipop valentine. It was just before lunch, prior to the period when valentines would be handed out, and in my mind I witnessed again and again her reaction. She would be surprised and alive with deep feelings; she would laugh and tell her friends I was a fool; she would satisfy her sweet tooth. I suffered greatly as I waited for school to end. When it did I ran out to the playground, to the monkey bars, where I climbed to the top and waited for her to come out of her class and head for home. Kids scattered noisily and my stare frisked the area in search of her. Finally she emerged from the room with a girlfriend and they walked with their brown bags of valentines, and although she must have sensed I was somewhere—behind a back stop or the bricked archway of one of the classrooms—she didn't look up. She walked with her friend at her side, neither of them talking, and disappeared behind a building as she dragged my heart like a toy duck on a string. I hung upside down on the bars, blood riding to my head, and wished I were dead.

But I lived on, gained weight, and entered junior high school with Mary. She was still part of my conscious life. My eyes followed her about campus, observing her every detail. She swung a brown lunch bag twice a week; she ate in the cafeteria the rest of the days. She wore a knee-length coat, a furry blue one with a belt that was attached in the back with two brass buttons pressed with anchors. Her hair was styled in a Sassoon cut: Twiggy was big that year, with the English invasion of wide-wale cords, wide belts and cruelly pale lipstick from Yardley. Paisley was "the thing" in fall, and she wore paisley. Madras was hot in spring, and she wore madras. She joined the choir, and

at the Christmas assembly she stood in the second row, third from the end, her voice carrying like a kite through the auditorium to where I sat in the back with the nobodys.

She left me to my own devices, one of which was to become a school cadet. On Fridays I wore my uniform that was clearly meant for an adult. My pants legs billowed in the slightest wind; the shirt pockets came down below my ribs almost to my belly button. Whereas Mary had become stylish and popular, a darling among the Chicana cliques, I drifted in the opposite direction to become a hall guard who paced up and down the corridor during lunch time. For a year's service, I earned a green ribbon that I pinned proudly to my shirt pocket that sagged like loose skin. I also earned sergeant stripes that year.

The next year, as an eighth grader, my love took a different turn. It was Judy Paredes, daughter of a wealthy baker in town, whose brother Ernie was in my platoon. As a squad leader I marched my line of men about the school yard: behind the backstop between basketball hoops through the sand of the track pit to behind a row of bushes, where I stopped the squad and ordered Ernie front and center. He walked stiffly up to me, his eyes unblinking but moist from the cold. I looked over his shoulder to the squad and barked an about face command: *aaabbaht fah!* I turned to Ernie, who had begun to blink and wrinkle his nose, and asked him if Judy liked me. I had gotten wind of this possibility from a girlfriend of a girlfriend of Judy's.

Ernie, whose face was marked with acne, stared straight at me until I couldn't stand it. I had to look away and my attention fell upon an old man working his way up the alley that ran the length of the school. He was pushing a shopping cart filled with cardboard and bottles. I looked into Ernie's face, bravely: "Does she like me?"

He had known what was coming, so his response was

quick: "Yeah, I think so. I saw her hugging her pillow just the other night." He stopped, looked down at his shoes, and then back up to me. "She called your name." Then he rushed intimate detail that I hadn't even asked for. "You should see her on the speedboat. You should see her stomach. It's flat, real flat—like an anvil!"

My hair lit up. My underarms went moist and I could feel a thread of sweat lengthening. I looked away and again turned to the old man in the alley turning over in his hands a shiny object. So she's hugging her pillow, I thought. A clear sign. Surf's up. Groovy. Outta sight. Papa's got a brand new bag!

"Aabaht fah!" I barked. Ernie returned to the squad, which I marched from the bushes to the track pit between the basketball hoops behind the backstop and back to the central campus where we were assembled into a platoon and the period ended with three rings of a bell.

That night I, too, hugged my pillow that I had dimpled with punches, soft punches, that made a face of sorts. I whispered to it; I spoke hushed secrets—that once I wanted to be a priest; that I stole from my mother's purse, dimes only. My brother, who was in the bunk above me, yelled at me to stop muttering. I slept with a big grin on my face.

The next day was a Friday, I remember, because I wore the cadet uniform my mother had bought for me at Walter Smith's after much snivelling and whining on my part. I wandered through central campus before first period looking for Judy. It was cold that morning but I hadn't worn a jacket because I wanted to display my two rows of ribbons: hall guard, leadership, parade, armory, and conduct. I also wanted to show off my staff sergeant rank, with my color guard cords looping my shoulder and dangling handsomely almost to my elbow.

I searched for her among the colonnades where she often whispered with a girlfriend. No luck. I stuck my

head into the foyer where the girls hung out to gossip and trade sandwiches and to tease and poke at one another's stiff hairdos. Again no luck. From there I went to see if she was already standing at her first period door. She was there, in a furry white jacket that had been in style the previous year but was quite acceptable a year later. I wet my lips as I approached her slowly, but the words—the thick note pad of love I had composed the night before—failed to flutter open in some great wind at the back of my brain. I walked past her to the end of the hall to rethink my crippled plan. I looked over the balcony. There was Scott, my best friend, in his black stretch jeans and maroon socks that beamed brightly in the gray morning. He saw me and called to me to come down and trade sandwiches. I pretended not to hear his shouting and bent down to tie my shoes, after which I waddled a few steps on my haunches because I didn't want to explain to Scott what I was up to. While waddling, however, Judy turned to look at me as she was about to go into her class. Her face was indifferent to me, even in the awkward position I had dropped into. Soto the penguin. She didn't laugh, smirk, or raise an eyebrow in interest but only opened the door of the classroom and entered, leaving me, the penguin, at a standstill. I got up, embarrassed and shaken at finding myself so foolish, and ran down the stairwell to search out Scott.

At lunch there was a dance in the auditorium. An arena of students looked dully on, hands in pockets and cradling stacks of books, as three or four couples dazzled everyone by turning tenderly in a slow dance with their eyes closed. For slow music there was the Righteous Brothers, The Drifters, Mary Wells. For fast dancing there was the Supremes, The Spencer Davis Group, James Brown, Martha and the Vandellas, and the Kingsmen with their *Louie, Louie*. Then there was surfer music: The Beach Boys, Jan and Dean, the GTOs, but these groups were seldom

played because they weren't revved up with brow-sweating soul. The Beatles and Herman's Hermits were also considered surfer music.

I went to the dance and threaded my way through the crowd in search of Judy. When I spotted her with a girlfriend, both of them hugging their books, I turned around and walked back to the door to collect my thoughts. What was I going to ask her? Should I be blunt and ask her for a dance? Then, suddenly as a baseball through a window, I realized that I couldn't dance. I had never danced, though I had studied the spastic quiverings of those couples on American Bandstand. But could I do the same? Fear caught like a chicken bone in my throat as I walked back to where she was standing. But she was gone. Another girl, a cafeteria-helper type, stood in her place. There was nothing for me to do but to watch those on the dance floor wheel to James Brown's *It's a Man's World*, since I didn't have the energy or right words to search out Judy. I stood there, thinking that I at least looked dazzling in my uniform, and let her go for that day.

And I let her go the next day, and the next day, because I found out it was Gary Perez the baseball stud, not Gary Soto the cadet, who made her hug her pillow and say crazy things. An innocent mistake, no doubt, but still I had to beat up her brother Ernie for pulling the moveable strings of my heart and making me look like a fool to myself. Punchpunchpunch during cadet period, and I was demoted to a private again because the teacher caught me stuffing leaves inside his shirt behind the bushes.

It's just something you have to do.