

The Shape of Love

By Daniel L. O'Connell

The three inseparable friends lolled leisurely on a single park bench near the edge of "The Grove," a 10-acre park serving as the focal point on the campus of the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss) in Oxford, Mississippi. It was spring break of their senior year at Ole Miss so the campus was emptying out like a fifth of bourbon at a campus frat party.

Skipper sat on the left, Maggie on the right and, of course, Brick was in the middle as usual, both in physical position and in his role as the glue that held him together with the two people he loved most in the world. The trio laughed easily as the warm spring breeze fanned the ardor of their shared love. They awaited the arrival of the southbound passenger train which would rumble them along from Oxford to New Orleans for their version of spring break revelry.

The Grove was merely a park on that spring day, a far cry from the riotous hub of tailgating and elaborate cuisine that it became for every Saturday home football game of the season. Brick and Skipper had often been the center of conversation and rash speculation at those pregame soirees. How many of those beautiful sky-touching passes would Brick launch to the heavens and how many would fall gracefully into Skipper's eager and vise-gripping hands? The wagering became louder and more furious with each succeeding round of alcoholic libation.

Skipper broke the silence as he said, "I'm sure gonna miss those days, Brick. You are the best quarterback in the nation. All I had to do was to run without falling down until that glorious pigskin miraculously fell into my hands."

"It wasn't quite that easy for you, Skipper," Brick replied. "Those days the football just seemed to be an extension of our friendship. It left my hand and the damn thing just knew that it had to settle in the outstretched hands of my dear friend. That is what made us so great."

"You boys and your football," Maggie interjected. "Here you are with a beautiful Memphis southern belle and all you can talk about is that dirty old brown thing."

The boys both turned in Maggie's direction preparing their most eloquent retorts but the wail of the train whistle fortuitously interrupted them. The three friends quickly grabbed their suitcases and hustled off toward the Oxford Depot which, in that era of the 1940's, served as the emotional, commercial and travel hub of Oxford.

They clambered aboard the passenger car and selected two seats across the aisle from one another near the rear of the coach. Maggie slid gracefully into the seat on the left, leaving space for her beau, Brick, to cuddle next to her. To her dismay, Brick chose the seat next to Skipper in order to continue their football recollections and to speculate on how they might recreate those glorious feelings in the future.

To an extent, Maggie was accustomed to such behavior. Maggie wanted to be elevated to a pedestal unreachable by anyone except Brick. She saw herself like one of the full-skirted beauties at Cypress Gardens settled on a bench far from the visitors. She wished to be viewed and admired from afar by an adoring public but unreachable for all save her glorious Brick.

Still, Skipper was always there like a tick, sucking away some of the love from Brick that Maggie wished not to share. The depth of Brick's friendship with Skipper was obvious to all with many speculating that it teetered on the edge of perversion if not already fallen into that forbidden abyss.

Maggie primped. She pouted. She launched glaring leers toward the two boys. She even wept a little but it seemed like she had become invisible.

"Maybe there really is something unholy about those two," Maggie said to herself. "If Brick does follow through with his promises of marriage to me, will we need an extra wide four-poster bed to make room for Skipper?" she wondered to herself.

After an hour in the rocking train coach cradle supplemented by several snorts of bourbon from the boys' flask, Skipper succumbed to slumber with his head leaning heavily against the picture window displaying the Mississippi countryside. Brick, lively as ever, slipped across the aisle into the seat next to Maggie.

"How are you doing darling?" Brick crooned in his best southern drawl.

"Well, quite frankly I'm feeling a little neglected with you spending all that time with Skipper," she said with an obviously snarky tone. "Honestly, I do believe that you love that boy more than you love me," she continued.

"Now, Maggie," Brick began, tenderly draping his arm over her shoulders tense from her obvious jealousy. "Yes, I surely love Skipper but it's a different kind of love. Maybe, we three are what they call a love triangle," he continued.

