Back to School

By Judy Paris

One day when I was starting high school, the strangest thing happened. A new student came in—a man.

There was an audible sigh, and from the back of the room, someone said, "Oh, hubba, hubba!"

When I entered high school, we were all referred to as "Mr." or "Miss." It took awhile to get used to that, but it made us feel very grown-up. When the teacher introduced the new student, she said, "Mr. Cahill will be joining us under the GI Bill." Then she told us to open our books to page 14. What book it was and what subject, I no longer recall, but I remember joining the other girls in heaving another audible sigh.

Mr. Cahill was no boy. He was a tall, muscular man. He had been in the service. He had seen the world. But I noticed two things: He was going to be a very big distraction in class, and he appeared to be very uncomfortable being there.

When school let out, I raced home to tell my mother that we had a *man* in our class. She immediately thought I was referring to a new teacher. Later she explained that some of the returning servicemen were heading back to school to continue their education. She explained the GI Bill. But she was surprised that someone was entering my grade when others were entering college.

To my mother, the end of World War II meant that she was happy to get rid of her ration stamps for meat and canned goods. "No more 'meatless Tuesday,'" she told my father. For his part, he was happy to rid himself of ration stamps for gasoline. But all I could think of was that there was a new student in my class. *A man*.

But Mr. Cahill was not too happy the next day when every girl showed up wearing heavy pancake makeup, the latest shade of lipstick, and a low-cut blouse. One girl even wore high heels!

At 3 p.m., I rushed home and asked my mother if I could please, *please* start wearing lipstick to school. But I already knew her answer: "Only on weekends, and very lightly."

Of course, I didn't mention what the other girls were wearing. I never mentioned the new student, who blushed easily and ignored the stares of all the girls. I think he wished he were back in the service.

I never gave up hounding my mother about wearing lipstick to school. And she never wavered.

Many years later, long after I was married and had four children, my mother came to visit me one day. "You look so pale," she said. "At least put a little lipstick on."

I turned away and smiled, but I did not remind her of the lipstick episode when I had longed to wear it to school and, like all the other girls, hoped to attract the man in my class. I don't think she would have understood, or even remembered. ❖

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