

## Love and Hate in the Fourth Grade: On Why I Slapped Catherine Bogdanovich (and earned the “Cone of Shame”)

(4 minute read)

When do boys begin getting crushes on girls, and girls on boys? My first memory of having a crush was in third grade. Looking at Paula H. warmed my heart, but I didn't warm hers, not even after I presented her with an extra-large card on Valentine's day. I moved on.

Things intensified in fourth grade. Let's call the girl Catherine Bogdanovich. Her family had recently moved to town. She was the cute new girl in my fourth-grade class who easily caught the eyes of boys. In school, she sat three or four seats behind me. Catherine was not only cute, but way ahead of her peers in sexual development. She knew how to make advances on a boy. One day in class, the girl sitting behind me tapped on my right shoulder and passed me a piece of paper, folded into fourths. “This is from Catherine” she whispered. *Wow*, I thought, *a note from that cute new girl!* I stealthily opened it (passing notes was prohibited and we could get in trouble if the teacher discovered . . .) She wrote the note in cursive. “Hi. I think you are cute. I really like you. – Catherine B.” She drew hearts on the note with a red pencil. My heart went a-flutter. I'm sure I blushed. The girl behind me giggled quietly, aware of what was up. I didn't know how to respond, and don't think I did, but I remember my heart expanding big enough to be an eighth grader—and Catherine Bogdanovich?—well, she was already two years ahead of that! I had not yet heard of terms like “premature thelarche” or “precocious puberty,” and have no idea if Catherine Bogdanovich was going through any of that.

It so happened that her family bought a house just up the street from mine. Several days after passing the note, she sent another to my home via her little sister, who had made friends with one of my younger sisters. It was not really a note; it was a questionnaire, neatly folded in half, length-wise. I was to complete and return it by messenger (my little sister). The questions went something like this:

1. Do you think Catherine B. is cute? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_
2. Do you think Catherine B. is pretty? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_
3. Do you like Catherine B? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_
4. Do you love Catherine B? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_
5. Do you hate Catherine B? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_
6. Do you want to kiss Catherine B? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_

Whoa! This girl was really hitting on me. I'd have eagerly checked Yes on all but question five, then sent the questionnaire back quick delivery via courier, i.e. my younger sister. Problem is, my Oldest Brother—a mean and nasty boy at the time—intercepted the note before it got to me. He happened to be walking into the front door when Catherine Bodanovich's sister brought the note. She handed it to him and said, “my sister wants to give this to Kenny.” He, of course, being the nasty big brother that he was, opened and read it before giving it to me. Now, this particular brother not only had a mean streak, but he was a sadist: he took joy and delight in mocking and

ridiculing his little brother. He cackled (with wickedness, I thought) as he read the contents of the questionnaire *out loud* to a room full of family members and friends! I was humiliated, embarrassed, angry. I tried to snatch the paper away from him, but he read every last word before turning it over to me.

Humiliation and anger sometimes take a strange turn, and from that moment on, I hated Catherine Bogdanovich. I would have checked the answers on that wretched questionnaire differently, just to prove I didn't like her and didn't want to kiss her (though, I did). I don't remember completing the questionnaire and returning it. No matter, this brother's sadistic streak was relentless in his mockery, for days. Maybe weeks. So much so that I planned to run away from home to escape it.

It was a Saturday morning, and I'd had enough. I was probably crying from the incessant taunting ("Hey, puke hole, have you kissed Catherine Bogdanovich yet?"). I was determined to get out of that house, for good! I knew I'd need food and water to survive, so I made a sandwich and wrapped it in wax paper (PBJ, I think.) I filled a canteen with water. I pulled extra clothes out of my closet and stuffed them into a paper grocery bag. I made it clear I was leaving and never coming back. I was nine years old. Oldest Brother, of course, taunted me all the more: "Here, let me help you pack—you little turd!" My mother tried to calm things down and coax me from leaving, but I'd have none of her pleas.

I knew just where I was going to live: in a small open pit at the edge of town, hidden on the far side of a hill. The hill was no more than five blocks from our house. From this open pit the town's street department dug out rocks for gravel roads (this was before asphalt came to our small town). The gravel pit was a solitary place, hidden from view, and I'd sometimes go there to be alone. That's where I was going to live. I could lie on my back and watch clouds. I could make hollow whistling sounds that sounded like wind blowing across the prairie or through cracks in buildings of abandoned ghost towns, and I, the lonely cowboy, would wail with it.

Sometimes townspeople discarded unwanted appliances in the open pit. There was an old ringer-washing machine, lying on its side. The space inside it was enough for a small boy to crawl into in case of rain (rare in Nevada) or cold (very common in winter.) There were two cement slabs—probably from the corner of a building (they were L-shaped.) You could sit on them. My friends and I referred to them as the "chairs." Once I arrived, I would relax on one of the chairs to eat my sandwich. I could pour a bit of water from my canteen on the cement, then smell the petrichor-like freshness (have you ever smelled concrete after a rain? It is earthy and rich.) At times, at home, while lying in the yard, I licked the sidewalk with my tongue, just to release that scent. Yes, I could live happily in the open pit, and return home only for another sandwich, when no one was there.

I relished the thought of being a runaway. However, just as I was walking out the front door—which Oldest Brother gladly held open for me (while smirking)—my mother reminded me that I had swimming lessons that morning. *Shouldn't you wait until after lessons to run*

*away?* she asked. That made sense; I didn't want to miss swimming. I was persuaded, in the very nick of time. When I returned home, I'd forgotten about my plan for running away. But Catherine Bogdanovich didn't let me forget why I was supposed to hate her. She continued to make advances, which made me all the madder. I'd had enough. I had to prove to her that I hated her—my misery was all her fault—even though I really did want to kiss her.

It was after school, late Autumn, I believe (I remember everyone wearing cold-weather coats). Since Catherine lived just up the street from me, we tended to walk home from school on pretty much the same paths. One day, I caught up to her. Told her I hated her. I even tried to slap her, but she resisted and fended me off. I was surprised at how tall she was—taller than me. Two of her friends accompanied her. My memory is not clear, but they probably scolded me—“Leave her alone! Go away!” I think I did manage to land one feeble slap to Catherine's face, and even made her cry. Did that give me some sick comfort for my misery? I don't remember, but now I can see myself looking around in all directions, after the slap, and seeing shame everywhere I looked.

The passing of years brings back forgotten memories. Now, in my old age, as I remember that scene, I wish I hadn't slapped Catherine Bogdanovich; instead, I wish I had kissed her— that cute new girl who was beginning to ripen sexually, and provocatively, at an early age.

I now blame it all, of course, on my Wretched Big Brother—the jerk who really deserved a slap in the face for ruining an incipient puppy love.