

SANDY DAYS, SALTY NIGHTS

Fanning the flames



ArtisHENDERSON
sandydays@floridaweekly.com

Much to my chagrin, I was never a girl scout. Though I didn't envy the green polyester jumpsuits, I was jealous of the wilderness adventures I imagined those girls sharing. I dreamt-up elaborate, envy-fueled scenarios where scuff-kneed scouts in kelly green berets tromped through the woods, laying small animal traps and learning to read a compass.

As it turns out, I was fantasizing about the wrong scout division (boy scouts get to go canoeing and learn how to survive in the wilderness, girl scouts are the masters of cookie commerce), but I did eventually learn how to lay a campfire. Working at a summer camp along the Pennsylvania line, I was taught by more seasoned counselors how to build a wood frame and pile on kindling. Each evening at dusk, as the sun dipped behind the hills and cool shadows overlaid the campsite, we gathered around the rock-lined pit, striking a match and sending orange

flames shooting up through the tinder.

Late in the evening, as the last echoes of campfire songs stilled in the smoky air and the moon shined through the elms, the fire burned down to mere embers. Heavy-lidded campers made their way to cots and counselors doused the remnants of the fire. Red pieces of burning wood smoked and turned gray as we extinguished the still-glowing coals. Some mornings, despite our best efforts the night before, a thin column of smoke rose from the ashes, hinting at a heat still burning within.

In many ways, relationships are like this. Dousing the flames is no guarantee that once-burning passions are extinguished, and sometimes it takes little to reignite a bonfire. At the same time, some embers are easily cooled – by distance, time, or circumstance – and no amount of kindling can coax flames from cold ash.

Take, for instance, "Dillon." I wish I could call him my first love, but in that teenage way of tentative dating, only learning the first steps of the elaborate mating dance that will come later in life, it's not really love (not in my book, anyway). But, it was close enough that we still keep in touch, calling one another periodically and rehashing old

times until we're both panting into the phone with the billow of memories.

We've seen each other little since high school, and we often wonder aloud during those late-night phone calls what it would be like if we got together again. If we poked around in the fire pit of our hearts, would we find embers there, banked but still hot to the touch, ready to burst into flame? Or would we discover that the coals have long since cooled, that once extinguished, the fires of this relationship cannot be relit?

This year, we'll be having our 10-year reunion here in Fort Myers. Dillon called to tell me he'll be coming to town. He's newly single, and it's the first time in six years we're both with-

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out a partner. Now, as we talk, there is an underlying, fiery current and the air crackles with heated anticipation. Perhaps, when we meet again, we'll discover nothing but the ashes of our past romance. Then again, maybe a little fanning is all it'll take for this old flame. ■

Contact Artis

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