

July 10, 2013

Every Teenager Should Have a Summer of '65

By **JOYCE WADLER**

There are people who make fun of teenage romances, but I never do and that is because of Rob. He strolled up the street in the tiny Catskills town of Pine Hill one day in the summer of 1965 carrying "The Catcher in the Rye," the badge of a kindred spirit, wearing a canary yellow cable knit sweater. You did not see that shade of yellow on an American guy, but, of course, Rob had not yet become an American guy. He was a Hungarian, working as a busboy at a small hotel owned by another Hungarian. The Catskills were like that then. I was 17; Rob was two years older.

"Do you remember a conversation we had one night near the lake about God," I was saying to him this weekend on the phone. "I told you I had been thinking there was nobody out there and I thought that was pretty bold of me."

He did not, but he remembered something I had forgotten entirely.

"I was telling somebody the other day you were the person who introduced me to Bob Dylan," he said. "It's kind of funny because 50 years later, I'm still listening to Bob Dylan."

Rob lives in Budapest. A few years ago doctors found a nonmalignant tumor in his head, which the doctors zapped, and now, because of medication, he no longer drives. A year and a half ago, pre-cancerous cells were found in the breast where I'd had cancer 22 years ago, and I had to have surgery, and there were complications healing. Did I tell Rob about the complications? I can't remember. We sometimes go for months without talking, but when we do it is as if we talked yesterday so I always have the feeling of being caught up.

"What was my father like when you met him?" one of Rob's two daughters, then in her late teens, asked me once.

"He was funny," I say, which sounds wrong to both of us the moment it is out because Rob was never a guy who always had to be on.

He was dry and smart and observant. He spoke at least four languages. He had history in his bones: His mother and older brother had been rounded up by the Nazis in Budapest during World War II and escaped by melting into the crowd, though I do not think I knew that then. He had lived at the Y when he first came to New York and always seemed calm and perpetually amused. It would be a long time before I knew that coming to the United States speaking very little English was so stressful that he would have stomach trouble for years. The self-absorption of 17-year-olds is staggering.

“You must have been making out like crazy in these woods when you were a teenager,” a friend I was showing around the Catskills said recently.

“No need,” I said. “We had all these deserted hotels. Sometimes with beds.”

Not very good beds, it’s true. The mattresses were so skinny they could be rolled up, and they smelled heavily of mold. But the deserted grand hotels that might or might not be torched at the end of each season were still an answer to a teenager’s dream. It’s too bad no one wrote songs about them — we were probably too limited a demographic: Kids in the Catskills making out in abandoned hotels. And what fine little love nests they were: Force open a window of the Takanassee Hotel in Fleischmanns, slip inside, wonder about the detritus left behind — a cook’s big white apron, a few pots. But you don’t think about it long. Busboys don’t get a lot of time off.

Most teenage girls have to leave their boyfriends when they go off to college, but I do not. When I go to N.Y.U., Rob returns home to Queens to work in his parent’s candy store. At the Weinstein dorm on University Place in the Village the other girls are impressed: College boys are scruffy, starting to move from chinos to jeans and longer hair, unreliable, stoned. Rob, in his narrow-cut jackets and jeans that look pressed, is a cool European guy out of one those French movies we were so proud of watching, “Shoot the Piano Player” maybe.

But I don’t want a European guy. I want a funny, fast-talking New York City boy. I don’t want a guy who has to be back at the candy store by 11 on Saturday night, to put together *The New York Times*. My values stink. I break up with Rob for a fast-talking guy in freshman sociology who has a girlfriend at Boston University and a red TR-3, starting a bad pattern of lusting after the unattainable, human and automotive.

Rob, fundamentally saner, gets a scholarship to N.Y.U., where he meets a smart, pretty American girl who grew up in Paris and whose name is Lucy. It is probably between

junior and senior year, when I hear they have married and spent the summer knocking about Europe, that I feel the deep, unequivocal, “Oops.” And it is not until I am 32, visiting Rob and Lucy in Budapest with my boyfriend, Donal, that I really realize how much I had in common with Rob after all.

But here is the upside of being an adult: It is O.K. You do not have to be in a romantic relationship to keep the love. I have known since I met Lucy that she is the better match for Rob, and I like her. If Lucy comes alone to New York we hang out, which, as you move into your 40s, means something different than when you were in your teens: me being treated for one kind of cancer at Memorial Sloan-Kettering on one floor, Lucy’s mother dying of cancer a few floors down, Lucy, shuttling from one floor to another. With the boyfriends who matter you get a new friend, the wife. And later, when their children grow up and come to New York and need a place to stay, you get to fuss over them and see how great they turned out and wonder, just for a moment, how they might have looked if you hadn’t have gone for the guy with the sports car.

Next thing you know it is another day in summer, the summer of ’98. My friend Herb and I have just finished a bike trip in France’s chateau country and we are waiting for Rob and Lucy. When they drive up, we are all talking at once. We drive to Provence. Around three in the afternoon we pull up to a little guesthouse and the owner says it is too late for lunch but maybe she can scare us up something. Forty minutes later we are sitting at the table, having the freshest salad I have had in my life.

“This lettuce was in the ground 20 minutes ago,” Rob says.

Why, with the billions and billions of sentences I have heard, do I remember a sentence about lettuce? But I do. It is great lettuce and my first boyfriend and his wife and my best friend and I are all together. I have pictures. We four in the house in Provence, grinning.

Somewhere out there a 17-year-old girl is sitting outside on a muggy day and a teenage boy is about to walk up to her.

Don’t knock it.