
THE GIRL WITH THE RED FINGERNAIL POLISH



I met the girl with the red fingernail polish in speech class my freshman year at Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina, and I hated red fingernail polish.

I say that like I had traumatic memories, and I'm kidding when I say that, but I really did have some vivid memories from family reunions growing up in Southern California. All my great-uncles drank too much and got really loud, and I was a little boy. To compound that, my great-aunts all wore bright red fingernail polish. I only remember two or three of those get-togethers, though my mom says it was actually quite often. In my memory, those ancient great-aunts of mine would come running toward me, screaming, "Oh, little Kenny, little Kenny, little Kenny," with their long bright red fingernails, and then they'd squeeze me to death laughing.

It's funny as heck now, but there it is. To this day, I just don't like red fingernail polish on women. I was traumatized. I'm kidding. Mostly.

So when I noticed this freshman girl in our very small speech class, maybe a dozen 18-year-olds, that's what I first remember about her. Now, her memory is that she seldom wore red fingernail polish then, though she does now quite a bit, so we disagree on that. But that's what I remember.

I also remember thinking, Oh, she's okay-looking. Actually, she was quite attractive. But she had red fingernail polish, and I had always been attracted to brunettes. My crushes had all had dark hair, and my first girlfriend had dark hair. I guess I had a type: no bright red fingernail polish, and definitely dark hair.

Well, the woman who would later become my wife, the person who would become my very heart and my very life and my very soul, had blonde hair—poofy, big, blonde curly hair—was Swedish, and had bright red fingernail polish. Definitely not the person I would have imagined spending the next 49 years and five months of my life with. As I'm telling this story in 2026, that's how long it has been since we met. We've been married 47 years, and like I said, she's my very heart and my very soul. I don't want to get all mushy, so we'll leave it at that.

She'll tell her version of this story in her book someday, and I can promise you her memory is more accurate than mine.

I'm sure there will be a different telling of it. But what we do agree on is that we became very good friends in that small speech class.

I wish I could remember the young teacher's name. She was brand new, and there were only maybe a dozen of us in the room. We became close because we gave public speeches to each other. It was speech class, and that's what you do. You prepare a speech, then stand up in front of your classmates and give it. It was life-changing for me.

I was a ministerial student at the time—a preacher boy, we called it—and we were required to take speech class because of that. I took other preacher-type classes too, but truthfully, I think I learned more about public speaking there than I ever learned anywhere else in life. I'm a very comfortable public speaker now, in spite of the fact that I'm an introvert, and I credit that class and that excellent teacher.

The year went by. We had class two or three days a week; I forget whether it was a two-credit or three-credit class, but I think it was three. During that year, Mary and I had what I'd call a very casual, once-in-a-while-we-bump-into-each-other-and-talk kind of friendship, the same sort we had with everybody in that class. There were maybe 4,000 students on campus and 400 acres, so you didn't just constantly run into people. It wasn't a small college. Still, when we did bump into each other, we'd stop and talk. Nothing in my mind was crush-like or even remotely like, Oh, I could fall for that

girl. She was very attractive, but she just wasn't in that I'm-gonna-fall-for-this-girl category. I'm pretty sure she felt the same way about me.

Now, meanwhile, I was doing what 18-year-old boys do and making a mess of my emotional life.

I had already had a rebound summer fling, essentially just a girl to make out with all summer, and I broke that off when I became a preacher boy at Bob Jones. I sent her a Dear John letter and apologized for being too physical and for using her as a rebound romance. As I remember it, she sent me a pretty blistering letter back. So if you send a Dear John letter, you'd better expect a Dear Dude, You're an Idiot and I Hate You letter in return.

Then a few months into the school year, I dated a senior. She was redheaded and curly-haired, two things I didn't think I liked, but I really did like her. We kind of fell for each other, at least a little. At Bob Jones, dating privileges depended on the class of the girl, so senior girls got more official dating time. I swear to you this is true: the approved dating area was called the dating parlor, or the DP. It was upstairs above the student commons and was about the size of a football field, full of furniture. That's where couples went to date under the school's watchful eye.

I dated that redheaded senior for a while. I cannot remember her name now, which tells you something. We both realized it wasn't going anywhere, and I don't remember who broke

it off because it never became serious. But I did enjoy the extended dating hours, so she became my second rebound.

After that I dated Sherry, who had long, straight black hair and fit right into what I thought was my category. She did not wear red fingernail polish. We really did fall for each other. We dated for maybe two or three months, and it was quick, because at 18 you can fall in love in no time at all.

Then I had a dream.

This is a true story, and Mary still laughs at it. I wouldn't be married to Mary now if I hadn't had that dream. At the time I attributed it to God. Now, though I'm still a deep, devout follower of Jesus, I look back and think it may simply have been my subconscious protecting me. You can decide for yourself.

