

Black Eyed Susan

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By Joseph Devon

I don't know that I believe in love at first sight, at least not how The Beatles describe it and all. That being said I think I fell in love with your mother the first time I saw her, I just didn't know it. Looking back, that first instant, it's all pretty clear now. Maybe that's what they mean. I'm just saying it's not like I went home that night and couldn't stop thinking about her or anything, she was just another girl. But, looking at it all in reverse, yeah, it was love.

It was summer and we were fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, and we were at the Jersey Shore. Too young to drive anywhere interesting but too old to have fun hanging out in a house full of parents. If you were lucky you might get a ride to a party somewhere with an older brother of a friend, but that was only rarely and usually you had to pay a price, like by siphoning some gas out of a parent's car or something. And that's a nasty business. You have to get a length of garden hose and everything reeks of gas once you're done.

No, those of us in our early teens were driven into the streets, squeezed out really. Ten blocks of sleepy beach houses and during summer nights the outdoors became the only place we could hang out. Personally I loved the challenge of it.

You couldn't go anywhere that was built for people, the park on the bay for example, because that was city property and had to be maintained, so it was one of the places the police would sweep. For that matter, anywhere with a proper place to sit: a bench on one of the boardwalks or out in front of one of the cafes that were closed for the night, anywhere like that was too out in the open or too double checked by the police. Cul-de-sacs could work, and dead ends, but then you were sitting on the street and inevitably you got loud enough so that some house lights would come on and you'd have to run.

The only real option was to move to the beach. Even if one of the ocean front houses had their deck lights on it was still basically pitch black. Every street had a small wooden walkway running up through the dune grass so you had multiple exit sites. The constant sound of the surf helped hide noise. Also the distance between you and anyone trying to sleep could be maximized out there on the cold sand.

You'd get chased off eventually of course. Once you found a good spot word would spread and enough people would show up and be loud enough that sooner or later you'd see the flash of blue and red light crawling across the outside of one of the nearby houses, or, worse, you'd suddenly find yourself on the receiving end of a very bright flashlight. At that point it was every man for himself.

Finding a place to hang out was only part of the challenge though. The rest of the challenge was getting beer. Not only getting beer, but hiding the beer, then transporting the beer out of your parents' house and onto the beach. You had to have beer. If you didn't find beer it was a sure thing that someone else would, or at least someone would sneak a bottle of something out of their parents' house, and then what did you have? You had chaos because everyone always followed the beer. It didn't matter if you were drinking. If you were one of the night people then, whether you knew it or not, you were going to follow the beer.

One twelve pack buried in the dunes would attract enough people who in turn would attract more people until the entire party would be centered on that twelve pack. Twenty or so kids would eventually cluster. It was like magic.

Although looking back I guess it wasn't magic, it was just that some kids liked biking around town more than they liked sitting on the beach drinking beer, and they'd tell others who would tell others and soon everyone would be up at the beach, sitting against the dune fence. Of course, as soon as this happened you'd start running the risk of seeing the flashing blue and red lights. That's why you had to get beer. Or why *I* had to get beer. If someone who didn't know what they were doing managed to get beer and picked a bad spot, like the playground by the bay, then you were running real risks of getting caught and not just chased, of getting marched up the driveway of your parents' house at midnight with a policeman behind you. That's why getting beer was so important, because it was too important to be left to amateurs.

Nowadays it seems so normal to walk into a bar, and to procure a booth or a stool or a comfortable spot in a corner, and to order a beer. And then the beer comes, and it's cold and it's fresh and it has a coaster underneath it and you pay for it and everything is perfectly legit. But it doesn't taste as good. When I stop to think about it, nothing will ever taste as good as the first can of beer dug out of the sand. It was usually lukewarm and you had to brush the sand off the rim, and it would gurgle up in foam the second you cracked the top and even when

you wiped it off with the sleeve of your sweatshirt all you'd wind up with is a wet sleeve and sand in your beer. But I swear nothing ever tasted so good.

