

BETSY

by Joe Barella

I first met Betsy while employed as a maintenance man at Wyckham Rise, a private girls School of the Arts at the high school level. We had gotten a new headmaster who had two children, one a typical boy of thirteen and his ten year old, mentally challenged sister.

One day as I was replacing a valve on the school's heating system, I heard screeching and loud laughter coming from a nearby stairwell. While noise during class changes wasn't unusual, the loudness of this laughter piqued my curiosity. As I approached the stairwell, there astride the banister, against the newel post on the next landing was a very sturdy ten year old girl who was the source of most of the clamor. When she spotted me she asked one of the girls who I was. From that day on, there was no doubt I was her favorite and the shout of "Joe!!!" echoed through whatever building she found me in.

Even though her parents kept her on a very busy schedule getting her the best possible education, she would always manage to find me somewhere on the campus a couple of times a day. In the beginning, I found this awkward in spite of being very flattered by this adoration. After a while I became quite relaxed with her even when she'd ambush me by jumping me on my back from the next landing as I climbed or descended the stairs. Imagine a 60 pound body dropping on your shoulders from above when you're not expecting it. The first time, my legs buckled a little but I had been training for a marathon so they held and after that I was always prepared.

You may ask why I did not go to her dad about it. First of all, I had already become very fond of her and her antics and secondly, it probably wouldn't have stopped her anyway.

Over a period of time, Betsy and I became friends. I learned her favorite color was purple and her favorite saying was, "Joe Barella, you weird!"

One afternoon as I was installing a new expansion tank on the dishwashing machine in the kitchen of the dining hall, she was sitting nearby peeling an orange. When I finished my project and turned, there was Betsy with the orange, the pith now black from her hands, reaching towards me saying "Here, Joe."

Having seen where those little hands had been over the last few months I had known her, my mind raced to find some way to avoid eating that orange but as I looked into those eyes watching me intently, section by section I ate that orange knowing she'd be crushed if I didn't. I'm still here at 75 years old so it must have been the right thing to do.

A year later I left the school for a new job but I never forgot her and I still smile when I think of her.