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**GRADUATION TIME**  
**By Mrs. Paul E. King**

Becky walked through the heavy doors of the school feeling sad and weepy and like she didn't want to speak to anyone; not even Blaine. Nor Ann. She knew she'd break down and cry if she talked. Three days. Only three more days and she'd be gone. Oh, why, why did it hurt so deeply to graduate! All her school days she'd looked forward to this great event. She'd worked hard so she could graduate with honors. And. . . .

She ran alongside the familiar red brick building where memories were made, dreams were fashioned and friendships were forged that would last a lifetime and, suddenly, she could contain her tears no longer: The emotional dam of her heart broke its boundary, spilling its contents down over her cheeks in small torrents.

She stood against the building and sobbed. The thought that soon she would no longer be a part of the daily schedule of classes nor of the laughter and fun and the daily meeting and greeting of friends, overwhelmed her. Where had the four years sped to so rapidly?

She walked over to a nearby maple tree and sat on the ground. Her back pressed hard against the sturdy trunk of the aged tree. The feel of its stoutness and immobility seemed to comfort her slightly. But only slightly: The ache in her heart remained. So did the tears.

Becky closed her eyes, recalling the first day she passed through the doors of Brentonwood High. She was timid and scared. Like a frightened rabbit, scared. Everything was strange and new to her. She stood inside the big, heavy doors looking up and down the hallway, wondering where to go and what to do. Students milled around her. She felt bewildered. Quickly, she had bowed her head and asked the Lord to help her. When she opened her eyes, a dark-haired, smiling, freckle-faced girl was beside her.

"Hi. I'm Ann Picketing," the voice behind the smile said by way of greeting and introduction. "I believe you're new here. Right?"

"Right," she had answered, adding, "I'm so glad to meet you, Ann. I'm Rebecca Nisely."

Ann had smiled broadly. Then she said, "It's wonderful to have another Christian here. I saw you praying. My heart leaped for joy. Real Christians are in the minority in most schools these days, it, seems. But, then, it doesn't take tons of salt to add flavor to cooking nor to preserve a thing: Jesus said, 'Ye are the salt of the earth.' . . . I'm so happy He sent you here. And now, if you want me to, I'll show you to your room. You're a freshman like I am, I would presume. Right?"

"Right again," she replied. 'And Ann, you are a God-send. I feel better already, just knowing there is another Christian here in school."

"There are others, Rebecca; you'll be meeting them on of these days, the Lord willing. Quite a few of them are from our church. Oh, by the way, I'd love to have, you come to our church. Have you found a church yet?"

"No, we haven't. You see we're not even fully settled in yet. The moving van got here only three days ago."

"Oh you, poor girl," Ann sympathized. "I can imagine how utterly and completely frustrated you must be. Well, since you haven't had an opportunity to so much as see what your new school looks like, let me give you a quick tour before the buzzer sounds for classes to begin. I've gone to Brentwood all my life. Not to this high school, of course -- except for special programs in which my elder sisters and brothers were involved, and when they graduated, of course. But I came up through Brentonwood Elementary, Brentwood Middle School, and now I'm entering Brentonwood High. Follow me. . . ."

Ann Picketing and she became instant friends. In church, they became known as The Harmonizers, singing together in the local church as well as at youth rallies and zone rallies. And now everything was about to change: Ann would be leaving within six weeks, God willing, for a distant state to enroll in a Bible college there. She, Becky, would remain at home, getting her schooling from a local state college in preparation for teaching. Blaine Alder: the very special male in her life, would be away to yet another college, the Lord willing. Things would change; their lives would never again be quite the same.

Becky's tears fell shamelessly as she thought of those teachers who had made a dynamic impact upon her life. Fortunately, she had had two deeply religious teachers who had helped her tremendously, not only in her textbooks but in her spiritual life as well. It was Mrs. Wells who had gotten her over much of her shyness by sweetly but persistently having her up in front of the entire class to give readings from an old classic in literature or to quote a piece of poetry from an old, long-ago poet or poetess. The teacher helped her with diction and inflection until, by scrupulously adhering to and following her directives, everything Becky read or gave seemed to come to life. It was not just a monotonous poem or reading or story: it took on

substance and meaning and, generally, left the impact of its moral, its intent, and its importance embedded in the heart of the listener-hearer for time to come. And now. . . .

