

The Casual Cruelty of Schoolgirls

by Elizabeth Bird

As the teacher turns to the board, I see the note moving from desk to desk, winding its way toward me in the back left corner. Surreptitious notes are nothing new, but never to me. I veer between anticipation and fear.

Our English teacher continues her impassioned, solo “discussion” of the Brontes, while I manage to unfold the perilous scrap of paper:

“You know you’re the most unpopular girl in our year, don’t you? By far!!”

I feel the heat rush to my face, with nowhere to look but down at my desk, willing the bell to ring. Does everyone know what I’ve just read? Glancing up, I catch the grin on Angela’s face, looking at me from the opposite corner. A slight lift of the eyebrows and a conspiratorial giggle toward her neighbor’s desk. They know ...

“Unlike male bullies, female bullies are usually attractive, popular, and successful in school. They do not use their physical strength or size, rely on their social influence. Subtle manipulation is a trademark of the female bully. Backhanded compliments, guilt tripping, and cruel tricks are all common methods.”

“Characteristics of a Female Bully,” Elle Hanson, Our Everyday Lifeⁱ

By lunchtime, Angela and her friends have moved on, chattering in a gaggle of smugness, savoring the victories that put them at the top of the heap. Girls like them are comfortable in their skins—confident of their place in the natural order. They should be. They manage to look good even in the shapeless brown “gym slips” that are required uniform at our 1960s girls’ day school. In these pleated one-pieces sashed at the waist, the average girl looked “like a sack of potatoes,” as I had been informed more than once. Top tier girls mysteriously transcended this, their nubile style evoking that distinctive British genre known as “gymslip porn.” Really.

I doubt I was truly the most unpopular; I'm sure others felt that rush of blood when the Alpha gaze casually turned toward them and unleashed an arrow of humiliation. No one ever called it "bullying;" that happened among boys or uncouth children at "rough" schools. And physical intimidation was almost unheard of; there was no slapping or hair-pulling. They would jostle us on their way to something more important, but mostly they were just indifferent to girls like me. Those were good days. And then suddenly another arrow would fly:

Jillian finds herself unaccountably next to me at lunch: "You know your hair is such a lovely color." (I was secretly rather proud of my then-chestnut locks). Long pause; I have no idea what to say, but I'm venturing a smile.

"Such a pity it's wasted on someone like you." Gales of laughter from across the table, and the familiar rush of blood.

There are certain traits that mark the target. Girls who appear submissive, passive, and anxious. Lack of assertiveness might serve as a cue that they are the 'perfect victim.'

"What You Need to Know About Victims of Bullying," Sherri Gordon, Very Well Familyⁱⁱ

And so it went. It wasn't always obvious which of us would end up as targets, but various undesirable features chalked up points. Glasses? Check. Surplus flesh? Check. Awkwardness and lack of agility? Check and check. Of course no one shared such experiences, which would only add to the humiliation. And no one tattled to teachers or parents; helicopter moms were yet to be invented.

In my case, crippling shyness started the process. From an early age, my worst nightmare was a demand to speak in class.

"Come on, girls, who knows the answer to this one?"

I do, I do! But my hand stayed down, and my mouth stayed shut. English classes often involved taking turns reading assigned novels or poetry: "With feeling, girls, please! When my turn came, I would gabble through the lines and end up out of breath, to the usual tittering, before subsiding with relief.

Then there was gym class—another arena where it was impossible to hide. Scaling the pommel horse, or even worse, rope climbing! No matter how I tried, I could

never move one inch up a rope. But we all were required to take our turn. I grabbed hold and managed to get my feet in place, where I hung motionless, spinning in a slow circle. Hilarity ensued and the teacher—athletic in shorts and a gym shirt—sighed: “Alright, get down. Barbara, show us how it’s done.” Which of course she did, scooting up the rope with incomprehensible agility, to the admiring approval of all.

Little wonder that when it came to team sports such as netball, I effortlessly embodied the oldest schoolyard cliché of them all. Not always the last to be picked, but firmly among the “dregs.” That was their casual name for us, as they negotiated the final picks to do least damage to their teams:

“Okay, I’ll take that one, but that means I don’t get her as well.”

My parents were oblivious; how could they not be, since shame kept me silent? My mother was left exasperated by parent-teacher meetings and critical report cards:

“We know how bright you are, and they say your written work is good. But why won’t you speak? I can’t help if I don’t know what the problem is!”

At her girls’ boarding school in the 1930s, my mother was definitely top tier. Head girl, captain of cricket, lead actor in plays. Photos show her confidently striding the stage as HMS Pinafore’s Ralph Rackstraw, “the smartest lad in the fleet.”

She loved me dearly, but my behavior perplexed her. My sister, two years younger, was an outgoing, comfortable girl with a circle of friends and the admiration of teachers. I could not explain. What was there to say? “If I speak, I will turn bright red. Then everyone will laugh and whisper, and then I won’t be able to say the words.” Best to avoid that inevitability.

