

Roll Out the Barrel

Category: Traumatized

written by Ronna L. Edelstein | November 1, 2023

I have generally thrived in school settings, first as a student and then as an educator. However, an experience in seventh grade–junior high–left me so traumatized that I feared I would never again feel comfortable going to school.

From kindergarten through sixth grade, all of the children in my neighborhood attended the same community school. But then we were bused to junior high before entering the large local high school. To “welcome” us seventh-graders, a group of mean eighth-grade girls engaged in “barreling”–forcing girls to spend their lunch recess at a nearby park and then putting those who were not popular into a barrel (a not-always-empty garbage bin). The eighth-grade girls then rolled the innocent seventh-grader across the dirt-covered field, leaving her to find her way out.

I was barreled.

After lunch in the gym, I tried to hide in the bathroom, but the eighth-graders found me. With two on each side, they half-led, half-dragged me to the park. I assumed the teachers were holed up in the teachers’ lounge, relishing their downtime from students; I searched for the principal, a custodian, any adult, but they seemed to have vaporized, leaving me to become a vulnerable victim of cruelty.

The remainder of the first day passed in a blur. I know I was upset that my outfit, bought by Grandma, who always treated me to new back-to-school clothes, was dirty. I know I felt pairs of eyes staring at me and heard voices whispering about me in mocking tones. I know I sat alone on the bus, trying to be invisible–and attempting not to cry.

Telling my parents would have worsened the situation. They would have reacted, and the eighth-grade girls who got in trouble would have taken out their punishments on me. Only decades later did I share this nightmare with my beloved dad.

I went on to teach–ironically, at a middle school, today’s equivalent of junior high. But I have always entered new social situations with anxiety–fearing the exclusion and nastiness that might greet me. The trauma of being barreled has stayed with me, turning me into an insecure adult who, now at age seventy-six, prefers the hermit life to the social one. I need to protect myself from the potential meanness of people waiting to pounce upon me.

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