

Looking Up That Lost Love

Ever wondered what an old flame is up to? For better or worse, an answer might be just a click away

BY ANNA MEDARIS



UDI MUTAL REMEMBERED one distinctive feature of her high school boyfriend, Steve Gove: his flaming red hair.

J So when she saw someone with his name commenting on a friend's Facebook post four decades after their breakup, Mutal wasn't sure it was *that* Steve Gove. Was Steve-the-commenter's hair gray under that hat? Then again, the Seattle natives were in their mid-60s. Could this guy be her Steve?

Mutal called the shared connection to ask. "The first thing she said was, 'Queen Anne High School, 1964!'" Mutal immediately realized, "Oh my God, that's him."

At the time, romance wasn't on their minds. The couple had dated less than a year and broken up undramatically when Gove left for college the year before Mutal did. Each got married, had kids and hadn't kept in touch. By the time the Facebook connection popped up, Gove had been divorced twice and Mutal was divorcing her spouse of 46 years. "I was, frankly, enjoying my freedom," she says.



Judi Mutal and Steve Gove at their 1964 prom, and their 2025 wedding

But when their shared connection, who knew Gove from the local choir scene, told Gove about Mutal's inquiry, he emailed Mutal. He'd done bolder things before, he hinted: "If I can dance on stage in a tutu"—which he had once done as part of a choir performance—"I can say hi to an old friend." The pair

exchanged a few polite emails before Gove asked Mutal to lunch. She resisted until her grandson intervened: “Nana, it’s just lunch!” He’d underestimated. The post-meal hug and kiss on the cheek left Mutal reeling. “I got in the car, and I shook like a leaf—that just really surprised me,” she remembers. The couple have now been together almost 13 years and were recently named king and queen of their Arizona retirement community’s “senior” prom—61 years after their first. This spring, on Steve’s 80th birthday, the two tied the knot.

EASIER THAN EVER TO FIND A FORMER FLAME

DAYDREAMING ABOUT what happened to the one who got away is nothing new. But the advent of social media and online people finders dramatically shifted how easy it is to do some digging.

“In the past, you may have thought about [an old flame]; you may have asked parents or friends or neighbors, ‘What happened to John?’ And they would give you information, but you couldn’t do much about it, you couldn’t research people,” says sociologist Terri Orbuch, who calls herself “The Love Doctor” and is a distinguished professor at Oakland University in Michigan. “You were much more likely to connect at a high school reunion or a college alumni football game.”

Today, you don’t have to wait for those milestones—and many people don’t. According to a 2020 Pew Research Center survey of nearly 5,000 U.S. adults, more than half said they’ve used online platforms to check up on people they used to date. That has benefits and drawbacks.

On the one hand, a breezy message takes little effort to send through social media or email. As the Goves can attest, one simple post can completely and positively change the course of two lives. A shared history establishes trust, and familiarity breeds attraction.

On the other hand, internet personas tend to be polished. Human brains color in hopeful gaps. The filtered photo you’re flirting with may be a mask hiding a very different truth. People can end up scammed, scorned or even at risk of destroying real-life relationships for one-dimensional fantasies.

“Whenever there’s space for your imagination to play a role, it8. of 14” says Catalina Toma, a media psychologist and communication science professor at

the University of Wisconsin-Madison. “It will kind of fill in the blanks with what you want to believe and what’s consistent with your previous experiences.”

What’s more, social media allows people to be bolder than they would be at a reunion or football game—and their advances aren’t always welcome.

Cynthia L. Dorsey, a director and producer who splits her time between Washington, D.C., and New York City, knows this all too well. When a former boyfriend sent her a Facebook friend request and message years after their breakup, she was initially hopeful. The ex had broken her heart by seeing other people behind her back, and he never acknowledged a four-page, soul-baring letter she had given him. But maybe he had matured; maybe he would apologize.

Dorsey remembers thinking, *I wonder if this could be something, or we could at least start a friendship*. But all too quickly, the ex’s “Hey, beautiful” spiraled into sexual advances. She blocked him.



Geoffrey Miller and Janet Galope at his 2009 high school reunion and in 2025

A (CHESS) PARTNER FOR LIFE

Sometimes, it’s not an old flame who reaches out; it’s someone you once—barely—knew.

That was the case for Janet Galope, who mostly remembered Geoffrey Miller as a nerdy chess kid back in their Washington, D.C.–area middle school. Her crowd was more into hard rock than board games. The two had sat next to

each other in Mr. Timberlake's history class, but as typical middle schoolers, they never spoke.

