



Mrs. Krueger's Third Grade Class
Second row from the left, Dude is third, I'm fourth, Jim is sixth.
First row from the left, Cathy is sixth

Chapter 4

Square Dancing

Spring, 1958

Boys, it's important to keep an open mind to new things no matter how horrible they may sound. You may be surprised. Sometimes they turn out OK. For me, that horrible new thing was square dancing. My friends and I thought there was a conspiracy to replace PE with square dancing at Mitchell Elementary School. While I thought this devious plan was only taking place in Golden, now so many years later and after a search on the Internet, it's clear the conspiracy was nationwide. People from California to New York report forced square dancing in PE class. This sinister plan scarred the lives of so many children. One respondent noted that hearing the Virginia Reel still gives her the shudders, and another suggested forming a support group, "Survivors of Childhood Square Dancing Trauma." What good could come of replacing PE with square dancing? As it turned out, square dancing was better than I thought. Here's what happened.

I couldn't believe the news our PE teacher, Mr. Stewart, had just told us. For the next two weeks, we would spend our PE classes learning to square dance. Square dancing in PE!! What happened to kickball or dodgeball? Mr. Stewart couldn't look Dude, Jim, and me in the eye when he delivered the bad news. Three times a week for two weeks!!! The girls weren't crazy about the idea either once they realized it meant we would be their partners and they would actually have to make physical contact with us. Mr. Stewart, after making the announcement, turned the class over to Mrs. Langworthy who would instruct us in the fine art of square dancing. With our hands shoved into our pockets, Mike, Jim, and I glared at Mr. Stewart as he slunk off to his office. The girls, their arms crossed and backs turned, whispered among themselves while occasionally turning to look in our direction.

Mrs. Langworthy was not a regular teacher, but a parent who volunteered to teach us square dancing. She stood before us in full square dancing regalia. She wore a red-checked dress that looked as if it was made from a tablecloth stolen from Pagliacci's Italian Restaurant in nearby Louisville. The multi-layered skirt was subdivided by white panels and was held aloft by numerous petty coats. Puffy white sleeves emerged from the gingham top with a white lacey bodice that covered her ample bosom.

She hauled an ancient record player to the raised stage that filled one end of the Mitchell School gym. The record player resembled a suitcase and was obviously heavy. “Are you boys just going to watch me struggle with this thing or are you going to help me?”

Jim rushed forward to relieve Mrs. Langworthy of her heavy baggage. The rest of us hoped she would collapse under the load, bringing square dancing to an end before it even started. She instructed Jim to set it on the stage and then produced an extension cord. “See if you can find a place to plug this in, and the rest of you can take a seat on the floor.” Grumbling, we sat crossed-legged on the heavily varnished basketball court, wondering what would come next.

Before long, the record player was operational and the scratchy sounds of “Oh Johnny, Oh” filled our end of the gym. Mrs. Langworthy had us listen to the song, which included strange commands like honor your partner, do si do, allemande left, promenade right, and swing your partner. We had no idea what any of it meant, but she assured us that we soon would.

When the music stopped, she assumed a position at the free-throw line as if she was going to take a shot. It occurred to me that we were the ones being fouled, but I didn’t say anything. She had the boys line up on the stripe to her left as if we were going to fight for the rebound. The girls were instructed to line up on the opposite stripe. Unfortunately, Mrs. Langworthy didn’t have a basketball, just more instructions.

“The person opposite you is your partner,” she directed. She gave no thought to the resulting pairs. Larry, the shortest boy in the class, was partnered with Nancy, the tallest girl. Dude found himself staring across the free-throw lane at Linda, his mortal enemy. They so disliked each other that Mrs. Krueger, our teacher, sat them in opposite corners of the class, as far apart as possible. They glared at each other. My partner was Cathy. With brown curls, freckles, and bright blue eyes, Cathy was one of the prettiest girls in the class. She looked at me and actually smiled. Not sure what to do, I gave my shoes a thorough inspection.

“Now, boys,” she went on, “You will walk to your partner and extend your right hand. Girls, you will bow to the boy, and take his hand in yours. Then, everyone will turn so that you are facing the other end of the gym.” She pointed in the general direction of the other basket. It seemed like a simple thing to do, but we were in third grade and none of us had ever touched a hand of the opposite sex, and no one want-

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ed to start now. We stood our ground, not moving an inch. "Boys!" she yelled. "Walk to your partner and take her hand!" Reluctantly, we moved forward. Once across the free-throw lane, we slowly extended our hands. The girls were no more interested in touching us than we were in touching them. "Girls, take their hands!" she commanded. I hesitantly took Cathy's hand.

Linda's voice rose in a shrill cry. "YUCK, he spit on his hand!" she screamed while trying to wipe her hand on Dude's shirt. All voices, male and female, were raised in unison. "Yuck, ew, ick, gross, yuck, ick, ick! Cooties! Cooties!" Cathy immediately dropped my hand and carefully inspected hers. She looked up in relief, happy there were no offending fluids on her palm.

Mrs. Langworthy jumped into action. She took Linda's hand, and seeing the revolting saliva, turned her attention to Dude, who was doing his best to disappear into a small crack between the hardwoods. "Come with me, young man!" she commanded while grabbing his ear.

