

JENNY

A party and a pair of yellow socks marked the beginning of a love affair that lasted the rest of my life. When Jenny and I met there were no flashing lights across a crowded room of love at first sight, rather an accelerating awareness that we liked each other and enjoyed being together. Our relationship first evolved beyond platonic friendship at an Operatic Society American Supper just before Christmas 1960. We spent the evening together and had a wonderful time. At the end of the evening Jenny accepted a lift home on the back of my scooter and we talked. As a result a pair of socks, bought originally for another boy, were diverted to me on the last day of Term as a Christmas gift. To say I was surprised would be an understatement. Nobody of the opposite sex had ever given me any kind of present as a token of value or affection ever before. It was a symbolic moment which made me sit up and realise that my attentions would not be altogether unwelcome. Within hours I wrote to arrange our first real date (see letter) and two or three days later we scooted up to St. Catherine's Hill, Winchester, scrambled to the top and larked around trying to follow the maze which was cut in the turf there. With Christmas looming imminently we parted with no definite arrangements to meet and it was not until 27th December that I received a letter from Jenny inviting me to her birthday tea. On Jenny's 15th birthday, therefore, January 3rd 1961, I picked her up in the afternoon and we drove to Southampton where, in a record shop in St. Mary's Street, I bought 'Cliff's Silver Discs' as a birthday present. Afterwards, back at Eastleigh, I crossed the threshold of 261 Desborough Road for the first time, was welcomed into the bosom of her family and sensed approval. In the following three or four weeks we met several times. We stole our first kiss at a Little Theatre Club social outside the Church Hall in West End and had a magnificent evening at the Theatre Guild Ball on the pier in Southampton. This was a glittering occasion where amateur dramatic societies gathered in fancy dress for an evening of dancing to live music, competition and a really good knees-up. Jenny had special dispensation to stay out late since the Ball did not finish until 1am. On the way home we stopped and dallied on a park bench not far from the Cowherds Public house on the Common. There, as we kissed and cuddled beneath the stars on a cold and frosty night, we began to understand the depth of our feelings for each other. We were picked up and swept along on a

tidal wave of emotion, the like of which neither of us had ever experienced before. We were slipping magically and uncontrollably in love.