Everything with Sherry was going great. We were in love, or so we thought, and already talking about marriage. She was from Kansas, from a small town—that's about all I remember. Then one night I had this vivid dream that turned into a nightmare. I walked down the aisle with her. It was one of those videotape dreams that feels absolutely real. We were standing at the altar holding hands, just like in the movies, and I said, "I do."

But inside my head, in the dream, I was screaming, No, no, no, no. I couldn't stop screaming it. I was panicked and horrified. I woke up in the middle of the night, probably four

or five in the morning, and I knew: I cannot marry this girl. I can't even tell you exactly why.

I broke up with her that day, right over lunch. We always had lunch together, and that day I ended it. Oh my gosh, it was traumatic. She cried and cried and cried, and I felt like crap. I felt so guilty.

So I have been dumped and I have dumped. If this is my great-grandkids listening to this someday, there's part of great-grandpa's life story. It's the universal human story. If it hasn't happened to you, it's happened to a close friend. I laugh about it now, but at the time it was deadly serious.

That was my last girlfriend before Mary.

By then it was getting toward the end of the school year, and I had nobody to take to a social function. Bob Jones University was rigidly fundamentalist and had a strict no-touching rule between men and women, except during certain official once-a-year dating events. The place was full of strange contradictions. You weren't supposed to touch a member of the opposite sex, but then over Christmas break or summer break they'd let a boyfriend and girlfriend get in a car alone and drive halfway across the United States together. I still laugh when I think about it. They were so strict in one area and so clueless in another.

There were a lot of rules, and a lot of pressure too. People dated all the time. Marriage was pushed hard, though students were expected to stay in school. As I remember it, you

generally couldn't get married until your junior year, and if you were going to marry, you had to go through premarital counseling. Mary tells me the girls were heavily encouraged to go on the pill right away so they wouldn't get pregnant before graduation. I always found that ironic in such a strongly pro-life environment, but that's a rabbit trail.

The point is, I had nobody to take to this function, and going alone wasn't really done. I knew lots of girls, but I didn't have a crush on any of them. I had broken up with Sherry maybe a month before. So I looked around and thought, Well, who do I want to ask?

And I thought of Mary.

I don't know exactly why I thought of her. She may remember better than I do. She also has a memory that I accidentally asked her out by accident, and I'll let her tell that story. But however it happened, I decided to ask her.

Now here is where the culture of that place gets even stranger. There were no cell phones, of course. This was 1976, 1977, 1978. No email either. There was one public phone on each dormitory floor, and you were not allowed to call girls across campus in the women's dorms. You could call home, but not your girlfriend.

So the school had a mail system. If you wanted to communicate, you wrote notes. Actual handwritten notes and letters. Men ran the mail between the dorms, literally running from building to building, sorting mail into long wooden

cubbyhole boxes. Boyfriends and girlfriends wrote each other all the time. That was how we texted each other in those days: handwritten notes, sometimes in envelopes, sometimes just folded paper.

And because of that culture, if you wanted to ask a girl out, you usually did not do it face to face. That was almost taboo. You sent her a note, and then she sent back a note with her answer the next day.

But I was afraid she might turn me down, and for some reason that embarrassed me more than it should have. So I broke the unwritten rule and asked her in person.

We still laugh about that.

I asked her out face to face, and she was shocked because that just wasn't how it was done. But she said yes.

Then we started writing notes back and forth, though just platonically. Mostly they were about the event coming up and what she was going to wear so I could wear something that matched, or something like that. We were just friends. She wasn't dating anyone at the time. I had just broken up with somebody. Everybody knew all that.

So we went to the event together, just as friends, and we had a really good time. No chemistry on my end, as I remember it, and she's told me over the years there was none on her end either. But we had fun.

After that we set up a lunch date a few days later, and again we had a really, really good time. Then we went on a third date to some campus event—I think it may have been Bible conference in the spring, when everybody paired off and spent days sitting together listening to preaching and then hanging around between meetings. My memory may be off, but it was around then.

And on that third date I had an epiphany.

I still had no crush on her, no great physical attraction, no romantic fireworks at all. But somewhere during that date I just knew: this is the girl I'm going to marry.

It was the strangest thing. I had never felt that even with my first love in high school. I never thought that with my rebound girlfriends. Even with Sherry, she did most of the marriage talking and I nodded along until the nightmare told me otherwise. But with Mary, I just calmly thought, I think I'm going to marry her.

I went back to my dorm room afterward. Five of us lived in a small room with a triple bunk and a double bunk. Two or three of my roommates were there, and I said, very calmly, "I think I have met my future wife."

They laughed me to scorn, which is exactly what roommates are for. But it turned out to be prophetic.



We did not stay in touch over that summer, and that was completely my fault.