Your father always had a beer in his hand and they were always disgusting skunked frothy cans encrusted in sand...and he clearly thought he was the greatest thing going for being able to produce such stuff. Over time I came to realize that he barely ever finished an entire beer in one night. For him holding a beer had nothing to do with getting drunk. It was a source of power for him, a symbol of accomplishment. If the hiring board at Amalgamated Packaging Inc. had known your father in those days they wouldn't have needed four interviews to decide he was the man they wanted heading their northeast distribution chain. If anyone ever understood how to move a product and the power required to do so and the power gained by it, it was your father, sitting on the beach, offering people a can of warm beer.

I'm being a little harsh. In all fairness it's not like his whole universe centered on beer that had been hidden in a sweltering garage for a month, but that first summer I wasn't quite ready to accept this bizarre world of perfectly normal kids acting like street urchins once the sun went down.

And it's not like they made it easy. They had all known each other, or of each other, for years, all seeing each other summer after summer. I was coming out for the first time that year to live with my cousin. And for some reason everyone got it into their head that I was a "city girl." Just because I didn't have the clothes down right and I wore strap on sandals to the beach my first night there. It was a little judgmental on their part. It's not like I was from the city any more than they were. I'm from the suburbs of southern Michigan. I just had never spent any time at the beach. So it wasn't a very smooth transition. And I suppose I was being overly defensive, I was getting heckled from all angles it seemed like. So when this boy who looked more like a Dickens character than anything else offered me a sand coated beer like he was handing me nectar from the heavens, well I guess I acted a bit like a bitch. I snorted and laughed him off and looked around hoping that my cousin would side with me and we could walk away from him and I could retain some sense of dignity. And that's what happened. My cousin and I weren't that close but she didn't know your father too well so of course she sided with me, but it didn't help any. I was known as a bitch for basically the rest of that summer. Even when I wasn't known as a bitch I was referred to as the bitch by my closer friends. Nicknames stuck back then. I was the bitch and your father

was the beer man. And we were both fifteen.

She had all these snippets of information about herself that she insisted on giving us. In fact it was the night she met everyone that I learned her favorite flower was the Black Eyed Susan. It was almost the first thing she said after being introduced to the group and snubbing my beer. We were fifteen, who on earth has a favorite flower at the age of fifteen? Who has a favorite flower at any age? And who decides to give that information out when they first meet a group of people?

She was nervous I guess, trying to establish some sort of identity or something. But there it was. Black Eyed Susans. Over the years I've gathered that a grandmother of hers who she was very close with cited Black Eyed Susans as her favorite flower and they always held a special place in your mother's heart. Turns out that not only had that grandmother passed away earlier that year, but your mother had misunderstood someone next to her as saying something about a favorite flower and that triggered her to insert this information into the conversation and, thus, tell me her favorite flower absolutely out of nowhere.

As I've told you before, there was a great degree of magic involved with your mother and me getting together.

But really, not much happened that first year between the two of us and then summer ended and I was back in school. That was when I received my first shocking glimpse of how small my world really was. I took it for granted that I would see all my school friends when the fall came and when summer rolled around again that I'd see all my beach friends. But this awkward lanky girl was on my mind when the school year started and it suddenly hit me that I might not be seeing her again. Ever. In my life.

Like I said, it wasn't exactly love at first sight. It took some time for her to be accepted by the group and to get over that whole bitch thing, and then I sort of talked to her here and there and I hadn't realized it but she had gotten to me. And suddenly in the middle of a September afternoon everything went all topsy turvy on me. My shoes were too tight and my clothes were all neat and everything was white walls and I was back in this school world and everyone was concerned about tests and books and playing sports and yet only a few weeks earlier I had been the beer man. I had snuck out after curfew and watched the sunrise just

because I wanted to. At the beach the entire town was mine at night. Back north I'd be crazy to go wandering around at night and even if I did the only thing I'd have for company would be crickets. But more than anything else there had been this girl. And I had zero control over whether I'd see her again. It kind of got to me. Summer wasn't ever held lightly in my mind again. That was the first of many times that your mother forced me to grow up.

