

Becoming A Real Girl

by **Pam Munter**

I was never much good at becoming a girl and I loathed every bit of the relentless indoctrination.

Early family photos either show me looking uncomfortable in frilly girl's clothing or smiling broadly while wearing my preferred dirty jeans and tee shirt. My mother offered to teach me to cook, but I had no interest. Sewing was completely a non-starter. I wanted to be outside, hitting a tennis ball against the wall or riding my bike around the neighborhood. When my mother decided I had earned too many Girl Scout merit badges, she refused to sew anymore on the sash "because it might hurt the other girls' feelings." When I was in the first grade, I wanted to be called Phil. An outlier at an early age.

All this is coming up now because I've been having phone conversations with my junior high school Homemaking teacher. We first met over sixty years ago, a time when becoming a paragon of the socially acceptable female was a more urgent matter than it is today.

In the 1950s, girls were expected to learn the gender-based domestic arts to train for their foreordained positions of wife and mother. The only women I knew with a real job were my teachers and all of them were married. I felt as if I were living in a parallel universe. I didn't want to sit around and gossip over coffee every morning, make fun of men's foibles, or mold a rug rat into some better version of myself. So I went my own way, not an easy road in that unforgiving sex-role stereotyped era.

Contrary to conventional expectation, however, junior high provided a sense of freedom and worth, an oasis of achievement and recognition. I thrived in band and drama, excelled in English and social studies, and looked forward to PE every single day. Eighth grade would have been just about perfect if it hadn't been for that dumb requirement all girls had to take Homemaking.

I walked into the Homemaking class that first day to a noisy room of eighth grade girls, spotless kitchen appliances adorning every wall, and a youthful-looking teacher smiling at us in optimistic expectation.

“Welcome to Homemaking class, girls. I’m Mrs. Potts.”

I laughed derisively.

“Is she kidding?” I asked my best friend Jacquie Weiss sitting next to me. Jacquie never took her eyes off the teacher. I could see she was transfixed.

“She’s so pretty,” Jacquie cooed. I hadn’t noticed, but I saw how perky and animated she seemed, her long dark brown ponytail bobbing around with every movement. She didn’t look that much older than we were.

Jacquie and I had been friends since the fourth grade when we met as we walked to school. We were an odd pair from the start. Jacquie was gawky with frizzy hair and a big nose. I was chunky, already a victim of persistent acne and my blonde hair always seem to go in its own malevolent direction. Mrs. Potts was perpetually pulled together, dauntingly so. I was not happy to be in there at all and, as the days wore on, I began to look at her as a daily reminder of the woman I could never be. I was both repulsed by the assigned meaningless tasks and yet fascinated by the teacher expecting me to do them. My way of dealing was passive-aggressive resistance. When we had projects like baking cookies, I leaned on my baking partner to make the decisions. I became the flamboyant official taster. As the students were entering the room each day, I wrote a mordant aphorism on the board or some sarcastic comment I had cadged from a joke book. I quoted H. L. Mencken: “A cynic is a man who, when he smells flowers, looks around for a coffin.” Or, “If you can smile when everything is going wrong, you’ve found someone else to blame.” A thirteen-year-old wisecracking iconoclast is hard to stop.

Jacquie’s approach was more direct. She hung around after class as long as possible, asking her questions.

“I saw an E in your signature. What does that stand for?” This was a cheeky question in this era, a time when there was a strict wall between student and teacher. Knowing a teacher’s first name was pure gold even if moot, as we never would and never could use it.

“My first name is Elizabeth but my friends call me Liddy.”

This was a major coup for Jacquie. We had always been competitive, at least I was. But this was a contest I didn't think I wanted to win. I let Jacquie do the reconnaissance and continued to hide behind sarcasm and trenchancy, my go-to demeanor in adolescence. And yet I wondered who this alien being might be. Liddy Potts? Really?

To her credit, Mrs. Potts never stopped my blackboard protests. I knew I was pushing the limits of convention but she treated me as she did all the other girls, with warmth and friendliness. It was confusing.

