

His Fingers Brushed Her Cheek (Our thirty-first wedding anniversary)

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It was our thirty-first wedding anniversary several years ago. Me and Honey Nim had blown through the years in a period that seems brief as a meteor fly-by. Her Japanese palate likes anything from the ocean, so we chose a nice seafood restaurant for our commemoration.

A day earlier, I had finished reading a new book by Phyllis Edgerly Ring called *Snow Fence Road*, a beautiful, expressive novel about complex relationships and the restorative power of love. Novelists say the secret to writing is to make the reader care about characters that are so true to life that the reader walks around all day having imaginary conversations with them. Set in the fictional coastal town of Knowle, Maine, this is that kind of book. It's a great read, which I ingested in huge gulps and dealt with "book hangover" for several days afterward (the feeling where you don't want to start a new book because you're still enjoying living in the one you just read).

At the restaurant, as we sat there talking and laughing about truth, beauty and life, I recall a description in Phyllis' novel where the man "reached out and lightly brushed her cheek with his fingers."

At that point we have only been married a third of a century, so the juices are still fresh in us, and the lightly brushing fingers thing seems like the perfect romantic expression for a moment like this. There we are nicely dressed, with the ambient light, the wall tapestry décor, sitting toe-to-toe in an intimate restaurant. I reach out and brush my fingertips against her left cheek. My caress is light, confident.

She smiles a "thank you," spoken so softly it cannot be heard beyond the few inches between us.

It was like a time-machine replay of our love's first awakening three decades earlier. I am inspired to try a variation on more of the same. I ever so gently reach up with my right hand to brush the back of my fingers down her right cheek. "I love you," I tell her.

Her face flickers in the candlelight. Her eyes twinkle.

And now for perfection - I reach out both hands, brushing my fingertips down both cheeks. And finally this: I gently cup the side of her face with one hand. She reaches her hand up to take mine, move it toward her mouth, and kiss my palm.

Still, she's starting to think this is a bit odd. She looks at me with a quizzical smile, "What?"

That's when I tell her about the romantic book, the hero, the pretty girl, a blossoming love similar in many ways to our thirty-one-year-old kind, and how I was inspired to brush her cheek with my fingers. As I explain the whole thing to her I find myself once again, rendered adorable in her eyes.

The way she looks upward and to the left, tells me she is leafing through her mind's Japanese-English dictionary. It's housed in the foyer of her cerebrum, a large space lined with shelves. I hear wheels softly grinding inside the right hemisphere, as she quickly grabs a verb off the shelves, then sorts through some nouns, a participle, a purgatory, an interrogative doodlebug. The gears finally catch with a click. A bright shimmering smile spreads across her face, lighting her up as she hesitantly says, "I am a peaceful ... shining ... rabbit."

A peaceful, shining rabbit? Why not? Maybe this is why we've never become bored with each other in three-plus decades.

Ours was a very typical courtship and marriage. She came from Japan, and I from West Texas. We were introduced to each other by the Korean, the Reverend Sun Myung Moon and were married on July 1, 1982 along with 2,074 other couples in Madison Square Garden, where we covered the floor of the arena in neat rows of alternating grooms and brides.

One might think a mass wedding is not romantic, but it was. So very. The room was filled with love. Love times two thousand. All I saw was her. When we exchanged rings, I also slipped onto her finger my great-grandmother's gold wedding band. I carried pictures of my parents, grand and great grandparents, in my suit pocket. The whole family, past and present, was there in the room as we were sprinkled with holy water.

Like I said, your typical wedding.

On any other night the Garden's arena floor is covered with a slab of ice, and hockey players knock each other's teeth out. And 30 years earlier, Marilyn Monroe stood where we stood and sang "Happy birthday, Mr. President" to JFK, while wearing a dress so tight she had to be sewn into it. So who's to say what's normal in the world?

A great many of my friends in our community also celebrate their wedding anniversary on the same day. Each one's marriage and life is, of course, unique, with a unique book to be written about it. Certainly one common aspect in a group of thousands married at the same time is that there is not a chance of any of us ever failing to remember our wedding anniversary.