“The love among the three of us is too irregular to be called a triangle,” Maggie responded. “Maybe it’s more like a love trapezoid with you and Skipper making up the two non-parallel vertical legs and me alternating between being the top and bottom bases of the thing,” she added.

“I guess I am supposed to be the top base when it’s time to keep you two out of trouble and the bottom base when the pair of you face the low times,” Maggie speculated. “With you two fellas always leaning one direction and then another, most times I don’t know which base I am supposed to be,” she concluded.

“Some folks say that you and Skipper are dirty old men doing unthinkable things,” Maggie said sheepishly. “Many times, I don’t know what to think,” she mumbled.

“What the hell, Maggie,” Brick shouted. “How can you dare repeat such slanderous gibberish? Why can’t two men have a friendship that rises to the level of love without someone making it sordid and putrid?” Brick continued.

“Well, what exactly do you think love is?” Maggie asked.

“Love is wanting good things for someone else,” Bret began. “Love is wanting to help the object of your affection to become the best that they can possibly be. What does that have to do with gender?” he concluded.

“I’ve never heard it put quite that way,” Maggie said, hanging her head.

“You know how much I love you, Maggie. Haven’t my constant love proclamations and our spectacular lovemaking adequately demonstrated that to you?” Brick questioned.

“Yes, I have always thought so but then there is always Skipper lurking in the shadows wanting to kidnap you to steal more of your time that rightly belongs to me,” Maggie replied.

“You are my sunrise and my sunset, Maggie,” Brick said tenderly. “But isn’t there enough time in a 24-hour day for friendships, even loving friendships with a few carefully chosen others?” he asked.

“There are things, personal things that a man can best only share with another man and, likewise a woman can only best share with another woman,” Bret postulated. “Does that in some way diminish the love between romantic partners?” he questioned.

“What about your relationships with your female friends?” Brick queried. “Don’t you tell them things that you wouldn’t share with me? Don’t they provide a special kind of comfort and camaraderie that no man could ever understand much less provide?” he added.

“Well, yes, I suppose so, honey,” Maggie replied. “But Skipper kind of acts funny. Sometimes he seems more like a woman than a man,” she said quietly.

“Don’t you think that I know that?” Brick said impatiently. “Is a variance in the level of so-called masculinity a crime of some sort?” he asked. “Are we humans supposed to be a homogenization of more of the same? Is a star athlete somehow superior to a sensitive poet? Is a hairy beast of a man somehow more manly than one who demonstrates kindness and compassion?” he added.

“The world seems intent on denigrating any relationship that falls outside some contrived boundaries of gender roles. Why can’t a man and a woman be loving friends without the tongue-waggers speculating that they are sleeping together? In truth, why can’t friendship of any nature among any sexes rise to the level of love without others turning it into something sinful?” Brick offered.

“For that matter, what if Skipper really is one of those “queers” as society calls them?” Brick asked. “Does that mean that I am forbidden from loving him in a wholesome way even though our sexual preferences may diverge? Is everyone who is not exactly like everyone else supposed to be unloved and ostracized? If that is the way of this world then send me to another one because I will have none of that misguided nonsense,” he said slumping into his seat with exhaustion from his emotional soliloquy.

“Love is love, and that is the end of it. There is no logic, no planning, no plotting, no scheming. If those are involved then that is not love. Love just happens and it cannot and should not be constrained by some arbitrary societal bull hockey,” Brick said.

“Oh, Brick,” Maggie gushed. “I had no earthly idea that you were such a love philosopher. I love you more this moment than I ever have. Kiss me before I burst” Maggie exclaimed.

Brick wrapped his arms around the southern beauty and kissed her like she had never been kissed before. It was a melt your soul kiss and both of them felt it. No bells tolled but the train wheels clickety-clacked in time to the two lovers’ heartbeats and the train whistle suddenly broke the silence proclaiming a new level of understanding to all of the countryside.

Still, while passionately kissing Brick, Maggie slowly opened one eye and looked across the aisle at Skipper and she wondered.