Off they marched to the principal's office. Along the way, she yelled for Mr. Stewart to watch over the class. No sooner had he stubbed out his cigarette and emerged from his office than she was back. "That young man will be spending his PE time in the principal's office for the next two weeks," she announced firmly. Several of us thought spending time with the principal might be preferable to square dancing, but gave up the idea when she added, "And this will go on his permanent record!" A gasp went up from the assembled students. While we weren't sure about the mechanics of permanent records, we knew that such a mark would haunt the permanent record owner for life, in the case of Catholic students, even longer. With the threat sinking in, we sullenly complied with Mrs. Langworthy's directives.

Later that day, the conspiracy theory was confirmed at our Cub Scout den meeting. As we busily glued Popsicle sticks together creating trivets for future Mother's Day presents, Mrs. Paine informed us that she had a wonderful announcement to make. "The Pack has decided to replace this month's Pack meeting with a square dance! Aren't you all thrilled?"

The Scouts groaned loudly. Not only were we forced to square dance in gym class, now our Pack meeting, which usually included scouting skill contests and hilarious skits, would be replaced with more square dancing. How bad could it get? We complained vociferously, but Mrs. Paine said the decision was made. To make matters worse, we were expected to ask a girl to the dance. "This will be your first date," she added happily. She was the only happy person in that den meeting.

Then, amid even more grumbling and sensing that her pack of Cub Scouts was considering mutiny, Mrs. Paine invoked the Cub Scout Promise. “Raise your hand and repeat after me,” she instructed. Reluctantly, with our right hands raised and two fingers pointing skyward, we repeated,

“I (name inserted), promise to do my best to do my duty to God and my country, to help other people and to obey the Law of the Pack.”

She ended the meeting by telling us that the upcoming square dance was now “Law of the Pack — and you promised.”

Boys, I was trapped. There was no way out. Under threat of a dark mark on my permanent record and the peril of disobeying Pack Law, I had no choice but to learn to square dance and ... horror of horrors, invite a girl to the dance.

I considered my options. I learned my lesson with Carol the year before and had immediately scratched her off the list. I thought about Linda, but Dude and I were best friends so her hatred of him rubbed off on me. Nancy was a possibility, but she and Larry seemed to be dancing well together despite their mismatched heights. And then I thought of Cathy and her blue eyes and bright smile.

After several days of worry and consternation, I decided she was the one and crafted a plan to pose the big question. Her locker was next to mine, so after noon recess, as we were hanging coats and retrieving supplies and without as much as a look in her direction, I asked, “Will you go to the Cub Scout Square Dance with me?”

Without a look in my direction, she responded, “I’ll ask my mother.”

The next day, again in front of our lockers, and without looking at me, she said, “My mother said it’s OK. I can go.”

“Ok, we’ll pick you up at seven tomorrow night,” I said, looking straight into my locker.

The next evening, wearing my freshly washed and ironed blue Cub Scout shirt, blue cap and yellow neckerchief, and carrying a corsage fashioned from a tin foil pot pie plate and a red plastic flower made at the last Cub Scout den meeting, I walked up the sidewalk to Cathy’s house. I pushed the doorbell, and a few seconds later a large Irish boy with red hair, blue eyes, and freckles opened the door. He scowled at me then told me to sit on the straight-backed chair opposite the sofa. The sofa was stuffed with three more boys, each one larger than the door opener, who squeezed himself into the seat at the left end of the sofa. They sat in order of height, the smallest on the left and the tallest on the right. If not for their relative sizes, they could have

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been quadruplets. Not one of them said a word; they just scowled various sizes of the same menacing scowl. Cathy was one of seven, the youngest girl, and fiercely protected from unworthy Cub Scouts by her four brothers.

After what seemed an eternity spent with them scowling directly at me, and me looking in every direction but at them, Cathy and her mother appeared on the stair. Cathy was dressed for square dancing. She wore a big skirt with petticoats, a western blouse with a vest, a cowboy hat, and boots. She looked beautiful.

I jumped to my feet and presented the tin foil corsage. "Wow, you look great!" I stammered. "Oh, hello, Mrs. Green." Mrs. Green greeted me warmly and asked if the boys had been treating me nicely while she pinned the corsage on Cathy. "Yes, Ma'am," I lied. No sense adding the ire of four Irish boys to the threat of marks on my permanent record or the penalties for breaking the Law of the Pack. I had enough to worry about. "We'll be back by nine," I announced while rushing for the door.

"We'll be waiting," they growled in perfect Irish tenor harmony.

Once at the dance, the boys rushed to one side of the gym and girls to the other as if something radioactive occupied center court. Mrs. Langworthy was in attendance, still in full red-checked costume and assumed the role of dance master. She turned on the record player and once again the gym was filled with scratchy tunes. Next, she turned her attention to the boys, with instructions to invite the girls to dance, as we had been taught. Knowing there was no viable alternative, we did as told. In short order, boys and girls were in pairs bowing to their partners and then to the person on their right. Before we knew what happened, we were do-si-doing and allemande-lefting, and promenading. Some of us even smiled.

Punch and cookies were served after four or five dances. While we stuffed ourselves, Mitchell School and Cub Scout officials gathered together and declared the dance such a success that it would be repeated the following year.

Boys, one year later, I asked Cathy to the Cub Scout Square Dance again, but that time I looked straight into those blue eyes when I asked.