



# Hello, Thirteen

*Bumping into a childhood crush brings adolescent intensity rushing back.* **By SANDRA A. MILLER**

I was visiting my mom last weekend in the town I moved away from almost three decades ago. After our usual round of errands followed by a pizza lunch, I dashed into a nearby grocery store to buy her a mousetrap. While scanning the aisles, I heard a man calling my name. “Sandy?”

I turned toward the voice at the checkout. He was lanky, with a tousle of graying hair. After paying, he strolled toward me, shaking his head and chuckling to himself.

“I’m afraid I have no idea who you are,” I started to confess. But then, as he came closer, the years fell away from his face. “Dean?”

We didn’t quite know what to do. Shake hands? Hug? He was sweaty from working out, but a reunion with a childhood friend – OK, crush – after 28 years merited some kind of physical greeting. I took his hand and clutched it for a few awkward seconds.

We’d gone to school together until eighth grade, when he attended public high and I went across town to a private school. We might have seen each other a few times in church after that, but I don’t think we ever spoke again. Yet the connection, as we stood in front of a rack of suntan lotion, was as real as any unbroken friendship.

There is something about looking into your past through another person’s eyes, I kept thinking. There are bonds with the kids you grew up with, then eventually grew away from. You remain the custodians of one another’s earliest memories – your shared piece of history that, in many ways, shapes the person you become.

I stopped short of admitting to Dean that I liked him, as in like like, all those years ago. That seemed to be the kind of thing unhappily married people blurt out if they are looking to have an affair. I was nuts about you in fifth grade, now let’s hook up! I’ve been with my husband, Mark, for 17 happy years. Dean’s wife was his high school sweetheart. We both had kids around the same age and no interest in turning our encounter into a sappy pop ballad.

And yet I wondered how I appeared. Did I look as frazzled as I felt on a hot summer Sunday?

I hoped not as I fiddled with my hair and remembered out loud that our second-grade teacher once saw him turning his shirt around while still keeping it on his neck, then made him do it in front of the class. He remembered, too. And we kept remembering funny little stories from when we were 5, and 10, and 13, a year when I would have traded my prized ticket to the Styx concert for a single kiss.

I looked down the aisle. “Help me find a mousetrap?” I asked. I wasn’t ready to say good-bye. It was such a rare treat to find myself in that faraway place of innocence and longing, where I had never quite expected to be again. This wasn’t a reunion manufactured on Facebook. It was chance and funny and so so sweet.

On the drive home, I was as giddy as a teenager, searching the radio for ’70s love songs that would keep me in that 13-year-old world. Back then, crushes were a mixed bag of deliciousness and torture. At 46, the memories reminded me that I was very much alive and lucky to have the real thing.

Back at home, I told my husband and 10-year-old daughter about

running into Dean. “Should I feel threatened?” Mark joked.

“Hardly. He’s happily married,” I assured him. “Like me.”

“Who is this guy?” my daughter wanted to know.

“An old friend,” I answered. While crushes still seem silly to her, she does understand them. What she might not understand is that her parents occasionally have innocent ones that appear in a burst like the fleeting glow of a sparkler on an August night.

“How long before you’re friends on Facebook?” Mark asked. About a day or so, I figured, but that seemed irrelevant. In fact, talking about it suddenly seemed irrelevant. It was impossible to explain how 15 minutes in a grocery store could mean so much.

What wasn’t irrelevant was how Dean and I said goodbye.

“See you in 28 years or so,” he’d called across the parking lot.

“OK,” I called back, assured that a tiny piece of my girlhood heart was in safe hands.

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