

THE SNOB

by Cheryl J. Preece

“Have you seen the new girl?” everyone wanted to know. We were eighth graders in a small town in Utah, and when a new girl came to school in the middle of the year, she was the subject of much discussion in the hallways.

Her name was Cathy Carlisle--a beautiful name that sort of rolled from the tongue--and the name fit. She had moved to our town from Salt Lake City when her father bought a local car dealership. She was totally “citified,” and her whole appearance, from her hairstyle to her clothing, bespoke sophistication and money. To teenagers who had grown up in a small rural community and did most of their shopping at one local department store, Cathy Carlisle represented a whole different world--a world that we admired and envied.

Each school day I could scarcely wait to see what Cathy Carlisle would wear. She always seemed to look perfect, with every hair in place and a radiant smile that she flashed to one and all. She moved with a graceful poise that was uncommon to eighth graders, and whatever she undertook at school, whether it was tumbling in gym class or reading aloud in English Literature, she did it flawlessly.

It was strange, but I never heard anyone refer to her a just plain Cathy. It was always “Cathy Carlisle” this and “Cathy Carlisle” that. If Cathy Carlisle did it, or wore it, or said it, “it” became the popular thing to do, wear, or say. Despite Cathy Carlisle’s immense popularity at school, however, she didn’t seem to have any close friends. Hers was not a kind of popularity where everyone flocked around. It was more of an awe-inspired adoration from afar. We all thought she was amazing, and yet we were afraid to speak to her. Cathy Carlisle did not seem to be the sort of person that you went up and mingled with.

The cluster of girls I socialized with at school were the group commonly known as “the nice girls.” We were not the group of girls who were nominated for everything, nor were we the “nobodies.” We were just kind of middle ground. Probably because our crowd felt rather threatened by anyone as perfect as Cathy Carlisle, we began to refer to her a “the Snob.” To our way of thinking, it just followed that anyone as exceptional as she seemed to be must be stuck on herself. The fact that she really didn’t “run” with any of the kids at school only supported that idea.

The conversation among us began to go more along the line of, “I wonder what the Snob’s going to wear?” and “You can be sure the Snob will get it right!” But we were still just as awed by her as ever.

Then came the day of the eighth-grade sock hop. Because we were considered too young for nighttime activities, eighth-grade dances were held in the afternoons in the gymnasium. The first hour at these dances was always spent the same way. The girls sat on the bleachers on one side of the gym while the boys sat on the other side. Minutes would drag by while the music played, and boys and girls stared at one another in acute embarrassment.

Finally, a threesome of brave boys would jointly walk over to the girls’ bleachers. Then, almost in unison, they would ask three girls to dance. The three couples, each fearful of reaching the dance floor first, would timidly walk out and begin to shuffle their feet. The ice was finally broken, and it was safe to dance now. Slowly other couples would get up to tromp across the floor.

This particular dance began as any other. Most of my friends had gone out with partners, and I was still sitting on the bleachers, not particularly caring, until I looked up and saw Foy Murray walk in. A feeling of dread came over me as he shuffled past the bleachers, clumsily, with that silly smile on his face.

Foy Murray was mentally retarded and attended the special learning school next to the junior high. He rode the same bus as the junior high students and delighted in attending our school activities. I didn't understand why our principal allowed him to join in--I thought he was a nuisance.

At the school dances, Foy loved to ask the girls to dance. No one ever accepted, but he would go to one girl after another, undaunted. Our response was always the same. We would giggle in embarrassment, roll our eyes, and try to ignore him until he went away.

That day, as Foy walked closer to me, meeting rejection after rejection, I decided not to stay and be subjected to the usual humiliation. I scrambled to the top of the bleachers where I hoped I would be out of sight. As I settled into my new spot, I gave a small groan. Foy was approaching Cathy Carlisle! This was her first school dance since moving to our town. She didn't ride the bus, so she would not have encountered Foy Murray yet.

"Wow," I thought, "the Snob will die when Foy asks her to dance."

I held my breath as I watched; then I couldn't believe my eyes! To my utter shock, Cathy Carlisle stood up and let Foy lead her out onto the dance floor. She was as graceful as ever, looking perfectly lovely. As the music started and Foy put his arm awkwardly, hesitantly, on her waist, she smiled that wonderful smile directly into his eyes. But it was Foy's face that kept my eyes riveted. It was absolutely rapturous! I had never seen him look like that. It was obvious that he was thrilled beyond belief. The two of them moved around the dance floor, his big feet stumbling over the steps, hers never faltering as she continued to smile.

I sat with my mouth open and realized that everyone else did too. Couples on the floor had stopped dancing to turn to watch. Cathy Carlisle and Foy appeared not to notice and danced as if they were oblivious to everyone else.

When the dance ended, Foy walked Cathy Carlisle back to the bleachers, a new look of confidence on his face. He moved on to another girl on the bleachers, asking her to dance. After a moment's hesitation, the girl jumped up and joined him. He grinned widely at her and everyone else around him, looking as overjoyed as he had moments before.

I descended the bleachers in a hurry to join my friends near the door. "I can't believe it," I said. "Cathy Carlisle just danced with Foy Murray."

At that precise moment, I glimpsed my own reflection in the hall window nearby. I stared long and hard as a sudden realization struck me. I had always considered myself "too good" to dance with someone like Foy Murray. As I looked once again at Foy's glowing face on the dance floor, I knew what kind of person that made me.

I sat, feeling wretched, as I watched Foy dance every dance after that, each with a different girl. From then on, it became an unspoken law at school dances that if Foy Murray asked a girl to dance, she didn't refuse. It was a sort of contest between us to see who could make him look the happiest.

Each day as we waited for the bus after school, we chatted with Foy, and soon began to actually look forward to having him join in on our conversations. We asked him questions and became genuinely interested in him as a person. Throughout the rest of the school year, Foy continued to make lots of friends, and as he did so, he blossomed before our eyes.

I don't know what became of Cathy Carlisle. Her family moved back to the city a year later. Foy Murray passed away a few years later, but I've often considered how less joyful his last years on earth might have been if not for one lovely 13-year-old who set a firm example of friendship for her classmates (*The New Era*, Feb. 1992).