That fall came and I went back to Michigan and the school year went by and summer came and I never really thought about it. I'm not even sure if I was officially asked, I just wound up heading back to New Jersey when school was out. I think my parents thought it was a good enough deal. They were already having some problems and without Nonna there anymore to take care of me I think my cousin's house on the coast seemed like as good a spot as any to stick me for the summer. It certainly wasn't because of any great love between me and my cousin. We weren't really very good friends at that point. I think she saw me as sort of foisted off on her and getting in the way of her summers. Which was a fair enough judgment. But she could have been nicer. It's pretty amazing that she wound up as my Maid of Honor. Time does strange things. Your lovable jack-ass of a father would mention something about magic in here.

You know if you took a group of fifty strangers, had them chat with your father for half an hour then with me for half an hour, then told them that one of us was an English Professor and one of us was head of distribution in the northeast for a large soft drink manufacturing concern, I'm pretty sure all fifty would peg your father as the English Professor and me as the head of distribution. He's honestly so good at what he does that I can almost allow him to claim it's magic except that it'd be nice if he took credit for some of the things he's done with his life. Of course he has this idea that he deserves credit for all sorts of things that he had no control over. Like our first kiss.

She was there the next summer. But I was no longer the beer man. The powers that be had decided that I needed a job so I was now the ice-cream man in the corner ice-cream parlor. Some other guy had an older brother in town that summer so he had an easy pipeline to beer. I wasn't going to try competing with that. I knew it was time to step aside and pass that particular hat along.

But this did cause some problems. Mainly because there was this girl. Being the

ice-cream man didn't exactly put me at the center of many conversations. When we'd congregate on the beach I'd be close to the beer man, I'd sit next to him, but I wasn't him, so any talking I did to people had to come from me. Fair enough. This obviously didn't cause any problems with friends and various other girls but with your mother...

She had been sitting in the back of my skull for the entire school year, and while she was back there she must have crossed any number of wires and laid down any amount of powerful voodoo because when I saw her in person again I was unable look at her and speak at the same time. There was too much pressure. Not only had she been in the back of my head all year, but when she first saw me she smiled. A real smile. Just for me. My brain fried instantly and I couldn't get a word out when she was around and we were out with the group. So I got to thinking. All I really needed was a little time alone with her, without her cousin hanging around or any other boys nearby.

Now, I already mentioned that where you chose to congregate for the night could affect things drastically, and that spot was always decided by where the beer was. Your mother never seemed able to understand that. But it's the truth.

So I figured that if I were to control where and when the beer showed up one night I could control the outcome of said night. The right place and the right time and the cops were bound to show up and that was bound to make people scatter. And if it was close enough to your mother's curfew she wouldn't bother to come back out, she'd just head back to her cousin's house for the night. Your mother never broke curfew. You shouldn't break curfew either. Also, don't drink beer.

Your father claims that he masterminded the whole thing and that he knew when the police would show up and that everyone would run. If you listen to him talk you'd almost believe that he could control something like that. And then he supposedly knew that I would be out back behind my cousin's house. They were on the bay side of the island and it was nice at night to sit on the dock along the water. The bay was much calmer than the ocean. The sound the water makes lapping against the pilings still relaxes me whenever I hear it.

Your father claims that he knew I would be out back behind the house all alone and that he ran from the police in just such a way so that he'd stumble onto me.

But that's outrageous. There was absolutely no way he could know something like that. A lot of nights I would just come home and go to bed. It's not like I was out there every night.

Your mother smoked back then. Not a lot, just one at the end of the every night. It was common knowledge if you kept your ears open. She would talk about how much she loved it with the other smokers and then they'd discuss various ways to make sure their parents couldn't smell it on them. One girl, her mother made her come in, wake her up and kiss her goodnight. Supposedly this was to make sure she was safe but we all knew it was so her mother could smell her breath. So the girl would always keep a bottle of mouthwash outside and would rinse her mouth before she went inside. Although you should keep in mind that your parents are always smarter than you are so I'm sure her parents saw right through that.

So I knew your mother would be behind the house because I knew her aunt and uncle's window was in the front of the house and I knew if the beer was at the playground on the bay then everything would fall into place. The only problem was that one kid decided to follow right behind me when the red and blue lights flashed on the sand. Kept right behind me as we snuck along the lagoon from dock to dock behind everyone's house. I figured he would break off at one point and head for his own house but we were getting closer and closer and eventually I had to take drastic measures. So I pushed him into the bay. Then I crept off along the docks and pilings and pretended like I was still running willy-nilly with no plan at all when I happened to stumble onto your mother. I was so nervous to be with her I was shaking and of course at first I couldn't speak.