I had already found two strong female role models among my teachers who were much more to my liking: my drama teacher, who good-naturedly challenged me at every turn, and my band teacher, whose warmth was exceeded only by her wry sense of humor. Mrs. Potts was running a distant third. I decided to cede her to Jacquie. While I made it eminently clear who I did not want to be, Jacquie had long ago decided her fondest dream was to be a wife and mother, a sort of Mrs. Potts without the professional career.

I had thought of Mrs. Potts from time to time—on my wedding day; when lecturing on the role of sex-role stereotypes while teaching a class on the Psychology of Women; and, oddly enough, as I walked to the podium to deliver my keynote address before 2000 people at an International Women's Day conference in the 1970s. I didn't understand the reasons for these flashbacks but they were surely there.

The years and decades passed. Jacquie and I reconnected on Facebook. She had, indeed, become a housewife and mother, living in a small town in Northwest Washington. I became a collector of college degrees on my way toward becoming a clinical psychologist and a writer, among other things. I did marry and have a son. A year after the divorce, I met a woman with whom I shared my life for three decades.

With the passage of time and a senescent sense of responsibility, I decided to contact those few teachers who had impacted me so I could thank them. The older I grew, the more aware I had become of their overarching influence. My band teacher had tragically died of diseases related to alcoholism and Alzheimer's; my drama teacher and I exchanged a few emails, had dinner once, but she died soon afterwards. I

Googled Mrs. Potts and found she was teaching ballet in Oregon. I emailed her and she answered almost immediately, asking me to call her.

Unexpectedly, I felt the flush of that familiar adolescent anxiety. Call my Homemaking teacher on the phone? The formality of the past clung like cobwebs inside my head. But I did make the call, and she sounded happy to hear from me.

“Mrs. Potts? Um. Liddie? It’s hard for me to call you that.”

She laughed. “It’s OK. Call me what you wish.”

“I am surprised you remembered me. It has been, what, well over five or six decades, right?”

“That long? Of course, I remembered you. Really, you’re the one I do remember from all my years of teaching.”

I paused to take that in and inhaled deeper than necessary. I was afraid to ask, but I did.

“Why is that?”

“I don’t know. There was something about you. I could tell you needed something from me, but I didn’t know what it was.”

Of course, she was right. I needed her acceptance, her reassurance that I was OK as I was, that it was perfectly fine if I didn’t fit the feminine stereotype. It was more important coming from her because, as a teacher of the “feminine arts,” she was the avatar of the cliché I was expected to approximate.

We chatted for a few more minutes, then she told me she was coming to stay with her cousin just a few miles from where I lived in Palm Desert, California. Would I be up for a visit?

“Absolutely,” I quickly responded. Still, I wasn’t sure I wanted that to happen. Did I want to be reminded of my obstreperous past? A time that was painful, poignant and uncertain? And yet, maybe I could learn more about myself and answer a few leftover questions I had about her.

Twenty years earlier, I had written an autobiography and more recently, recorded a CD at Capitol Records. I sent both of them to her with trepidation. She was not mentioned in the book in favor of the other two role models and I hoped her feelings wouldn’t be hurt. It turned out she didn’t read much of it. I wondered why.

I had quickly decided not to serve lunch because the mere thought of preparing something to eat for my former Homemaking teacher was too fraught with anxiety. It was bad enough that she would inspect my interior decorating. I could still remember the lecture about how to file one's nails (in only one direction) but I knew I had missed other more relevant Homemaking tips. I had a fear of being graded again.

A few weeks later, the doorbell rang. I opened it and saw an older Mrs. Potts, but the same bubbly elfin woman I had observed so long ago—and still wearing the ponytail, now completely gray. We hugged and she sat down on the couch. I brought her up to date, briefly outlining the past fifty years or so, and she did the same. Her husband had died many years earlier, leaving her with three children. They had lived in a remodeled schoolhouse, where she was now teaching classes in bodywork and providing an occasional B&B retreat for groups wanting a bucolic place to meet. At a pause in the conversation, she looked down at her lap.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

Her big brown eyes met mine like a laser. “Why were you so angry back then?”

It was the ghost of Jacob Marley coming back to haunt me for my misdeeds. But, needless to say, she had nailed it. I thought I was being funny and clever and hadn't experienced it as anger.

I gave her a perfunctory, abbreviated answer but knew I'd have to think more about this. Whatever I told her was enough, apparently. We moved on to more casual conversation and she left, promising to write.

