

THE WEIGH-IN

The worst day of 1954 was coming up on Tuesday. The school health nurse was coming to our sixth grade class to measure each student's weight and height. My teacher, Mr. Martin, would pick one of his pets to sit in the storage room with the nurse to record the findings on her chart. This hideous procedure was duplicated each year; I don't know for what purpose. It was humiliating and senseless and so decided to play sick.

Tuesday morning I arose early and went into the bathroom where I gagged myself repeatedly, trying to vomit. It didn't work, although I made a lot of retching sounds hoping Mama would hear them, but she didn't.

She got up a few minutes later and started attending to Sherry Kaye, three, and Connie, just a year old. Still in my nightgown, I went into the kitchen to report that I was sick.

Since the birth of my younger sisters, Mama and Daddy had become paranoid about germs and sickness. Admitting to not feeling well meant immediate expulsion to my bedroom. It also meant holding my breath as I dashed across the hallway to go to the bathroom, and holding a scarf over my face as I tore through the house to go outside. All this to keep germs at bay. A neighborhood friend, Jeanie, would wait at the living room door and she'd witness my dastardly entrance. She related it, in my presence, to various other friends.

"You have the weirdest family, Dianne. Your little sisters can do no wrong, while you're treated like a piece of crap. You need to remember it's your house too."

I didn't need reminding as I no longer felt wanted at home. When I was not in school, I was allowed free reign. So I spent a lot of time down town, at a friend's house, or playing alone down in the gulch over the hill by my house. Daddy was rarely home because he worked at one or another of his jobs. Mama spent every minute with my sisters or reading in her bedroom. Fortunately, I had my piano where I spent hours each day practicing and developing my style.

Despite the sickness charade, my scheme to escape the Tuesday weigh-in, would be worth all repercussions. Mama was getting breakfast for my sisters. When I told her I was sick she said, "Hurry into your bedroom and stay until Daddy gets up...and cover your mouth."

Oh no, I thought. 'Since Daddy teaches the other sixth grade class, he'll know I'm faking.' Resigned, I went to my bedroom and waited. Daddy came in a few minutes later.

"What's the matter?"

"I'm sick to my stomach and I'm loose." (That was the word my family used for diarrhea.)

"When did you first feel sick?"

"This morning."

Daddy thought a minute; I could see he wasn't convinced. "Well, you go ahead and get dressed for school. The public nurse is coming today to measure the sixth graders." He shot a look at me. "If you still feel sick after that, you can come on home."

Obviously I couldn't get away with cutting school like kids whose parents weren't teachers--teachers knew all the tricks. So I got dressed, held a scarf over my mouth, darted through the house, and walked two blocks to school.

Surely I was the fattest girl in the world. I loved food and felt hungry most of the time. Mama cooked a family dinner on Sundays. The rest of the week she just cooked for Sherry Kaye and Connie. They had lemon pudding or Danish Desert, Campbells chicken noodle soup, and vanilla wafers; while the rest of us weren't allowed their food. We made toast or tuna fish sandwiches.

When I got my allowance each Saturday, I hurried downtown and spent the entire fifty cents on candy bars. I once read 'one fourth pound' on the wrapper of a Baby Ruth bar. So I thought, 'I can eat it, because I'll only gain a fourth of a pound.' After eating the candy I always felt guilty and resolved to never do it again, a resolution that lasted until the next Saturday.

Once Daddy teased me by pinching my stomach and asking, "Are you getting a spare tire there?" I hated him for mentioning my weight. It was an outrage because he was grossly fat himself. People often told me that I looked like him—I hated them too.

Sylvia and Mary Ann were the only girls in my class that were heavier than I. After saying the Pledge of Allegiance, Mr. Martin called the roll. Neither of those girls was present; in fact, they were the only students absent. Playing sick had worked for them—their parents weren't teachers. With them gone, I would be the fattest one in the class.

Mr. Martin appointed his pet, Brenda, to help the school nurse record the measurements. She also got to call the students out of class when it was their turn. You could see she felt important, tossing her hair back and forth. And wouldn't you know it? Brenda was one of the skinniest girls in our class. She didn't even have any boobs yet and worse still, she was catty and self-righteous. No one's weight was safe with her.

I worried all morning and skipped lunch in order to not weigh so much. By the time the school nurse began in the afternoon, I was sweating and hyperventilating. Luckily, we were taken out alphabetically, so I didn't have long to wait.

"Dianne Blaine," Brenda called. I rose from my seat and walked toward the door. It was like marching to the gallows--FRUMM, FRUMM, FRUMM, FRUMM. I knew every eye was on me, comparing me with my fat dad and speculating on how high my weight could go.

The small storage room made the scales looked huge and looming. They were the doctor's office kind that you stood on while the nurse moved the weight along the scale. A long ruler extended at the top of the scale so that height was measured at the same time. Harold had been there before me. He weighed eighty two pounds because the weight was fifty pounds and the marker was on thirty two.

Now the nurse moved the weight from fifty pounds over to one hundred pounds and then she moved the marker until it balanced in the air, hitting neither the top nor the bottom. I was five foot two and weighed one hundred and four pounds—short and fat.

The results were agonizing. I watched Brenda smirk and then write my weight on her chart. Dimly, I made my way back to my seat. My ears burned and my head pounded. ‘You’re fat, fat. Why, you’re as fat as your dad.’

Brenda finally finished and came back into class, handing Mr. Martin the chart. As the bell rang, we were dismissed. The boys bolted from class like caged animals being set free. A weigh-in is just another day to them. The girls hurriedly crowded around Brenda excitedly awaiting the pronouncement.

“Well, come on Brenda. Who weighs the most?” I heard Martha ask. Reveling in the limelight, she smoothed her dress, tossed back her hair and said, “Dianne Blaine.”

That was enough for me. I raced home, crying all the way, hating Daddy, school, the nurse, Mr. Martin, Brenda, and myself--most of all. Mama was in her bedroom reading and Sherry Kaye and Connie were napping. I didn’t use my scarf to cover my mouth or go to my bedroom.

Instead, I went directly into the kitchen, made two big tuna fish sandwiches, and poured a big glass of milk. I still hurt and didn’t feel better until I ate a big bowl of the forbidden lemon pudding and several handfuls of vanilla wafers.

In remembering that fateful day, I look at sixth grade pictures of myself, alone and with class members. To my surprise I see that I wasn’t fat--short and a little stocky--but only a tiny bit chubby. What clearly shows is my attempt to hold in my stomach. Everything is there, my intelligent eyes, thick dark brown hair, straight teeth and winning smile. What one sees is insecurity, my shame of being fat and worthless--it simply overrides all.