

*Romance Re-Called;
Memory Relived*

(A Short Story)

*MIKE HERNDON
Athenaeum Society
February 2, 1989*

*"A little ditty about Jack and Diane,
Two American kids growing up in the Heartland."*

(Song by John Cougar Mellencamp from American Fool album.)

Already running late for work, I was gulping my last cup of coffee when the phone rang. "Hi Mike," said a strange female voice on the other end. "I'm Belinda Smith. Do you remember me, Diane Johnson's sister?"

"Yes," I answered with a lie. I didn't remember the sister even vaguely, but I certainly remembered Diane, the love flame of my best high school buddy, Jack Jakowski.

"I wondered if you knew if Jack is in town. Someone called me last night trying to locate Diane and said Jack was looking for her," the voice continued.

"No, I'm sorry," I said. "I haven't heard from Jack since our class reunion three years ago. He may be in town, but he hasn't contacted me. Did the person who called say who he was?"

"No," she answered, "he just said he was a friend of Jack's and that Jack was looking for Diane."

I ended the conversation by suggesting some others with whom Jack might be staying if he were here.

My car must have found its way to the office by itself because my mind was driven by curiosity and memories. Why would Jack be trying to get in touch with Diane? After all, he now was a happily married man with two teen-aged children ... or at least he left the impression of happiness at the high school reunion in 1985.

Before he showed up at the 20-year reunion of the Class of '65, I had not seen Jack since graduation night. He had missed our 10- and 15-year anniversary gatherings despite living just 50 miles away in Oakdale.

I remembered thinking how much Jack had changed. The lean 5-foot-8 frame and wavy, reddish-blond hair were unmistakable, as was the soft baritone with which he introduced us to his wife, Lorna. But he now wore glasses, his clothes were subdued and his personality reflected the introverted image of an absent-minded professor. It was something like Superman changing into Clark Kent.

Sure, we were surprised that Jack went into education ... teaching problem kids at that. But no one would have expected him to adopt the prototypical image of the school teacher he had become.

Then there was Lorna. She was attractive enough, I guess, with big brown eyes and a fetching figure. She was polite and nice ... almost to a fault. She wore her long brown hair pulled tight in a bun on top of her head, befitting her own vocation of librarian. And she seemed to be slightly domineering. In short, she would have been the last girl in the world I would have matched with Jack.

"All the courtly traits of a lover," read the caption under Jack Jakowski's photo in our high school yearbook. After sharing a locker with Jack for that four-year period of our lives, I had to agree the quote described him to a "T." Because during that long friendship, I never recall a time when we did not have to make room in our already cramped cubicle for the belongings of one or the other of Jack's girlfriends.

Those who have had the experience know that co-organizing books, coats, snacks and posters out of a narrow 5-foot-long locker gives new meaning to the term, "close-knit," and Jack and I developed a very close relationship. His role was Romeo, and mine was Father Confessor to him and his jumble of Juliets. You see, Jack wasn't your usual high school Casanova — the "Wham, bam, thank you, mam," type. He was a true romantic, the kind of guy who fell deeply, hopelessly, poetry-spouting in love with all of his girls.

These were intense infatuations, never of short duration, and it was during these periods, when one of his loves would invade our locker, that I inevitably began to feel like a third wheel. I eventually would offer to leave the lovebirds to their nest and move my belongings elsewhere, only to be assured by Romeo and Juliet that Father Confessor's place was in their metal home.

It may be clear by now that I was a little envious of Jack. I did envy his girl-getting abilities; after all, there were never four sets of books squeezed into our locker. But I think I envied his individuality more. He was from an upper middle class family and maintained close personal friendships among our richest and most popular classmates. Yet he didn't run with the in-crowd. He made decent grades without being considered a bookworm, and he was considered an athlete while spurning football and basketball in favor of the less glorious sports of tennis and track. He was mischievous without being a trouble-maker and funny without being a wisecracker.

Jack's girlfriends always were, at the very least, flirty. And, most of the time, such as in the case of Diane Johnson, exuded sex appeal to the detriment of reputation. Diane — a lithe, long-legged brunette with bedroom eyes — entered our lockered lives midway through our junior year. She was from what was considered the poor side of town, her family living in a newly opened housing project.

I had never seen Jack so smitten by the "Love Bug." The couple would stroll trancelike hand-in-hand through the hallways, seemingly oblivious to the din around them. They spent class periods composing romantic recitations to each other. It wasn't a month before I offered to beat a hasty retreat and received my usual redress. Jack and Diane wouldn't hear of it. We are a team, Diane insisted, the "Three Musketeers." So I resigned myself to passing love notes and running interference to divert the unconscious couple from massive hallway collisions.