Over the next ten years or so she sent me her Xeroxed Christmas letter, adding a few personal sentences. I wrote back, telling her what I was doing. Then last December in her annual note, she said she wanted to call me and asked for my phone number.

Two months passed and I wondered if she had become ill or even had died. By now she would be eighty-seven or so, living alone in that big schoolhouse. Then the night of the Oscars, I was preparing for bed about ten o'clock when the phone rang. The caller ID told me it was E. Potts. Liddie.

“I'm so glad to hear from you. How are you?”

She told me she had been ill for more than a year, lacking energy and losing lots of weight. It didn't sound good.

"I read your book finally and listened to the CD, trying to hear what you were trying to do with each song."

This was a different Liddie than the one I had entertained in my living room years before. When she referred to my book, she didn't seem to realize it had been over thirty years since it was published. She was confused. Her thoughts wandered.

"I was such a young teacher then. We aren't so far apart in age, you know."

"Yeah, well, I'll be seventy-four next month."

"That's young!" we both laughed and then she added. "You're the only student I've ever talked with outside of class. I have thought about you through the years."

I was stunned. "Oh, yeah? Why is that?" I kept my tone of voice casual but steeled myself, afraid to hear what she might say.

Her voice grew louder. "You made it clear: 'I don't want to be here.'"

That made me laugh again. I guess an adolescent is no expert in subtlety. She continued, "I didn't know what to do with you. I had taken classes in education and psychology, but I wasn't prepared for that. Or for you."

"Looking back on it now, I was intimidated, I think. You were pretty, effervescent, accomplished in the areas in which I had no interest or aptitude, and feminine—everything I wasn't."

She seemed surprised at this characterization. While I had sensed her openness to conversations like this, she didn't seem a habitually reflective person. Then I realized she was seeking information about who she was then, just as I had been.

"You know, I told you I'm finishing up a degree in creative writing. In fact, I just had an essay published about that time in my life. I don't mention you by name but it mentions what went on for me then. I'd be happy to send it to you, if you'd like."

"Yeah, I would. I remember you saying when we met that you felt unattractive and fat back then but the photos in your book show you looking thin."

"Well," I chuckled, "Do you think I'd show the reader a photo that wasn't flattering? But my body did change a lot, up and down. My weight was part of the power

struggle between my parents. You'll read about it when I send the essay. Maybe it'll help answer the question you asked back then about my anger."

Another pause, this one a little longer.

"I admire the fact you've found meaning in these years. I wish I could." She went on to tell me that she never read a newspaper or watched TV and didn't keep up with what was happening in the world because it was too distressing. I could hear the sadness in her voice.

Now we were entering the well-trod territory I had once occupied in my role as a clinical psychologist. The next comment I would make could launch me into a different type of relationship with her—helping to guide the last part of my junior high school Homemaking teacher's life. Almost sixty years ago, she wanted so much to teach me how to be a real girl. Now, in one of life's many ironies, I was capable of helping her learn the essential skills she would need in her final years. As I carefully chose my words, I thought of it as paying it backwards.



Pam Munter has authored several books including *When Teens Were Keen: Freddie Stewart and The Teen Agers of Monogram* (Nicholas Lawrence Press, 2005) and *Almost Famous: In and Out of Show Biz* (Westgate Press, 1986). She's a retired clinical psychologist, former performer, and film historian. Her many lengthy retrospectives on the lives of often-forgotten Hollywood performers and others have appeared in *Classic Images and Films of the Golden Age*. More recently, her essays and short stories have been published in *The Rumpus*, *The Manifest-Station*, *The Coachella Review*, *Lady Literary Review*, *NoiseMedium*, *The Creative Truth*, *Adelaide*, *Litro*, *Canyon Voices*, *Open Thought Vortex*, *Fourth and Sycamore*, *Nixes Mate*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Cold Creek Review*, *Communicators League*, *I Come From The World*, *Switchback*, *The Legendary*, *Scarlet Leaf*, *Down in the Dirt* and others. Her play "Life Without" was a semi-finalist in the Ebell of Los Angeles Playwriting Competition. She has an MFA in Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts from the University of California at Riverside/Palm Desert.