Nicest Thing Anyone Has Done for Me

"Guess Who" Echoed Through the Decades

OUR TEACHER, Miss Temperance Longcore, a tall, stately, Lincoln-esque woman, had decorated a cardboard box with red hearts for Valentine's Day in 1942.

The cutest girl in the class was assigned Cupid's task of delivering the valentines that had accumulated in the box for days.

The immovable desks, each with an inkwell, were screwed to the floor in rigid rows and Cupid, whose dress was decorated with red paper hearts, walked up and down the aisles, delivering the cards.

New to the class, awkward, ill at ease and knowing no one, I watched as she dropped an envelope onto each person's desk except mine.

As she neared the bottom of the box, I kept hoping for a miracle but saw the other kids' piles of cards getting higher. Still, I had none.

Then, looking puzzled, Cupid began walking toward me. She dropped an envelope on my desk. I was ecstatic and tore the envelope open. I had to see the card and decode the signature at once.

Miss Longcore had taught us to sign our cards using a code. The number 1 stood for the letter a, 2 for b and so on.

Inside the card, I found the cryptic signature: 7-21-5-19-19-23-8-15.

Decoded, it read, “Guess Who.”

Who was my secret admirer who wanted me to be her valentine?

At recess, each classmate denied sending it.

Days passed and turned to years as I wondered who had been the one person who had made my day and sent me that wonderful card.

Forward to Valentine’s Day in 1972. Now I was a teacher in my own sixth-grade classroom. Girls asked if they could make a valentine box and have Carlos, a plump little fellow and favorite of theirs, play Cupid and hand out the cards.

The holiday came, parents sent in cupcakes and it was almost time for the box to be opened.

In the corner of the classroom, off by himself, sat David, a surly, overweight, ill-kempt student I knew would be ignored.

When the class went to lunch before the festivities, I retrieved a Valentine’s Day card from my desk, signed it “Guess who” and inserted the card in the box. It was then that I realized who had been my secret admirer 30 years before.

—Bob Mankoff, Babylon, New York