

“First love” and First Friend: An autobiographical piece

By David N. Brown

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This is a revision of something I wrote a long time ago. I have been thinking about it in relation to some feedback on this site, and it seems relevant. But this is mostly for its subject, a woman named Lorie.

It took me a long time for me to develop a significant interest in girls. In fact, it took me a long time for me to get very interested in people. At the start of elementary school, I mostly played by myself. By the end of elementary school, I was actively avoiding other kids, mostly because it seemed like the only way to escape abuse. (See “Escape and Evasion”, offsite.) This pattern continued through 7th grade. But, in the summer between 7th and 8th grade, I finally found some social activities where I seemed to fit in, and I started thinking about making new friends.

Lorie would have been 15 at the time I met her, about the same age as I was, but she was one grade ahead of me. I saw her across the room at a meeting of the school’s Christian club, and her red hair was enough to catch my eye. I walked straight up to her and initiated a conversation, which when I think about it was a remarkable thing for me to do at the time. Over the rest of 8th grade, I saw her occasionally at school and at church, and always tried to at least say hello. At this stage, it was not something I took very seriously. That changed after I entered 9th grade. While I no longer saw her at school, since she had graduated from junior high, I saw her once or twice a week at church. I talked to her often, and a real friendship developed between us. . Perhaps more importantly, I saw her friendly and joyful personality. That really attracted me; such things still do.

In 10th grade, we went to the same school together again. Our friendship grew deeper, and not just through my efforts. The setting of the library was pivotal. I was always there before class, reading and/or writing, and she was in there often too. I was very surprised and pleased when, one morning, she came right over, sat down and talked to me. To me, this was about as unexpected as a UFO crashing through the ceiling! I don't recall what we talked about, but I distinctly remember her apologizing for interrupting my writing. Needless to say, this was unnecessary! I'm not sure how many more times she came over to talk to me before the end of the year, but it was enough to convince me that it was more than a one-time thing.

At the start of summer found our relationship seemed ripe with possibilities. Lorie broke up with her long-time boyfriend, of whom I had been mildly jealous. She was clearly interested in getting to know me, and particularly in hearing about my writing. However, there were problems brewing which would bring down our relationship. I became increasingly frustrated by the difficulty of talking to her. This was a very dramatic problem at church, where I would always end up competing with other people for attention. We rarely talked for long before a conversation started with someone else. In hindsight, I can see that this was because the kindness she showed to me was and probably always had been normal for her. If I had recognized this, it could have been a source of comfort. If how Lorie treated me wasn't a sign of special feelings for me, then it wasn't a complete fluke either. But at the time, I was only

confused and frustrated. I was frightened, too, because whatever I had with her seemed absolutely irreplaceable.

Things peaked in late July, when we both went to a week-long church retreat. One day before we left, I stayed up all night (and a significant fraction of the morning) writing a scene so I would have something to show her at the retreat. I was satisfied that this story fragment was the best thing I had put on paper up to that time. The retreat had always been held at a site in California, a few hundred feet up a steep and weedy path from a beach. The beach was quite rocky, and full of tidepools with interesting animals. Every day, we had a free period, and I always went down there. On the last day, I was on my way back from the beach when I passed Lorie going the other way. I actually climbed up a little farther before I realized what I could be missing. Then I turned around and went back to the beach.

I spent an hour sitting beside Lorie on a big rock. We watched the various marine animals crawling on the bare rock or swimming in tiny pools. We talked about nature, about school, about God and even about dating. In response to a circumspect question or two, she confirmed that she had broken up with her boyfriend, and said that she didn't want to try with anyone else in the foreseeable future. I told her that I "used" to have a crush on her. We were there long enough that we had to race the high tide back up the cliff. I still remember this as one of the happiest days of my life. Unfortunately, it would be almost two years before we talked as friends again.

