

# Miss Sloey Learns ToTango

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**By Ken McLean**

The first great love of my life was Miss Sloey. She was in her early twenties and I had just turned 6. The age difference might have been of some concern to my parents but it didn't bother me a bit. I could wait.

Miss Sloey was was my first grade teacher at Eberhart elementary school on Chicago's southwest side. She was a tall, willowy redhead with greenish eyes behind horn rimmed glasses, ruby red lips and a seductive smile. Actually, I didn't quite understand what "seductive" meant back then but I had a general idea. She was a far cry from my Kindergarten teacher Mrs. Alden, a gentle white haired lady in her sixties who sat primly behind her desk with folded hands and implored us to behave nicely. Miss Sloey never sat behind a desk. She was always swishing around the room and looking over our shoulders, her perfume hanging in the air, as we sat hunched over our desks struggling with our assignments. She didn't have to ask us to behave nicely – we were too taken with her to misbehave, especially us unruly boys.

Miss Sloey reminded me a little of my mother who was also very pretty and only a few years older. My mother cut quite a dashing figure in our staid working class neighborhood. She was not like the older stout mothers who wore babushkas and bulging house dresses. My mother was slim and wore fashionable clothes and played poker with the men in our family. She enjoyed going to race tracks and betting on horses and to Polynesian restaurants where she ordered exotic rum drinks with flowered swizzle sticks. Her favorite was called "A Missionary's Downfall."

Our house was only a block away from school and so I was allowed to go home for lunch. My mother always had lunch ready, usually a peanut butter sandwich and a bowl of soup from a pre-Warhol can of Campbell's tomato. I felt I was really fortunate to be able to go home for lunch with my pretty mother while the other kids had to carry their lunch in a lunch box and eat in the drab school lunchroom. Not me. My mother and I sat on chrome and plastic chairs around our wooden kitchen table standing atop our linoleum covered floor.

When I came home for lunch the first day my mother wanted to know all about my new teacher. What was her name? Did I like her? What was she like? Was she old? Was she pretty? I answered the best I could between bites of my sandwich but when my mother asked "Is she prettier than me?" I paused. I was only six but I knew a trick question when I heard one. "No" I lied, "She is not prettier than you."

Miss Sloey handed us our homework assignments that she wrote and printed out on the school's ditto machine. The type was purple and the paper was always a little damp. We had to check boxes, connect dots, draw pictures, color objects and cut out shapes. They were a challenge for me. One day I got confused and cut where I was not supposed to. Miss Sloey gave me another copy of the assignment and wanted to know whatever gave me the idea to make a cut. "Where do you see the word cut on the paper?" she demanded. "I'll give you a hundred dollars if you can find the word 'cut'."

I was devastated but I took the paper home hoping that after careful examination I could find the word 'cut' somewhere on the paper. I didn't want Miss Sloey to think I was a dunce which I probably was. I also wanted the hundred dollars. I looked at the paper for a long time but came up empty.

One day at lunch as I was slurping my tomato soup my mother casually mentioned that Miss Sloey was a student in my father's class in ballroom dancing. My father worked as an instructor for the Chicago Park District and he held an evening adult class in ball room dancing. Miss Sloey was learning how to tango.

The tango!

I knew about waltzes and polkas that my hefty German aunts danced at wedding receptions which typically took place in a second floor hall over a tavern accompanied by a boisterous accordion. But a tango was new territory. I didn't exactly know what the mysterious tango was but it sounded very exotic. It seemed to be one of those things adults discussed quietly among themselves – something that us kids were not supposed to know about.

I could hardly contain my excitement when I returned to school that afternoon. Miss Sloey was learning to do the tango! I thought about whispering this new discovery into the ear of some of my classmates but on second thought I decided to keep this gold nugget of information to myself. No one in the class would know what I knew other than Miss Sloey herself. It would be our little secret.

The secret knowledge that Miss Sloey was learning the tango made her all the more alluring to me. I paid strict attention as she stood at the blackboard and taught us things like how to write using the Palmer method while we sat in our tiny desks bolted to the floor. I hung on her every word. One day she told us that small pieces of coal would eventually become diamonds over many years.

A light bulb was suddenly turned on in my young mind. I was descended from a long line of canny Scotsmen and while I may have bungled Miss Sloey's intricate homework assignments, I knew a good business opportunity when I saw one. All I had to do was save a few pieces of coal and when I grew up they would have turned into diamonds and I would be rich. Unlike the other kids in my class who were not alert enough to grasp the wonderful opportunity tossed out by Miss Sloey, I would not have to labor in a factory or office. I could live in a mansion and play golf and sail my boat on Lake Michigan and maybe dance the tango with a still young Miss Sloey.

When I returned home that afternoon I slipped down into our basement and selected a few choice pieces of coal from our coal bin and hid them away in a dresser drawer. My mother soon discovered them and called me into the room. "How did these pieces of coal get in the dresser?" she yelled. I pretended not to know but she somehow could always tell when I was lying. Finally she wormed it out of me. I told her that Miss Sloey said that the coal would turn into diamonds and that I wanted to be rich when I grew up. My mother laughed and told me it would take a very long time and that I would be dead and up in heaven before the coals became diamonds.

As my first year of school was drawing to a close I hoped that I would be held back so that I could spend another year with Miss Sloey. But it was not to be and I passed into second grade. The rest of my grade school teachers have been mostly forgotten but Miss Sloey still occupies a prominent place in my memory. Recently my wife and I went to see a revival of Pajama Game at Arena Stage. When the band began the sultry tango piece called *Hernando's Hideaway* it brought back my childhood infatuation with the fabulous Miss Sloey.

*I know*

*a dark*

*secluded place ...*