Recognition that Diane might become a permanent fixture in Jack's life came easier for me than for Mr. and Mrs. Jakowski, who apparently objected to their son's growing obsession and the girl's social status. At any rate, their repeated interference during the six-month romance met a predictable fate. Jack would sneak out to rendezvous with Diane, and his parents invariably found out. He would peddle his bicycle five miles through bad neighborhoods to Diane's house and stay too late, or his father would find the family car drained of gasoline and suspiciously caked with mud from an off-road parking spot. The parental confrontations finally culminated in Jack ramming his fist through a storm door in a fit of temper, severely cutting his arm and ending up in the hospital.

That incident either jarred Jack's libido back to reality or convinced him of the futility of parental feuds — because he abruptly broke things off with Diane and feigned total indifference toward her. Their parting almost ended our friendship as well. Maybe it was because he would catch Diane and me together during one of her many attempts to use me as a go-between to rekindle their relationship, or because, at Diane's urging, I had sneaked her into the hospital to see Jack against his parents' wishes. For whatever reason, Jack and I were never as close during the remainder of our senior year. When I last saw Jack, the night of our graduation, he was planning to take a summer job at an Easter Seals camp in pursuit of his latest heartthrob.

I ran into Diane occasionally during the early years, and I noticed she always made a point of asking about Jack. She had married on the rebound, mothered a couple of kids and endured a stormy divorce. But I eventually lost track of her as well.

I was shattered back to the present by the ringing of my desk extension. Why wasn't I surprised that it was Diane? I had not heard from her in almost five years since she moved out of town. She had failed to make it back for the 1985 reunion.

Diane was calling from Oakdale, of all places, hoping I might know more than I had told her sister about Jack's apparent efforts to reach her.

"Has he gotten a divorce or something?" she asked with ill-disguised hope in her voice. "Not that I know of," I responded.

I then told her what little I had learned at the reunion three years before — that he was a married school teacher living in Oakdale.

"Guess what? I'm living in Oakdale too. Isn't that strange?" Diane commented, going on to explain that she was in her last semester of nursing school and had just landed a job at a hospital there. "I think I'll just look him up see how he's doing."

"Oh, no," I thought to myself before wishing Diane luck and urging her to let me know how things went with Jack.

It was several days before Diane called me back, and I had to admit that my curiosity had been aroused by the strange turn of events, and I was eager to find out Jack's status and whether he indeed had been trying to find Diane.

"Mike, I called him and we had a nice visit at his school," she said. "He told me he hasn't been trying to reach me, but that he was glad to see me after all these years."

She then added something that didn't add up. "Mike, he hasn't changed a bit. He looks so good, the same old Jack." That's strange, I thought, he wasn't the same old Jack at the high school reunion.

Before hanging up, Diane suggested that the three of us get together soon. "It'll be like old times ... you know, the Three Musketeers."

That idea didn't exactly appeal to me, but I told her to get back in touch if she worked something out.

Within a month, I had put the incident out of my mind except that it recalled an unkept promise Jack and I had made at the reunion to get together for a weekend. It had been three years, and neither of us had followed through. So I called Jack and invited him to town for a weekend of fishing and old times. He quickly accepted.

During our conversation, he made only passing mention of his visit with Diane, saying only that they had a polite chat in his office and that it was good to see her again.

"We both wondered who made that phone call to Diane's sister. You know, we both thought it had to be you," he said with a laugh.

"Well, whoever made it," Jack said in response to my strong denial, "it did give Diane and me the opportunity to see each other again."

It was a different Jack who showed up three weeks later for our so-called "lost weekend." He was driving a restored 1965 Chevrolet Impala convertible and wearing a ragged high school sweatshirt over his faded Levi's.

"I've really looked forward to this," he said as I hopped into his car and he slipped a cassette of 1960s rock'n roll into the tape player. "It's going to be a great."

Jack was right about that. During the hours we spent cane-pole fishing at a secluded pond and cruising the boulevard in his convertible, we rekindled our friendship. Diane's assessment was on the money, I thought. This was the Jack I remembered from high school.

So lost was I in my own nostalgia and so thrilled that my earlier impression of Jack was wrong that I failed to detect the messages he was sending out. He cruised by the old housing project where Diane had lived. It is rundown now and populated mostly by minorities.

"See that second-story window? That was Diane's room," Jack said, pointing at one apartment. "I used to climb that tree there and toss stones against the screen to get her attention after I sneaked over here at night."