So when, in their 40s, Miller responded to Galope's Facebook post seeking a chess partner, she took it at face value. She'd never been married and she had two kids, including a teen with significant disabilities. "Most people would run from that situation," Galope says.

But when she and Miller met up, they talked for hours. Days later, when Galope's son was in the emergency room, Miller met them there. Soon enough, Miller admitted he'd had a crush on her 30 years ago.

"It was like I'd known him forever," Galope, now 60, says. And in some alternate universe, she had. The duo had been to many of the same concerts and some of the same professional events. (She's in cybersecurity sales; he recently retired from the government.) They both followed pescatarian diets and wanted a vintage Corvette. "We were just meant to be, because our paths had become so close and [then] they finally crossed," says Galope, who has been married to Miller—whom she has yet to beat in chess—for 11 years.



Esther Rose and Robert Parish, shown in 2024, reunited nine years ago.

BEAUTY AND THE CHIEF

Esther Rose didn't need Facebook to suss out what her grad school ex was up to. He was NBA Hall of Famer Robert Parish. Google did the work for her.

"There was always that lingering *What if?*" says Rose, who would occasionally

search to see how Parish was doing and whether he had ever remarried. (He was divorced when they met.)

But one day about nine years ago, Rose wanted the real-life scoop. She had been married, had a child and was getting divorced. She'd never forgotten how down-to-earth Parish was and how special he'd made her feel when they were dating. "Even during the season, when we were apart, he would send me flowers, CDs, cards," she says. "I actually still have the cards."

Newly separated and on business in Dallas, a three-hour drive from Parish's home in Shreveport, Louisiana, Rose shot her ex a text, asking him to dinner. The famously stoic athlete (who's nicknamed The Chief) replied "yes" without hesitation, she says.

The rest, they say on their TikTok channel, is history. Now Rose, 59 and based in Plano, Texas, and Parish, 72 and still in Shreveport, text and FaceTime often to make their long-distance relationship work. "We have our own lives but also one together," says Rose, who owns a legal marketing firm. "It's crazy that we met 31 years ago and are living happily ever after."

SO YOU WANT TO TEXT YOUR EX

If you're considering making a digital move on someone from your past, follow these tips.

1. KNOW YOUR MOTIVATIONS. Be honest with yourself about any current romantic partners and the intended recipient before hitting send.

Often, preoccupation with old flames prevents single people from being open to new love in real life, says Orbach, author of *Finding Love Again: 6 Simple Steps to a New and Happy Relationship*. "Sometimes we haven't let go of the emotional baggage connected to the person," she says. "But if we don't let go of the past, we can't see that person or we can't see new people for who they really are." In cases where you can't let go of those strong emotions, it's better to limit or cut off social media contact rather than wallow in what was.

Other times, people in relationships are tempted to reach out to an ex because they want a quick hit of admiration or to make their partner jealous. It almost always backfires. "It's so important to work on the current struggles with the current partner so that you're not reaching out for the wrong reasons," Orbach says.

2. MANAGE EXPECTATIONS. Toma calls social media profiles “glamorized glimpses into somebody’s life.” The touched-up selection of postings is curated—a vacation here, a promotion there. No one is advertising their crummy commute or double chin.

That’s in part why it’s a good idea to move online communication to real life within a few weeks if a potential romantic connection is mutually on the table. “When you meet them face-to-face, that bubble of idealization tends to burst,” Toma says.

And be prepared for your outreach to go unanswered. “If the former flame does not accept a friend request or does not want to engage in communication, that’s totally fine,” Toma says. Respect it and move on.

3. ACCEPT WHATEVER COMES. Even if an attempt at reconnection lands you in the friend zone, that can be a net-positive. Having a range of social connections—from your dearest friend to the desk attendant at the YMCA—is important for health and well-being, and for keeping loneliness at bay.

“If it doesn’t work out in terms of a romantic relationship, it’s great to have that connection with somebody from the past and continue it into the present,” Orbuch says.

Plus, research suggests that other people tend to like us more than we think they do. People we’ve lost touch with usually appreciate hearing from us—they just don’t want to make the first move. Why not you?

“There are a lot of people out there, and all you really have to do is say hi or ‘What have you been doing?’ ” Steve Gove says. “It’s just an amazing life, really.”

Anna Medaris is a Brooklyn-based freelance journalist with 15 years of experience covering health and lifestyle for publications including The Washington Post, Women’s Health, Business Insider and U.S. News & World Report.

From top: AARP (Getty Images, 4); Courtesy Judi Mutal; On the Rocks Photography; Courtesy Janet Galope (2); Courtesy Esther Rose