Also, don't smoke.

He still pretends like he had it all worked out but he was still shaking when he showed up on the dock that night and he was so nervous from having to run from the police that he could barely speak.

Your father was really rattled, but he came and he sat down next to me and he smiled. I've always said that if your father's smile wasn't cute none of this would have happened. But it was cute. Very cute. I had always known that and some part of me was happy that this boy I always sort of liked was sitting next to me.

And eventually he stopped shaking and we chatted for a long time and then we kissed. I don't think I need to go into details. I do remember that at one point after our kiss he turned around and lay back against my shoulder and it was very sweet but there was sand everywhere. I remember trying to run my fingers through his hair and brush it out but your father was perpetually covered in sand. That was something I could do nothing about. But that was our first kiss. It was a very proper kiss.

So your mother and I made out for awhile. Making out is fun, you have my blessing to make out all you want. The odd thing was, making out with your mother wasn't the best part, it was when she got tired of all the sand in my hair that kept falling in her face and she forced me to lay down on her lap and she ran her fingers through my hair over and over and over again trying to brush it out. If I had known she was going to do that I would have spent the entire previous day dumping sand into my hair. That was probably the best half hour of my life.

And that was it, really. For the rest of that summer and the summer after your father and I were a beach couple. The funny thing is, it wasn't supposed to be your father. I've never told him this but there was another boy I had been seeing here and there. His name was Frank Doogan. Frankie, he was known as, but he hated that. Frankie and I had kissed for the first time a few weeks before when someone had decided to play spin the bottle, which is a very mature game that you shouldn't play until you're twenty-seven. So Frank Doogan and I had kissed once or twice before your father found me on the dock and if things had progressed from there than Frankie probably would have been my summer boyfriend. I liked your father, mind you, he had that smile, but he hadn't spoken to me all summer and Frankie was nice. Your father got lucky showing up like that.

Did I know about Frankie Doogan? Of course I knew about Frankie Doogan. Why do you think I pushed him into the bay that night?

Of course karma paid me back after your mother broke my heart.

You have to understand this was just a summer thing. You'd spend three months

of the year off in this fairytale land where you barely had any responsibilities, you had no tests and no worries about what college you were getting into and none of that mattered. It was just the summer and it was just supposed to be fun. Of course we exchanged numbers at the end of the summer and of course we would talk on the phone every now and then but that was supposed to be it. It was supposed to fade out after that. My real life was back home in Michigan. Your father was just from the beach.

And then I didn't go back to Jersey the next summer and any fool could see that your father and I were very nice together but that it wasn't for real. Naturally your father isn't just any fool. That was when he started stalking me.

I don't know if stalking is the word I'd use to describe it. Stalking is pretty harsh. I mean I called her every now and then, and I wrote her letters at college. And I tried to get her to invite me to come visit. She was going to school in Maryland and I was in Georgetown. It's not like I was asking to swim across the ocean for her. It's maybe a twenty minute drive. No, stalking isn't the right word by a long shot. I just called her too often and wrote her too many letters. Pathetic is probably a better word.

After awhile I realized it was time to be a man and that I had to put all of this behind me. That lasted about a day and a half. Then it was right back to being in love with your mother.

I saw him once or twice during those years. He was going to school so close to Maryland and he offered to help me pack one year and I let him. You have to realize that I'm joking somewhat when I say he was stalking me. We call it that now but I'll give your father credit for knowing how to give someone their space while staying a part of their life. And he really wrote very lovely letters. For an English major that means a lot. You should remember that. Get your English grades up; it might help you some day.

And your father was sweet, he really was. But he felt more like a puppy I couldn't bear to leave than someone I might actually consider dating. I've already outlined how ours wasn't a real relationship. And the years went by and there were other guys. Don't let your father fool you, either. At this point in the story he likes to play the long-suffering saint, but there were other girls in his life too.