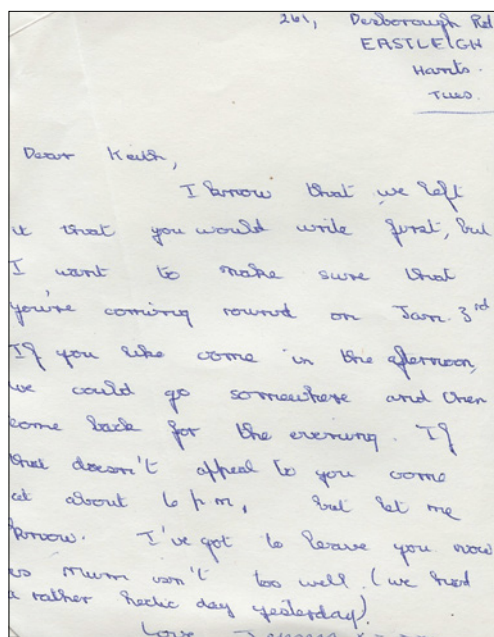
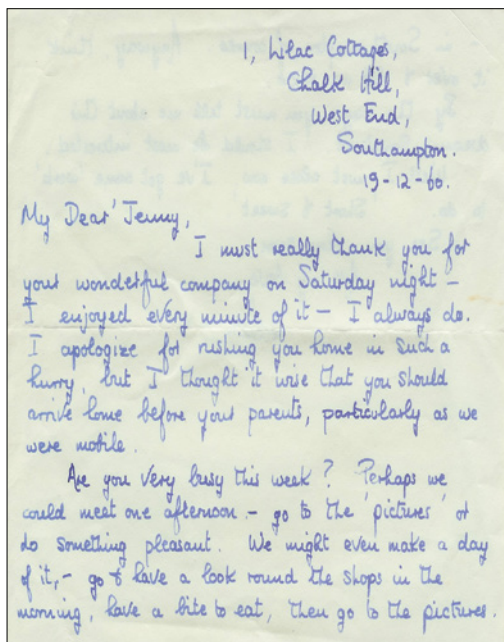
Fortunately for us Jenny had a very open relationship with her mother and it soon became obvious that, not only did she know how we felt about each other, but she whole-heartedly approved and understood our needs. She gave us a fair degree of privacy at home by allowing us the use of a room of our own. For two, perhaps three, evenings per week we talked and listened to music. Jenny had been given a Dansette Record Player for Christmas and had a limited number of popular records of the time which we listened to over and over. Edith Piaf – ‘Milord’; Connie Francis – ‘Everybody’s Somebody’s Fool’; Peter Sellers – ‘Goodness Gracious Me’ and ‘Grandpa’s Grave’; ‘Some Enchanted Evening’ and ‘Twin Soliloquy’ from the soundtrack of South Pacific; and Cliff Richard – ‘Living Doll’ all evoke particularly poignant memories of these evenings to this day. We were so lucky. Most of our contemporaries were forced to do their courting on the streets or in the Cinema or Coffee Bars. Jenny’s Mum trusted us from the start and not only gave us space but made space for us. It was not long after the Theatre Guild Ball, for example, that she invited me to join the family for an Easter break at Shanklin on the Isle of Wight. It turned out to be a wonderful weekend – four momentous days that set the seal to our relationship. We stayed in a private guest house run by a Mrs Axworthy – a large, generous-hearted woman who had a passion for collecting china and porcelain horses. The house was filled with them. I recall I shared a room with Jenny’s Dad and remember Jenny bounding playfully into our room first thing in the morning clad only in her revealing Baby-Doll pyjamas to get me up. It was one of those moments you do not easily forget! During the daytime we explored Shanklin, walked over St. Boniface Down to Ventnor, and spent precious moments together in a secluded shelter in Rhylstone Gardens, just down the road from the house. We also attended the last night of Sandown Operatic Society’s production of ‘Gypsy Baron’. We were so receptive to Strauss’s romantic music that we adopted a duet – ‘Dare I believe my heart’ as our song – something that stuck with us for many years.

Like most young couples in the early days of romantic love we could not see enough of each other. At school we passed notes to each other and, when prefect duties permitted, we met on the field at lunchtime. We went to the school Valentine’s Dance and both took part in the School’s production of Purcell’s opera ‘Dido and Aeneas’. We opened up our worlds and our friends to each other and did more and more together. The more we shared the stronger became the bonds. In the Summer Term I gave up travelling to School by bus and rode my scooter instead so that I could take Jenny home at the end of the day. Her Mum worked in the menswear department of the local Co-operative Store and did not finish until 5pm so we were able to share time together before she arrived home. As the summer progressed we began to spend Sundays together and I became a regular guest for Sunday lunch (then a much more significant event than today). Such was Jenny’s parents’ acceptance of me that, when the weather was good, we went out for the day as a family to Bournemouth and Swanage. They travelled by train, we went by scooter. They were beach people and enjoyed lazing in the sunshine and, at that time, the sedentary



Eastleigh Operatic Society, 'Goodnight Vienna', produced in November 1960, Jenny and I became friends!

The Beginning



Our first months together January – August 1961

Photographs taken at Swanage, Bournemouth, London





Bournemouth. July 1961



Goodrington. August 1961



Eastleigh Carnival. August 1961



Highcliffe. August 1961

lifestyle suited us perfectly. We did not want activity, we simply wanted each other. On other Sundays, back at Desborough Road, we soaked up the sun on the lawn and spent hours playing shuttlecock, particularly with Jenny's Dad. As the evenings became lighter we ventured out to coffee bars – the Chuckwagon in Eastleigh, and on several occasions, the Penny Farthing at Bishop's Waltham. It was on these jaunts, very regrettably, that I introduced Jenny to smoking!

