

Passages

Written by Vivian Bikulege

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I grew up at Anita Stalter's birthday parties. Like Abraham Lincoln, Anita was born on February 12. Every year, from 1965 until we graduated from the eighth grade in 1972, Anita's mom Leona decorated their basement with paper cut-outs of Washington and Lincoln's heads, red Valentine hearts glued to white doilies, and flying cupids armed with bow and arrows. Mrs. Stalter pulled together the best of February and tied it up in pink and white crepe paper, hanging it in twists and loops across the ceiling, and punctuating the annual event with candy dishes full of Brach's conversation hearts that whispered "Be Mine" and "Hug Me."

Annually, the cupids and presidents came out of the closet to disrupt the bleak and gray Pittsburgh winters and witness the slow morphing of little girls into teenagers. In the sixth grade, and for the first time, Anita was permitted to invite boys to her birthday party. At St. Valentine's, a Catholic school in the western Pennsylvania suburbs, students moved from the first to the second floor of the building in the fifth grade, signifying a physical and metaphorical transition away from childhood. Technically, we were in junior high or middle school, and the idea of boys at Anita's annual soiree created a grand discussion between my dad, my mom and me. You are too young to go to a party with boys. Who's invited? How long will the party last? Why is it in the evening and not in the afternoon? Would Mrs. Stalter be in the basement chaperoning the party? Eventually, I was allowed to go to my first boy-girl party, but not without stern guidelines for the behavior and conduct becoming a young lady.

I dressed in a new red jumper with a gold chain belt, and accessorized my outfit with a heart pendant engraved with my name. I wore white anklets and saddle shoes because my parents did not permit me to move into the grownup world of shaved legs and nylon stockings. When I arrived at the party, I was met by classmates in bellbottomed jeans. For the next two hours, I maintained a cheerful façade, achieving a Zen-like state of denial that I was overdressed and totally embarrassed. Even though I looked like a misplaced cheerleader, complete with training bra and limp brown curls, my heart thumped over the prospect of talking to and sitting beside

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boys.

The party was a disaster for me. The days of pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey and musical chairs had given way to spin the bottle and necking on the couch. I heeded my parent's requests and refrained from participating, standing in the background aghast at the sight of my best friends casually making out. Of course, I was jealous. I wanted to be in the circle and on the sofa, but no one was interested in me. My mom picked me up when the painful party ended, and I pouted on the ride home, blaming my mother for the shame I felt for wearing a dress, but secretly upset that I was an outcast for bigger reasons. The boys did not like me.

I corrected my fashion mistakes at Anita's seventh and eighth grade parties by wearing jeans and turtle necks. My first kiss took place in that basement on Linwood Drive. I shared only one kiss with John Baker, and I remember it being hard and fast, like kissing a wall with teeth, but with that formality over, I could move more confidently into my teens. In the eighth grade, the parties moved up another notch with boys going into the backyard to smoke, girls getting friendship rings and going steady, and couples moving from first to second base. I dropped back to the corners of the basement again disgusted by and in awe of girls who seemed more mature than me, sad that Anita's birthday parties were ending, and wondering why our religion classes evaporated in that basement.

On June 19, Mrs. Stalter passed away. In recent years, I'd visited her to see how she was feeling, bring her up-to-date on what was going on with me and with my family, talk about Anita now living in Santa Fe, and take Leona's advice on my health, my money, and my marriage. Every once in awhile, the subject of Nita's birthday parties would creep into our conversation, and we would laugh over the cupids and president heads. I did not tell her that I grew up at her daughter's parties, but I think she knew. Even now, if I close my eyes tight, I can see her serving cake, her black Lebanese hair done up in a chignon, me in the second grade growing into my adult teeth, excited by candles and birthday presents and the chance to shriek and laugh out loud when the music stopped and I still had a seat. In my memory, I see my friends growing up in the third and fourth grades while the world around us rioted, Hippies versus the Establishment. I hear myself talking back to my mom, a fifth grader, then sixth, getting in and out of our station wagon parked in Anita's icy driveway. And then, just like that, the parties end. I go to the public high school and Anita enrolls at an all-girls Catholic academy, but somehow, through college and travels, jobs and marriage, the loss of parents and the thousands of miles that separate us, we have cultivated a forty-six year old friendship.

So thank you Mrs. Stalter, and to you Anita, for giving me a safe place to grow up. The rigors of social etiquette, the flirtations of first experiences, and the knowledge of when to say no and

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when to say yes, each lesson was unwrapped in your basement and delivered in the uncurling of a party favor. Somewhere, hidden away in a basement closet, are the heads of George and Abe, the forefathers of my childhood. Cupids have flown away or met their doom in trash bags. I still have my heart pendant, and I have been shaving my legs and wrestling pantyhose for a very long time. I was always glad to go back home after the parties ended realizing my parents were mostly right. Take your time growing up, my dad would say. Use your head. Be a good girl.

What remains with me most from the seven birthday parties in Bethel Park are the philosophies of conversation hearts. The hearts that said "Love You." Because I did and I still do.

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