I think she may have dated another guy back in Chicago that summer, partly because she was aggravated with me, and I can't blame her. We had gone out several times, then summer came, and I just went silent. I lived my life in Plymouth, Minnesota, and I did not contact her. Near the end of the summer I finally sent a letter or maybe called—I don't remember which—and basically said, "Hey, how's your summer going?"

She has told me since that she was really mad at me. In today's language, I guess you'd say I ghosted her for the summer. So yes, I was an idiot. Somehow, I managed to fix it.

When we got back to school, we started dating heavily our sophomore year. Very heavily.

My memory is that at one break—we may have carpooled home with friends; she lived in Chicago and I lived in Minneapolis—we were riding in the back seat holding hands. That was the first time I remember holding her hand, and it was electric for both of us. Not because either of us had never held hands or kissed anybody before, but because now it was us, and we were falling in love fast.

I remember walking her to her door, and she has since told me she was probably thinking, Is this idiot ever going to kiss me? We were standing there lingering while people sat waiting in the car, and I finally worked up the nerve. My memory is that I asked, “Is it okay if I kiss you?” I’m laughing now just remembering it. I think she said okay, and we kissed goodbye.

It was a pretty good kiss. We were both experienced kissers, but this one was electric.

From there on, we dated all through sophomore year. By the summer we were passionately in love. We called constantly. I drove from Minneapolis to Chicago several times on weekends when I wasn’t working. Once I surprised her at the Mexican restaurant where she worked, either as a waitress or hostess—I don’t remember which. I walked in unannounced all the way from Minneapolis, and she was on the phone having an argument with a Mexican busboy who was calling in sick. Her Spanish was so fluent. We had both taken years of Spanish, but she had dated some Mexican boys before she met me, and she was just flying in Spanish on that phone. I thought it was pretty cool. Kind of hot, actually.

Later that summer she came out to Minnesota and stayed at my Aunt Bea’s house, about a mile from mine. For several days we were together nonstop, except for sleeping in different places, of course.

If we weren’t asleep, we were together.

That was when I proposed.

We had gone for a midnight swim. There was a lake down the street from my aunt's house, with a floating platform maybe a hundred yards out. It was romantic as all get-out—nighttime, lake water, I think maybe even moonlight. When we got back to my aunt's house, I proposed. I don't remember whether I got down on one knee. She would remember that better than I do. But I think I asked, "Will you be the mother of my children?" Corny as could be. But she said yes.

We went back to Bob Jones for our junior year planning to get married the next summer.

Well, the best-laid plans of mice and men.

We were just too hot for each other. We had done a lot of touching during that summer week together, and now we were back on a campus where you couldn't touch, couldn't hold hands, couldn't do anything, and we were crazy in love and full of passion. So we did what a lot of young couples at Bob Jones did when they believed very sincerely in no sex before marriage and couldn't keep their hands off each other.

We moved the wedding date up.

We got married on December 22 of our junior year, 1978.

My mom planned the whole thing. We were married at Parker's Lake Baptist Church. My mom and her friends arranged everything. I'd guess there were maybe a hundred people there. Chuck Hervas, one of Mary's closest friends from high school, gave her away because her dad could not

be bothered to come to the wedding. That tells its own story. One of my best friends, Bill—oh my gosh, Bill [Lee], I can't remember your last name—was in the wedding party, and either he or my brother was my best man. It was beautiful.

We had a great time afterward. Our honeymoon was cheap: one hotel night in the Twin Cities area. That was our honeymoon. Then we got in the car and headed right back to school full-time, because the semester wasn't over until sometime in January.

And boy, did we enjoy showing off that now, as a married couple, we could walk around campus holding hands in front of everybody. I was terrible about flaunting that. The chaperones—who always seemed like some kind of secret CIA operation, everywhere but nowhere—would glare at us and start heading our way. And we'd hold up our wedding rings. Then they'd get that disgusted look like, Fine, whatever, you're married.

I am not kidding. These are true stories.

So that is the story of meeting and falling in love with my very heart and soul.

We just celebrated our 47th anniversary. We have eight beautiful children and 22 absolutely adorable grandchildren. We have been through thick and thin together, and honestly, most of it has been thick and very difficult. We have been through hell and back together over and over in our lives.

And we are deeply, deeply attached to each other.

It's what Jesus quoted, and what the apostle Paul alluded to: they two shall become one flesh. I love that phrase, one flesh, because it isn't merely physical. It's something deeper than explanation, what a marriage can be and should be. I have been blessed beyond words to have the most loyal, closest friend and wife a person could ever have.

I may be biased, but I think she is the greatest human being I have ever met. Of all the human beings I have ever met, she's it. She is truly all that and a pack of gum.

So that's my story of the girl with the red fingernail polish. I hope you enjoyed it.