We didn't talk for about a month after that. I believe it was during that time that I engaged most in what seems to be a pervasive bad habit of the autistic: repeated phone calls. I fell into it by following what to me was merely a reasonable, systematic approach: I would call her at different times on different days. I fully intended that if, through experimentation, I was able to find a time when she would consistently answer, I would only call her at that time. To the extent that I thought about whether this might bother her, I figured that, if she wanted me to call less often, she would start returning my calls. Meanwhile, the longer we were out of touch, the more I thought about whether I wanted to be more than friends with her. When I finally talked to her again, I told her I loved her. I suppose that may have made her angry, if she wasn't already fed up enough with the phone calls. She told me that she never wanted to talk to me again, at school or at church.

Through 11th grade, I was chronically depressed, in ways I'm sure I never would have been if she had only turned me down as a boyfriend. I approached a lot of girls romantically during that time, with consistently disastrous results, but never felt more than temporary disappointment. But each time Lorie refused to talk was like being kicked unconscious. There were many times when all I could do was go to my room and go to sleep. I saw this in the simplest and harshest terms: She would no longer accept me, even as "just" a friend, which made the rejection complete and and personal.

I actually had plenty of support in all this. I wouldn't talk to my parents about it, but I told quite a few boys and at least two adults at our church. I received almost nothing except encouragement, which could have been the sign that I no longer needed to fear (if I ever had) being abused or ignored by the vast majority of the people around me. But this was never enough to compare with how I felt about losing Lorie's friendship.

The only thing that was of much comfort to me was, altogether unfortunately, a friendship with another girl. Wendy was someone I met in 10th grade, and she caught my attention by leaving her number in

my yearbook without my even asking. I called her often, and I was able to recognize even at the time that I had a better connection with her than I had ever had with Lorie. I thought about asking her out, but decided against it. When things fell through, I assumed that it was because she picked up that I had been thinking about it and not because I was calling her too often. I have kept track of Wendy, but have never heard from her again.

In the wake of these twin disasters, 12th grade was terrible. I still missed Lorie (she had gone to college in California), and I actually had classes with Wendy. (I should have switched or dropped- more hindsight.) I became more intense in seeking a romantic relationship, in part because I consciously thought that if Wendy knew I was “dating” someone, she would be comfortable talking to me again. In the midst of this, I was suffering a lot of I now can see were Asperger's symptoms. I flunked at least one test because I couldn't work fast enough. I became a bit paranoid that I was being “bullied” again. I was infuriated when other students I didn't even know asked or teased me about Wendy. Late in the year, I was tightly wound enough that I picked one or two fights with a boy for no better reason than that he irritated me by talking loudly.

It was also at this time that I created No-Hands, a character I now use as my blogging avatar, even more ferocious, amoral and disfigured in these earliest incarnations than in later material. And, in those earliest stages, I had a pretty good idea of what his story would be: He would be more than a mercenary. He would be a possum on a quest, which he would pursue even as he literally lost pieces of himself along the way. At the bottom of it would be some hurt or wrong he had been unable to stop. But it would be a quest in vain, because no matter how many battles he won, in the end there would be no more possum. And that has ever since been a kind of *memento mori* to my own anger.

Eventually, I made my way to graduation, very much like No-Hands plowing through an unusually strong enemy. At the start of summer, I finally saw Lorie again, and she finally started talking to me again. As far as I can remember, I was very happy about it, but whether she would talk to me or not was no longer the difference between euphoria and despair. Neither did I think I was falling in love with her, or wonder if she might fall in love with me. I simply felt forgiven, and that was enough. Since then, we have not been in regular contact, but have kept in touch. Talking to her has been helpful for me in some tough times, and I would like to think that I gave her at least a little help in her own rough patches.

So, as I write this, both of our stories are still being written. But what I can see in both is that it's possible to heal a hurt. A boy who hid from bullies can become a man who stands up to them. A woman who was her little sister's bridesmaid can go on to be a bride (long story). Estranged friends can be friend again. And in my mind, I can see a possum winning, simply by staying a possum.