"Becky! Becky! Whatever is wrong?"

Becky lifted her head to see Ann coming around the corner of the very familiar building.

"Beck . . .!" Ann was aghast when she saw Becky's swollen, red, tear-filled eyes. "What happened?" she asked, with her mouth agape.

"Nothing, really, Ann. It . . . it's . . . oh, don't think I've gone off the deep end -- even though I know this is what my two brothers would say if they were around to see me in my present mood."

"I won't say it, Becky; we're friends. And, too, I know better than that. But I can't imagine what happened. Care to tell me? 'A friend loveth at all times,'" Ann quoted. "And, I may add, under, beneath, or on top of all circumstances. Now, care to open up?"

"I'm such a silly little thing, Ann; I know this. And . . . I'm far too emotional, too -- in this particular thing. But I can scarcely bear the thought of not coming back here anymore on a daily learning basis. Nor of seeing you, and all our many other friends regularly. I'm happy that I'll be graduating; I really and truly am. But stupid as it may seem, I'm sad. Very sad. In fact, I'm so sad that I can't stop crying. Am I very abnormal, Ann? You're my truest earthly friend: Tell me the truth, please."

Ann was silent for a long while. Suddenly, she sat down beside Becky. Patting her hand, she said, "I'll shoot straight from my shoulder, as the saying goes."

"Please do!" Becky pleaded. "I'm almost ashamed of myself. Almost all, if not all, of our peers and counterparts are rejoicing and laughing and making merry that within three days they'll be 'out under the yoke,' as Clare Link phrased it for a group who were standing in the hallway outside the chemistry lab. That's when I felt I had to get, alone. I don't feel the way she feels at all. I have some wonderful memories of Brentonwood, Ann."

Ann, sighed deeply. In a small-sounding voice -- a voice, that trembled slightly when she spoke -- she said, "Don't feel badly, Becky: I cried too. Lots and lots of tears,"

Becky sat up straight. "You did? You have? You, Ann?" She was almost incredulous with surprise. "You seem so strong; so outwardly unemotional."

"But inwardly I'm going through what you are, Becky. To get myself off the weepy wagon I count my blessings; all those things I feel God has in store for me in the future, if He spares my life and doesn't return for His bride before then. I tell myself that my graduation now is a giant stepping stone for the Lord's greater plan for this little undeserving handmaiden of His."

"I'm really surprised, Ann. I had no idea that you too were going through this crying bit."

"I keep reminding myself that this is all a part of growing up; a part of life, really, Becky. It's full of changes. Life is, I mean. We'll have to learn to adjust to this change, painful though it is to both you and me at this time. But we'll get over it and, with God's help, in the days and years that are ahead, we'll look back and see that this was one of the Lord's stepping stones to get us into the place He wanted each of us to be."

"You're so right, Ann; I realize this. But I shall miss you dreadfully. Both from church and from not seeing you on the daily school-schedule basis. And I'll miss Brentonwood High; and the teachers who helped me in so many ways."

"But it's wonderful to know that God gave us a brain that . . . that. . . ."

"I know, Ann," Becky interrupted softly. "I'm so thankful He endowed each of us who is graduating with a continuing 'intelligence and learning center.' This is, indeed, a gift from God. I feel so sad when I see those whose mentality will never exceed that of a four- or six-year-old, even though their physical body continues to grow. We are blest."

"Are you up to going with me to The Creamery for a sundae or some hot, freshly-roasted peanuts?" Ann asked brightly.

"I'd love to, Ann. This will be another pleasant memory to add to my already rich treasure of memories. And I really must learn to accept these natural, growing up changes more nobly than I am presently displaying and doing. I most certainly do not want to look all swollen-eyed and red from weeping when I accept my diploma."

"Let's go, Becky. I'll run into the washroom and bring out a few cold, wet-soaked paper towels. A few gentle pats on those eyes should do wonders. . . ."

Becky got to her feet and watched Ann disappear around the side of the building. "Thank you, kind Father," she said, "for Ann, and for all my friends. And thank You, for the stepping stone of graduation."