But then I was graduating and I it was really time to end this. I was going back to Michigan to start my life and he didn't know what he was doing and we weren't going to be right next door to each other in Maryland and DC anymore. It was crazy to keep this up. I knew I had to set him straight and to let him know that this wasn't anything serious and that maybe he should move on with his life. So he had written me his usual casual year-end letter asking if I needed help packing up my stuff and how he was right next door to Maryland and it would be no problem and on and on. So I said yes, he could come help me pack and I told myself that I was going to make a clean break of things and then go on and start my life.

This is where things get a little strange. I don't buy into your father's view of magic, but things really do get sort of strange.

Your father's car ran out of gas down on a little county road I had never heard of. You could take the interstate right up to my campus but your father had to take some back road. And I had told him that I would be at the student center at a certain time and he should meet me there. This was before cell phones you have to remember. And your father didn't want to leave his car on the county road and didn't want to miss me either so I'm sitting there and two people, one right after the other, come up and ask me if I was waiting there to meet your father and when I said yes they handed me a note he had written asking me to come out to where he was stranded and to bring gasoline. Of all the asinine plans.

He had my address. I know I was supposed to move out that day but surely he could have hitched a ride into town then back out to his car and still tracked down my house and met up with me then. But, no, he flags down two strangers on a Maryland back road who were heading into campus and has them deliver notes to me asking me to lug gas out to him. He knew I would do it too. Your father knew how to give me my space but he also knew how to use an advantage when he had one.

What can I say? I was running some very large risks that day. I made sure I got at least two different people to agree to deliver my note. Outside of the overall lesson of how magic can affect our lives and all of that, you should take away the lesson that it's good to run risks but that you can always find ways to minimize them. No way was I letting all of this rest in the hands of one stranger. As it turns out they both found her at pretty much the same time, but still, it

didn't hurt to be safe.

So I go to the gas station and I buy a gas tank and fill it up with a few gallons and get into my car and go driving out on this middle of nowhere road and I remember I had to put my head out the window because absolutely everything stank of gas. And I follow your father's directions and finally I pull up and he's sitting there on the hood of his car. He doesn't hear me pull up behind him, no, of course not, instead he's staring out at this field and I took one look at his face set against the backdrop of that field and I fell in love with your father.

I mean, I say that now. It probably wasn't that abrupt. But when I think back to that moment, when I got out of that car and your father, oblivious as usual, finally heard me behind him and turned and he gave me that cute smile and behind him was entire field of Black Eyed Susans dancing in the late afternoon sun. Like I said, looking back it's easy to pinpoint, but at the time I don't think I consciously knew I fell in love with him then. What I did know was that I was struck with a profound sense of wonder that I was still pushing this boy away just because of how we had met. I mean that field behind him, it was so beautiful, and his smile and watching him hop off the hood and get the tank of gas out of my car and fill up his tank and thanking me and apologizing and there in the middle of nowhere was an entire field of Black Eyed Susans. I decided at that moment that maybe I owed this boy a chance. And since that chance turned into lingering a few days on campus and a few dates and then a few more chances and on and on until...well...I suppose it's okay to say that was the moment I fell in love with him.

If you listen to him tell it he'll go on about how magic was involved and how it was the magic that let everything unravel like that. But really it was just chance where he stopped and me finally realizing that maybe this boy was for real.

She still doesn't believe in magic. I suppose from her point of view that's okay, but that's the first lesson I want you to take away today. Magic happens; you need to have faith in that. And if you've got that first lesson learned I'll tell you the second lesson. Sometimes magic comes along in strange ways. Your mother has no idea what I mean by magic, she never has. Sometimes you can create magic by moving a twelve pack of beer to the playground. And sometimes magic operates by letting your mother spill some gas down the side of a gas tank

she's filling so when she shows up she doesn't notice the length of garden hose in my trunk or that everything reeks of gasoline.

But that's all nothing. Not really. Maybe that *is* all chance and luck. But I swear what really was magical was that your mother, who is a very smart woman, and who had been going to college in Maryland for four years, had somehow never once learned that the Black Eyed Susan is the Maryland state flower. Pick any county road and drive down it in spring and you'll be able to find a whole field full of them. I mean, they grow absolutely everywhere out there.

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