This amusingly predictable behavior was a gift to the tormenters, presenting no risk of a snappy comeback or cutting remark. Throw in the glasses and enough pudginess to draw a comment on my annual school medical exam: “Healthy, but on the plump side.” A soft target, in more ways than one.

Targeted girls are less likely to have a wide circle of friends. Negative peer response typically emerges long before, with girls experiencing peer rejection and being left out of social situations.

“Understanding Bullying: The Victim”ⁱⁱⁱ

So there I stayed for thirteen years. “Junior School,” starting at age five, was bearable; shyness left me unapproachable, but among little girls everyone is more or less tolerated. I was never popular, only occasionally getting the chance to don the special dress so lovingly sewn by my mother to be worn at birthday parties. Blue taffeta with embossed velvet roses, it was completed with the “stiff petticoat,” white ankle socks, and patent leather shoes. Best of all, she made a royal blue, velvet cape with a hood. While it took me to pitifully few parties, it was perfect for posing dramatically around my bedroom, fairytale fantasies swirling through my head. The dress was soon passed on to my sister, but I held on to that magical cape as long as possible—my vision of who I should have been.

“Senior School,” starting at age eleven, was when certain girls learned to sharpen their arrows, perfecting their techniques over the next few years. Not all were “mean girls,” of course. But as hierarchies formed and friendships cemented around me, I watched silently, hoping to be left alone.

By then, class presentations and other vocal demands were multiplying, causing me increasing anguish. I plotted occasional respites with cunning medical solutions—a tricky option, since both my parents were doctors. The gold standard was a “temperature,” defined as anything above ninety-nine degrees. It could be surreptitiously achieved but required negotiation.

My father, never the disciplinarian, would equivocate: “Well, she has a temperature, and she looks a bit flushed. Maybe we should keep her home for a day.”

My mother, made of sterner stuff, would typically demur: “No cough, no runny nose; I don’t think there’s much wrong with her.”

I would try to look pathetic: “I have a headache, and my neck’s a bit stiff ...” Signs of “swollen glands” in the neck were often a winner.

If all went to plan, even my mother would eventually err on the side of caution: “I suppose we don’t want her infecting the whole school. We’ll see how she feels tomorrow.” And just like that—a good day!

But victories were rare, and most days I trudged off to school without resistance. It was just a matter of getting through the day.

“We suggest that individual close friendships are an important potential protective mechanism...at least one close friendship helps adolescents craft meaning and strength amid substantial adversity...”

“Best Friends and Better Coping,” Rhiannon Turner and Anna Madill, British Journal of Psychology.^{iv}

Getting through was possible because I had a secret life-line—a weapon that deployed outside the school gates. A friend. Not even an imaginary friend, but a flesh and blood girl, who truly liked me, to my eternal astonishment. We met in the second year of Junior School, which for reasons lost in time was officially called Transition (followed by Preparatory, for equally obscure reasons). I had been moved up a grade, arriving in the new class mid-year. A shy six-year-old, I was thrilled when she decided we would be friends. She was outgoing and popular, and had other friends, even though she struggled with asthma, eczema, and a painful inability to spell. Today, she has a doctorate and writes books on teaching dyslexic students.

We were officially Best Friends. All through Junior School, we were inseparable—out of school. At age eight, we were placed in separate “forms,” and never again had classes together. Her writing problems, completely misunderstood in that era, labeled her “non-academic,” which in Senior School streamed her into Domestic Science and me into Latin. There we each fought parallel battles—she to prove she had an academic future beyond high school, and I to get through the day without hiding in the bathroom.

But our friendship did not change; we met at the bus stop for the trip into school, and again to catch the bus home. My silence would burst like a pent-up wave, and we talked incessantly all the way. We haunted each other’s houses after school and at weekends. We had a club, with its own badges, motto, and an exclusive membership of two.

My friend’s generous nature and fearlessness made her popular. She went to birthday parties, got coveted parts in plays, and was a reliable pick for netball. Yet unaccountably, she liked me best. And as I moved through the worst and settled into

later teen years, she was the bridge that finally nudged me into broader circles. Buoyed by the confidence of contact lenses at fifteen, I cautiously embraced social opportunities, even scoring the occasional date with a boy.

School, while never embraceable, became tolerable, and I began to enjoy forays into history and literature. I even found a way to subversively (if absurdly) make my mark. Over the course of a term, I carved my full name into my desk, lovingly deepening every stroke with a compass point, then carefully filling it in with ink. I added the date with a flourish. My artwork was inevitably discovered, and I was called to the Head Mistress's office. She was baffled, and I could only shrug. Yes, Miss Russell—it was wrong. No, Miss—I don't know why I did it. My punishment? To appear in her office every week for a month, bearing a token sum of reparation, in cash. Sixpence in pre-decimal British currency, as I recall. It was worth every penny.

