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Fat girl: A history of bullying

Every day I walked a gantlet of humiliation. By the age of 12, I wanted to kill myself

BY REBECCA GOLDEN



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At age 5, the last age at which I had a normal body mass, the school football coach's son punched me in the face. I have no memory of what prompted this; small boys can be a strange and violent people. I tasted blood before I felt pain. I am usually quick with a clever line, but the perfect comeback always escaped me in those moments. No matter how many times it happened, I was always surprised, devastated anew by the meanness, by the cutting words, by a classmate's fist.

But soon, they were calling me fat. I wore the ugly Catholic school uniform, a brown plaid pinafore with a white blouse and Peter Pan collar. Under this hot mess, I wore cheap polyester pants, also brown. All the girls had them.

"Fat pig, fat girl, *fat thing!*" This boy never had a name. He was older, in another grade. He threw one of the red rubber balls at me, hitting me in the stomach, laughing as the weight knocked the wind out of me, leaving me gasping for breath on the ground. Catholic school, that failed experiment in my religious education, ended shortly afterward.

Being "the fat girl" happened suddenly. In fact, it happened before I was actually, medically, fat. When children started teasing me, I probably only weighed five pounds more than I should have for my height. But kids seize on small differences. The tall child is a beanstalk, the short kid is a shrimp. By the time my weight became a problem -- when I really *was* the fattest person (adults included) in school -- I had long since given up weighing myself or caring. Making it through each brutal day became the only goal. The rest of it -- my health, my body -- fell away. By the time I cared again, after I graduated from high school, I weighed nearly 400 pounds.

At public school in the new-money suburb my parents worked so hard to put us in, the children found a wide array of ways to torture me. I never thought of myself as a child. I never thought of myself as anything, really. I read books, and I learned that girls have best friends. But I had no friends. Kids who liked me when we were alone never acknowledged any relationship with others present. I never really knew who I hated more -- the ones who hated me, or the ones who liked me, but only in private.

"Moose, Moose, Moose, Moose, MOOOOSE!" I sat on the hard, cold floor of the school gym, like I did every day, waiting for the bus. Kids chanted, some from my class, some from other grades. Older children, younger children, strangers -- they knew my name, the one that Brad, the sixth grader who lived in the house behind mine, had conferred. I heard this chant in line. I heard it on the bus. I heard it on the playground. I heard it every day of my life, every school day, for four years.

In sixth grade, the teacher joined in.

"Not you!" she shouted, taking the paperback book out of my hands. She'd instructed the class to read silently. I opened a

book, relieved at the chance to go someplace else for a while. She threw the book across the room. I remember her angry face, the flecks of foamy spit at the corners of her mouth, how deep wrinkles framed her nose. Her dentures didn't fit properly, and her mouth never closed all the way. She called me "butterball" and pointed out the shiny smear of blood the day I got my period in class. She crowed at the discovery while my classmates shrieked with laughter. When I talk about these things, I marvel at the absurdity and the shocking level of cruelty. It seems like something that would happen to a stranger, something that would happen in a book. All I know is that this was my life. I was 12 years old, and school wasn't safe. I went home and thought about how I would kill myself.

I moved from sixth grade to junior high school in a fog. I felt sad and afraid every day. I never had friends who stood by me. Teachers knew I was smart. They saw the test scores. They read my papers. None of them seemed to wonder why I did so poorly, especially in subjects that required verbal ability. I found it hard to focus because the fear never went away, not even when teachers were around. There was a boy in my art class who talked about his pubic hair and all the girls he'd touched. He leered at me and winked and then laughed with his friends about how easily he could land the whale.

Another boy at our table told me daily how much I disgusted him. He hated me in a quiet, powerful way. One day, our art teacher made us draw pictures of one another, of our hair. My hair tangled easily and I never quite managed to get out all the knots. The quiet boy had talent. He drew my ugly, tangled hair perfectly, paying special attention to the frizzy bump on the back of my head where I tried to hide a particular matted clump.

I longed to be invisible. I worried that anything I did that made me stand out -- even good things, like drawing well or writing a story for the school paper -- would mean attracting the wrong kind of attention. I loved to draw and paint, but I stopped taking art class in ninth grade because after our teacher left to smoke, a junior in the class went up to the board and drew pictures of me, nude and in impossible sexual positions.

One boy stabbed me with a pen. He pinned me against the wall in basic algebra -- a class for math dummies -- and told his friends to watch.

"I bet she bleeds gravy," he said, jabbing my bare arm. I bled. I cried. I trembled. I know I should've screamed, or done something else to attract the attention of the wrestling coach in charge of the class, sitting at his desk and prying bits of black scum out from under his fingernails with a pocketknife, but I couldn't actually believe this was happening until it was over. Even then, I couldn't make a sound. I didn't move until long after the bell rang and the classroom had emptied completely.

We've heard so much about the tragic consequences of bullying lately. Facebook and other social networks have added a new, **baffling dimension** to children's attacks on each other. But long before "bullying" was a national conversation, there were people like me. People who faced a gantlet of assault, taunting, humiliation and sexual harassment, people who were denied meaningful parts of their education. The children -- who, famously, can be so cruel -- were as advertised. And in my life, the adults either didn't care, couldn't be bothered, didn't notice or actively participated. My advanced-placement European history teacher, a self-proclaimed feminist who wore a pro-choice coat hanger on a necklace but never called on girls in class, called me stupid in front of the students. When I asked her for help preparing for a test, she told me to get out of her sight. I think looking at me actually made her sick.

People who tried to help thought the best way to end this daily nightmare would be for me to do the right thing and lose weight. My parents called the school, complained to individual teachers and gave me bad advice. "Just ignore it," they told me, echoing the ages-old bullying strategy that never works for anyone. "If you ignore them, they'll stop." I have no idea what they should've done, or if anything would've helped. At the time, lectures on my weight just made me angrier and sadder. Given how intensely miserable I was, tending my health was beyond my reach. Suggestions like that infuriated me.

Despite my classmates' best efforts, despite my teachers' utter failure to look out for me, despite the callousness of principals and the great distress I caused my own family, I had this crazy idea that I had a right to courtesy and an education no matter what I weighed. This idea made me defiant -- and defiance was the only thing I had going for me for a long, long time.

I'm still fat. I peaked at about 600 pounds before losing more than half my body weight. Still, I'm not thin, and probably never will be. One day at the gym, after swimming a mile and showering, I heard the sound of teen girls laughing. I saw them behind me, pointing at me as I changed clothes, making whispered comments to one another.

"If you think this is bad, you should've seen me before I lost 300 pounds," I told them. I stared them down. There were shamefaced and murmured apologies. At 35, I finally managed to win a round with some mean girls. Hooray for me, I thought.

But despite it all, I think people may be good. The recent **public outrage over bullying gay teens** makes me believe that. Efforts by Dan Savage and others inspire me to hold on to this thought. I have no regrets about not killing myself at 12. I've been to Australia, loved good people, had amazing friends and even written a book. I manage to have comebacks all the time now.

"Hey, baby," a 14-year-old boy at the mall thinks he'll make a scene and entertain his friends.

"Call me when you grow some pubes," I tell him. His friends laugh. He scowls and tells them to shut up. I triumph over a bully. Over a child, really. I know it's petty, and that I have other reasons to feel good about myself and to let go of the ugliness of my school days. I know that. But I'll take what I can get.

-- Rebecca Golden