In May and June there was something of a pause in our adventures as I shut myself away to study for 'A' Levels. My mother feared that my relationship with Jenny would ruin my chances but quite the opposite happened. I was so happy, so emotionally fulfilled and relaxed in Jenny's company, that somehow the exams seemed less awesome and oppressive and I approached them with an energy and confidence that I would not otherwise have had. As soon as they were over, however, the sense of liberation and freedom was wonderful and we lost no time in making up for the weeks of deprivation. We took every opportunity of being together. When there were spare places on school trips we contrived to pick them up. So it was that Jenny came with me on a Sixth Form History trip to the American Museum in Bath, and in our free time in the City I took her to meet Grandad and Auntie Rose at the shop in Claverton Street. As the end of Term approached we saw each other every evening. We were both becoming increasingly aware that time was precious. The dark clouds of separation and uncertainty were beginning to loom and there was a growing sense of desperation as we began to count down the days both to our holidays and the more permanent separation of three years at College.

On July 16th Jenny took off on her summer holiday to Goodrington, near Paignton in Devon whilst I went to the school fete and sang at a Young Farmers Club concert in the evening. The next day I went with my parents to Aberystwyth in Central Wales for a fortnight. With no access to telephones we wrote to each other every day. For me it was a dismal time. At 19 I was little interested in going with Mum and Dad and I spent the majority of time on my own. I waited eagerly for Jenny's letters and read them over and over again. Unfortunately I could not stop myself from reading between the lines of her descriptions of life on the beach and the local boys and I ended up imagining all sorts of things and jumping to all the wrong conclusions. I even thought I noticed a deterioration in the length of her letters and the care with which she had written them. By the end of the fortnight I was eaten up with jealousy and anxiety and I could not get home quick enough. It was a salutary lesson in the pitfalls of long distance relationships. Of course, within minutes of meeting her off the train the stresses and strains evaporated and I cursed my own stupidity! It would not be the first time that my jealous nature would cause us bother.

Upon our return from holiday I immediately started work at Edwin Jones for four weeks. This left only one week free at the end of August before Jenny returned to school and I started observation in local schools for a fortnight prior to going to College. Whilst I was working Sunday was my only day off and we began to travel widely on our own. We went to Highcliffe, Bournemouth, and Southsea where Jenny introduced me to Grandad and Grandma Neale. It was a blazing hot August. During our week off we went to London for the day to see the sights. I remember it was so

hot I had to dive into a loo to remove my new style underpants! It was during this period, as we stared separation in the face, that we first formulated plans to get engaged on Jenny's 16th birthday. In retrospect it is amazing that we could have contemplated such a proposition so young, but we felt grown-up, responsible, and completely certain that we were meant for each other. Furthermore, in the circumstances we were desperate for something to bind us together to give our relationship strength and resilience against the uncertainties of the future. It gave us something to cling on to to bridge the first three months apart.

In the few months that we had been together Jenny and her Mum had completely redressed me into fashionable clothes. Neither I nor my mother ever had much dress sense and we were certainly not in touch with contemporary fashion. Clothes were never a priority in my family. It was new and exciting therefore, to be kitted out with stylish narrow trousers, an expensive jumper, shirt with matching tie and a shorty raincoat. It made me feel much the man about town. Their thoughtfulness and generosity overwhelmed me. They also introduced me to deodorant, something I had never used in my life before. Jenny relates stories of the suds disappearing as soon as my clothes were dunked in the washing water! Certainly the number of baths I took increased substantially and I began to take a pride in my personal cleanliness and appearance. Strangely, it's the only time in my life when I remember singing in the bath!

During the course of the summer Jenny visited Mum and Dad at Chalk Hill once or twice. It was never a success. Mum did not welcome Jenny with open arms, it was not in her nature. Jenny interpreted this as rejection and subsequently wanted as little to do with my parents as she could. It was many years later that I came to realise Jenny's sensitivity about her adoption and being rejected by her natural mother, and, quite naturally her touchiness about further rejection. She needed unconditional love and acceptance and neither were forthcoming from my mother. For a while I found myself awkwardly in the middle having to placate and soothe both sides whilst playing down my own disappointment but it did not last. Such situations demand choice. For me there was no choice. I followed my heart and began to turn my back on my parents.

The dreaded day of departure for College arrived on Monday 3rd October. Around the middle of the day I kissed and waved goodbye to Jenny and my mother on the platform of the Central Station in Southampton. They both put a brave face on it but at the highly charged moment as the train pulled away both dissolved into tears. For me it was the start of an adventure into the unknown, a new life with new challenges. For Jenny it was heart-rending emptiness and the start of an emotional rollercoaster that was to end in breakdown and hospitalisation.