"I must have been crazy back then. Her dad was a truck driver and had a bad back, so he would sleep on the living room floor just inside the front door. I remember one night I sneaked into the house and had to step over him to get upstairs to Diane's room. I was scared to death. He woke up later and I jumped from that window to keep from getting caught."

"It's none of my business, but I assume you and Diane had sex?" I asked.

"Believe it or not, we never did," Jack answered without hesitation. "I guess we were too naive or wanted to wait until we were married. We did a lot of heavy making out, but that's about all. I'm kind of sorry now we didn't go all the way ... you know, because of the way things worked out between us."

Jack went on to tell me things about himself I never knew. His mom and dad actually were his uncle and aunt, who adopted and raised him after an unknown someone, possibly a next-door neighbor, had gotten his mother pregnant. Jack never found out who his father was, and what he knew of his mother he learned only after her death. That explained much of Jack's rebellious behavior as a teen-ager, especially since his parents chose that time in his life to tell him the truth of his heritage.

It also occurred to me that chasing girls was not the only reason Jack spent several summers working with crippled children at the Easter Seals camp. His own checkered past also explained why, perhaps, he had chosen to teach troubled teens.

Jack told me that because of his own beleaguered beginnings, he always felt a special affinity for the poor and disadvantaged.

"That's why I am so proud of Diane," he said. "I always had money and strong parent support. But she lifted herself out of poverty and made something of her life. She went to nursing school on her own after raising a family without a husband.

"Lorna's like me," Jack said, changing the discussion to his wife. "She's always had everything; her parents gave her everything. She's spoiled and totally dependent on me, just like she was on her parents before we met."

Several weeks after the "lost weekend," the telephone interrupted a rainy Sunday afternoon of reading. A gnawing filled the pit of my stomach when an obviously weeping Lorna screamed into the receiver: "Who is this Diane and what is she trying to do to my life? Who does this woman think she is coming into Jack's life after 20 years and wrecking our marriage? What do you know about her and did you know about them? You're Jack's friend. You're the only one I can turn to," Lorna sputtered without pausing for a breath, much less an answer.

I calmed her down as best I could, finally getting out of her that Jack had just confessed to her and the children that he was having an affair with Diane. Lorna had stormed from the house and had checked into a motel to sort out her emotions and contemplate her next move.

My first thought was that I was dealing with a hysterical woman I hardly knew and that one of the moves she was contemplating might be suicide. My second reaction was anger that 20 years later, I was back in the middle of another of Jack's ill-fated love games, this one far more serious. In any event, I had to be careful what I said.

"Jack's messed up really bad," Lorna said. "He says he wants to break it off with Diane, but he's not sure he can. He says he wouldn't blame me for kicking him out or anything else, but he wants me to forgive him. Mike, I don't think I can."

I was feeling sorry for her, thinking that she was an innocent victim of circumstances, until she added: "I can't go through with a divorce or people finding out my husband is having an affair. What will my parents think? It's so embarrassing; I can't even tell my best friend. It's all Diane's fault for ruining my life."

Her self-centered comment convinced me there was very little danger that Lorna might take her own life. My sympathy turned to disgust. Here her life was falling apart, and her only concern was keeping up appearances. It also bothered me that Lorna seemed to taking it all out on Diane. I reminded her that it takes two to tango and that Jack had to be just as guilty.

I avoided giving her details about my limited involvement in the matter and simply suggested that she not take any action until she could think more clearly. How she dealt with Jack would be her decision, I said, based on her ability to forgive and whether she felt her marriage was worth saving.

I must have hit the right nerve because she finally calmed down, promising to call home immediately to tell Jack and the kids where she was and that she was coming home.

When Lorna finally hung up, I was exhausted, relieved and angry. Through no fault of my own and without any warning, I had been placed in a dangerously awkward position. By saying the wrong thing, I could have broken up a marriage or, at the very least, lost a close personal friend.

For a couple of days, I was torn between resenting Jack for putting me in such an uncompromising position and the deep feeling he never needed a friend more. I'm not sure whether it was my undying devotion to Jack or my burning curiosity that got the better of me, but I finally phoned to offer him a sympathetic ear. He seemed grateful for the gesture, and we agreed to meet the next night.

I don't know what I was expecting from Jack, more than likely the heart-wrenching confessions of a man torn between his past and present. What I got was the distinct impression that he was not leveling with me. His distrust hurt because he was the only reason I was involved at all.

The affair with Diane had begun innocently enough, he said, with occasional meetings for drinks after work. These liaisons quickly escalated to more private visits in her apartment, where simple goodbye kisses inevitably gave way to lust.

