

"BLOODY BRENDA"

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[Assignment: Write an autobiographical essay in which you recount a memorable and/or significant experience from your past. The sequence of events must have its own coherence as a narrative, but the significance of this experience must also be indicated.]

(1) Junior High, the vortex of the turbulent adolescent experience, a time of departure from parental guidance but not yet an arrival at personal identity--a true period of transition. It is an age when a close relationship with one's parents is considered a breach of pre-teen etiquette. To be seen with a parent at the movies on a Saturday night is comparable to farting during an oral presentation or having one's shorts pulled down in the middle of gym class. Thousands of kids at the ages of twelve and thirteen are thrust into the unfamiliar environment of school dances and interchanging classes. Suddenly, the guy who used to fry bugs with a magnifying glass during recess and refer to you as "Giraffe Legs" is the man of your dreams. Waiting without hesitation for our "true adolescence" to begin, we abhor the term "pre-teen." Either you are a teenager or you aren't, and we all secretly hope we will be considered teenagers. As a young girl growing up in Huntington, Indiana, I was no exception to this juvenile hysteria.

(2) As I walked past the basketball courts and yesterday's traces of hopscotch games on the asphalt, the converted high school that was now Crestview Junior High no longer seemed to loom over me as it did my first day of school. Moving from a small town in Wisconsin, with its familiar faces and cluster of relatives, to Indiana was quite a change for a shy twelve-year-old. Being transported from the security of the four-room Milton Middle School to the ominous five-storied Crestview School, containing halls crowded with faces that all seemed to be scrutinizing me, was a traumatic experience. But after a year's time, I had gone to many slumber parties, loved some teachers, despised others, and had more crushes than I wished to remember, even at that age. That morning I eagerly climbed the steps to my history class, confident as one could be at this age when self-esteem and assurance were as rare as diamonds. I had awakened on time, I had on a new sweater, and had received an A on an English theme the preceding day. All was right with the world. Little did I know as I hurried through the forty-year-old hallways, marred by a collection of pen and pencil scratches, paint cracks, and graffiti consisting of dedications of undying puppy love and combinations of expletives, that the greatest tragedy imaginable to a twelve-year-old girl was about to befall me.

(3) I rushed into history a few minutes before the bell. I did not have to hurry, but history was my favorite class, partly because I had always liked history and partly because I liked my teacher, Mr. Buesking. I had a crush on him. He was captivating in class, witty, intense, a little overwhelming perhaps, but always interesting. Everyone paid attention in his history class. He was not an attractive man by any means. He was short, balding, and had very harsh features whose ugliness even a school girl's crush could not dismiss or distort into beauty. I sat down in my

assigned seat in the front row between Marla Messler and Mike Loveless. I considered them friends, but actually I was terrified of them. Marla had this meanness about her that seemed to intimidate everyone into being her friend. She considered me her closest amigo, which I never understood since I hardly spoke to her. Mike, on the other hand, was amiable enough, but he was short. It seemed all the short boys at this time turned their insecurity into cruelty, as if by making others suffer, it would miraculously cause them to grow six inches. All it caused was grief. I did not really know many people other than Marla and Mike in the class, but I liked it that way. Others would only distract me from listening to Mr. Buesking. The bell rang and Mike made a mad dash to his seat in an attempt to avoid his third tardy this month as Marla was applying her third coat of lip-gloss over her over-greased lips. She was always attempting to make me rebel against my parents' wishes and wear make-up. I suppose if I really wanted to, my mother would consent to my rummaging through her Avon packets of waxy lipsticks and powder-blue eye shadows, but I was never convinced that anyone would actually believe my cheeks were naturally peach-blossom hued and that I had been born with pink eyelids with just a hint of violet at the corners. It was too much like Halloween for me.

(4) "Today we are going to begin discussing World War II, starting with the rise of Hitler," Mr. Buesking announced between gulps of his first of the twelve cups of coffee he drank daily.

(5) Like Pavlovian dogs, the class commenced the rustling of papers, the digging for pens in seemingly bottomless book bags and backpacks, and the unfolding of ragged notebooks with wires that always snag the clothing of whomever is in front of you in the hall causing almost certain catastrophe. I had already prepared myself, recording Mr. Buesking's lecture with the diligence of a medieval scribe. We were well past the invasion of Poland when I felt a curious sensation in the crotch of my pants, a warm, liquid-like feeling. I knew immediately what it was. Ever since they took us, the girls, into a separate room to show "those films" on the female reproductive system and related topics, I had been waiting for my period. For a nine-year-old, this was a fascinating and simultaneously repulsive thing. As time goes by it becomes a source of pride and envy. Having one's period was a revered accomplishment, a defining line between girls and women. Every year more girls embraced womanhood and taunted me for not developing with the rest of them. Well, my turn had finally come, but there could not be a more inopportune time for me to blossom. It was my worst nightmare realized, and I agonized for the rest of the class period. Should I have excused myself? But what if someone noticed? What should I have said if Mr. Buesking asked me where I am going? Maybe it was not actually happening. God, let it be so; please, I promise I will never daydream in church again or wish hateful things on my brother, even if he is evil incarnate put here on earth for the sole purpose of making my life miserable.