When school was finally over, I cautiously began my journey of reinvention. Cracks in the chrysalis appeared, as I tried out unfamiliar wings in an effort to transcend the place that had baked in my identity for so long. While my friend headed for college immediately—defying the skepticism of her teachers—I heeded my parents' advice and took a "gap year." It brought me travels in Europe, friends from around the world, narrow escapes, and a growing sense of self. Finally, at a university just miles from home, I realized that nobody knew (or cared) who I was once was, and I could take flight at last. My journey gave me a life of teaching, writing, friends—and the three loves of my life. It took me across the Atlantic into an academic career that would have once seemed impossible. And to my abiding amazement, I even spent two glorious years on an Iowa state championship soccer team. My British accent may have sneaked me a place on the team, but my first goal ignited a physical confidence and exhilaration that had so long sat dormant.

Two continents apart, my friend and I rarely see each other in person. But we mark every birthday and chat online, sharing news of our children and natal families. Unlike me, she has stayed in touch with some of our schoolmates and has even attended reunions. I enjoy her news of girls I have never wished to see again. Someone once asked if we would have become friends if we'd met at sixty instead of six. It's really an irrelevant question.

“A grievous example is the suicide of Rachel, a 12-year-old Florida girl. Two of her female classmates, ages 12 and 14, were charged with felony stalking. The older girl recruited Rachel’s friend to turn against her; the online torment included written messages: ‘You should die’ and ‘Why don’t you go kill yourself?’”

“Socially Adept Female Bullies: Know How to Spot the Traits,” Jill P. Weber Ph.D., Psychology Today^v

Twenty years into this new century, and a lifetime from my school days, a news photo shows a pretty, smiling girl, who one day decided life wasn’t worth living. The exact circumstances aren’t clear, but immediately resonate. Something signaled weakness; blood was in the water, and the sharks gathered. The perpetrators typically express shock. “We had no idea she would take it like that.” “We didn’t mean any harm ...”

During those faraway years in a distant land, drastic action never crossed my mind. School was mostly miserable, and many days I had to steel myself to walk into the classroom. But I had a loving family, books, and my Best Friend. They insulated me, ensuring there was life outside school and quietly asserting my worth.

Nevertheless, the torment left a mark. I was rarely comfortable in my own skin, convinced of my irredeemable unsightliness—a reflex that never quite left. As I peruse an article about the long-term effects of bullying, I sadly recognize both sides of the common coin: A compulsive need to be liked, coupled with a ferocious determination to “prove them wrong.”

I ponder the little girl who will never get that chance, and I fear for the others who endure in silence. Had I ever had daughters, I would have feared for them too and watched over them incessantly. Because in a terrifyingly new world, the context of cruelty is different today—ramped up several notches from my long-ago schooldays. In person, it takes a little effort to write notes, pass withering remarks, and generally indulge one’s cruel streak. No one ever told me to die. And once out of the door and heading home with my friend, I could put it behind me until the next day.

But today, cruelty follows you home. Social media makes sure of that. Insults, mockery, private photos—all are shared with abandon. The arrows come from all

directions, amplified one by the other and never letting up. I have read an expert's bleak warning: Cyberbullies love Snapchat, the app that automatically deletes images and messages after they're viewed, leaving only the humiliation behind. The consequences emerge in the headlines—but only in the cases where something unimaginable happens. Those sitting it out in silence are invisible. I never told a soul about the note that left me devastated—not my parents, not my teacher, not even my friend. Becoming a target was a shameful secret.

As I write, we are moving out of the pandemic that has upended lives and redefined schooling for our children. For many, the loss of daily contact with friends has been excruciating. But perhaps for some it has been a blessed relief: It's hardly a sacrifice to trade daily harassment for the haven of home. Yet even there, digital tentacles slither through the cracks; spotting today's casual cruelty requires a level of attention that my parents' generation could never imagine.

Who we are as children does not define us forever, as my fulfilling life has proved to me. But for a thirteen-year-old trapped in daily misery, the promise of the future rings hollow. Today, the note that once wound its way around the classroom has become a cold blast of shame, visible to anyone with an Internet connection. Cruelty may pass, but while it lasts it feels indeed like forever.

And it casts a long shadow.



Born and raised in the UK, **Elizabeth Bird** is Professor Emerita of Anthropology at the University of South Florida. The author of seven academic books (most recently, *Surviving Biafra: A Nigerwife's Story*), she now focuses on creative non-fiction. Her work has been accepted or appeared in *Under the Sun* (Readers' Choice Award, 2022), *Streetlight*, *Tangled Locks*, *Streetlight*, *The Guardian*, *Skeptic Magazine*, and elsewhere. She lives in Tampa, FL.

ⁱ <https://oureverydaylife.com/characteristics-female-bully-8466459.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.verywellfamily.com/characteristics-of-a-typical-victim-of-bullying-3288501>

iii <https://www.universalclass.com/articles/psychology/understanding-bullying-the-victim.htm>

iv <https://bpspsychub.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/bjop.12135>

v <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/having-sex-wanting-intimacy/201311/socially-adept-female-bullies>