"My conscience began bothering me more and more, and I grew distant from Lorna," he told me. "She started to have doubts about our marriage even though she never suspected there was someone else. Because of that and because of the children, I just had to tell them. You already know how she took it at first, but now she says she still loves me, and she wants to do what she can to save our marriage.

"She even admits that it was partly her fault. Before we were married, we would go camping with me or we would play tennis together. After the wedding, she never would. She just laughed and told me she hated that stuff and only did it to hook me into marriage. I guess I have resented her ever since. Despite that, I have tried to be a good husband and father.

"I thought seriously about leaving Lorna and going away with Diane. But Lorna is very dependent on me. I can't leave her and destroy my family and what we've built together."

Jack said he already had ended his relationship with Diane, telling her it was best that they not see each other again.

"Can you do that with her working in the same town?" I asked. "I think I can," he answered with a notable absence of conviction.

Jack thanked me for my understanding in dealing with Lorna and apologized for getting me involved. "I guess I have screwed things up royally this time," he said.

I had to agree that he had. And despite the gut feeling he was being less than honest with me or himself, I was sincere in assuring him that, just like in high school, I would always be his friend, no matter what.

Diane phoned the next day and asked if we could get together to talk about Jack. I was not surprised at her call, especially since Jack mentioned that he had told Diane, when he broke up with her, that he and I planned to meet. Knowing she would not let me rest until she had the opportunity to grill me about what Jack said, I invited her to my home. I promised myself, however, that I would remain purposely vague about the details of our conversation to avoid contributing to an already sad state of affairs.

It was good to see Diane after five years despite the unhappy occasion of her visit. I noted immediately that she had lost little of her figure or charm. After catching me up on her recent history, she turned the topic to Jack, and I began to squirm. Much to my relief, however, Diane wasn't particularly interested in what Jack told me. It was as if she already knew and wanted only to refute it.

"He is wrong if he thinks he can stay away from me ... any more than I can stay away from him," she began with matter-of-fact conviction. Constantly referring to Lorna without mentioning her name, Diane continued: "She is ruining his life. She doesn't know how to make him happy. I do."

Her version of the affair differed somewhat from Jack's — not so much in fact as in clarity. Her story had Jack much more the aggressor in the romance than he had let on, sending her flowers and notes between visits, and the sexual encounters were much more frequent than Jack had implied. But Diane wasn't exactly a reluctant victim.

"I knew she didn't know what I looked like," said Diane wickedly, again avoiding Lorna's name. "I would play games by showing up at school meetings or other places when they were together, and she wouldn't know I was there."

"The first time we had sex we were like two animals. We had waited 20 years. It was as good as I always imagined it would be," she said.

Diane obviously considered their rekindled romance inevitable, an act of fate over which they had no control.

"We were meant for each other, even back in high school," she said. "We will get together eventually, if not tomorrow, then the day after. You wait and see."

"Do you have any idea who made that first phone call looking for you?" I asked. "You don't think it could have been your ex-husband, do you? Would he do something that cruel?"

"No," she answered. "He would do something that mean, all right, but using Jack to get to me isn't his style."

Diane left around midnight, and I poured myself a strong drink, put my favorite golden oldies on the stereo and sat in my darkened den to reflect on the entire impossible episode. Simple *deja vous* did not do it descriptive justice.

"Why Jack, why Diane and why me?" I kept asking myself. Why couldn't it all have been settled 20 years ago? Time had succeeded only in complicating matters. An inconceivable set of circumstances had brought the "Three Musketeers" back together, but only to experience disappointment and disillusionment in adulthood — not to relive the joy of our youth.

And many questions remain unanswered. Is Diane right about all this being fate or is she destined to a lifetime of waiting for a man she can never have? Is Jack truly unhappy in his marriage or is Diane simply the unfortunate object of a man's midlife crisis? Would all of this have happened had Jack's parents allowed a teen-age infatuation to run its natural course?

I was waiting for one of my favorite old songs, "You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling," to wind down before turning off the record player and going to bed. The song sparked still another question: Was this finally the end for Jack and Diane?

Somehow I didn't think so. Perhaps the romantic was coming out in me, but I was sure that the same fate which brought them back together would not allow them to repeat their high school heartbreak.

As I dozed off to sleep, I found myself trying to dream up scenarios in which Jack and Diane got back together without Jack's family suffering in the process. Surely, fate would solve that problem as well, I reasoned.

The semi-conscious homage I had been paying to the deities of destiny was suddenly shattered as the stark realization of one last question shook me awake.

"Fate, nothing," I said, bolting upright in bed. "Just who made that first phone call looking for Diane?"