(6) It wasn't so. After class I stole off to the bathroom, going as quickly and inconspicuously as possible. With every step, fluid seemed to gush forth like the breaking of a thousand water balloons. I envisioned tidal waves, breaking dams, spraying fire hydrants as I flung the stall door shut. I lowered my pants to find crimsoned underwear, warm and

wet. Pellets of sweat formed on my forehead as I examined my jeans. They were soaked through with blood. Oh no, what if someone saw? Sitting in the lime green interior of the stall, staring senselessly at the grey and blue tiled floor, I began to cry. I considered remaining in this sanctuary for the rest of the day, perhaps not returning home until the evening to conceal my accident. I decided I would wait until after the bell to go to the office to explain my situation to Principal Dehaven, praying he would allow me to go home. It was at these times (and the thought of riding the bus with its noise, heat, and obnoxious odors caused by heaven knows what) that I was thankful I lived only two blocks from school.

(7) Within five minutes I was home. Still sniffing, I called Mom who was sympathetic as moms always are. She managed to come home from work early and help me through this new experience. I was beginning to feel better when around 3:00 in the afternoon, I received a phone call.

(8) "Brenda, did you get your period today?"
Geez, why did Marla have to know everything I did not want her to know?

"Why? What's going on?" I decided to play dumb.

"After you left class somebody noticed blood on your seat. The whole school is talking about it. They called you 'Bloody Brenda,'" she informed me with a note of pleasure in her voice, happy with being the bearer of bad news. She seemed to delight in other people's torment. I suspected that she had created the nickname.

"Oh God, what am I going to do, Marla? I had an accident. Why do girls have to go through these things? All guys have to deal with is a voice like Ethel Merman's for a year or so!"

(9) I cannot explain this sudden confidence in Marla. They say in times of undue stress we do irrational things. Perhaps I felt grateful that she called to warn me. Either way I needed to talk to someone.

"Well, maybe you could say it was cough syrup."

"Cough syrup?"

"Yeah, just say you had a cold and were carrying around some Robitussin or something in your purse. It broke during class and got all over your seat."

"Do you think anyone will believe it?" I was hoping she would say yes.

"I don't know. It's either that or move to Canada."

(10) I immediately informed my family of our necessary migration to Montreal. Needless to say they were not receptive to my proposition. "How could they be so insensitive?" I thought. This is a life or death situation. Even worse than telling me we would not be able to move to Quebec was my mother's insistence that I go to school tomorrow. I had read of insects and rodents eating their own young, but never had such an injustice or cruelty been served by a parent to a child as what my mother had done to me. I had just experienced the *crème de la crème*, the mother of all female adolescent embarrassments, and all my mother offered was consoling stories of her previous accidents and dealings with "the little visitor," as she referred to it.

(11) "You will look back on this day and laugh, honey. Trust me, it is not the end of the world."

(12) Easy for her to say, I thought: she did not have to face Mike Loveless or Marla Messler tomorrow. As I lay in bed that night I likened myself to a Jew in Auschwitz, being a helpless, persecuted victim among the menacing Hitler youth of Crestview school. Morning came and I anticipated entering the gas chamber as I stepped into school.

(13) At first no one said anything. For a brief moment I believed I was saved. There was a God in the universe; harmony and peace in the world existed after all. Then like a lightning bolt that tore through my body, I heard Mike Loveless say, "Bloody Brenda." I was so flustered I nearly dropped my books. I was embarrassed, ashamed really. But as I approached Mike, I was overcome by a feeling of self-worth. Immediately, I became angry that anyone should make someone feel small just for the sake of doing so. I was even more angry that I was allowing someone to make me feel so inadequate. Perhaps it was adrenaline, hysteria, or maybe courage, but something inside me gave me the calmness to approach Mike and simply say, "Yes, Mike, is there something you wanted to say to me?"

(14) I did not even bother to see his reaction. It did not matter. I do not remember anyone saying anything about the incident to me since. Sometimes one experiences instances of revelation; this was one of mine. I was important--just me, as I am. Whether I like M*A*S*H reruns and lima beans, or if I choose to wear blue jeans and flip-flops, or tell stupid jokes and lengthy stories about eccentric relatives, I am all right. "No one can make you feel inferior without your permission," said Eleanor Roosevelt. That day I finally realized what she meant. And that night I remember telling more jokes, buying a new pair of flip-flops, and going to the movies with my parents.