

That really was the last straw

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I remember very clearly the day that it dawned on me how I could win. From that moment on, everything became so simple that I wondered why it hadn't occurred to me to do this long ago.

That day started much like any other. I went to school as miserable as ever, dawdling at the gate for as long as possible before going in. Only when I heard the bell for assembly did I hoist my bag on my shoulder and trudge reluctantly into the hall. There, leaning against the secretary's office and staring malevolently at me were the two reasons for my hatred of school: Kate and Ruth.

The pair had moved to our school the previous September, but their reputations preceded them. Everybody seemed to have heard some story about their bullying ways, and it was rumoured that they had been expelled from their last school for beating a girl so badly that she was hospitalised with a broken arm. I hadn't taken too much notice of the stories until I found myself falling foul of Kate one morning. I'm still not sure exactly what drew her attention to me, but soon she was hissing insulting names every time I walked by and tripping me up if I passed too close to her desk. Naturally, her accomplice in crime soon joined in and within a week they had made my life a misery.

The main focus of their mockery was my looks. I'm tall for my age, and a bit heavier than I would like to be. It had never been a problem in the past, but Kate and Ruth honed in on it, calling me 'Nelly the Elephant' and 'Tubs' as well as other names I won't repeat. They were sneaky about it, too. They always made sure that I was on my own before bullying me. If I was with my friends, they were polite. In a way, that was the scariest thing about them – their ability to appear charming when they wanted to. I didn't bother telling my friends about the bullying because that would mean revealing the hurtful nicknames and I hadn't the confidence to draw anyone's attention to my size. What if the nicknames caught on? It wasn't worth the risk. I'd just stay out of Kate and Ruth's way as much as possible and perhaps they'd grow bored eventually and move on to someone else.

On that fateful day, however, my plans to avoid confrontation were thwarted. It was a very hot day in early May, and all the girls rushed eagerly out to the yard when the lunch bell rang, keen to enjoy the sunshine. Jumpers were abandoned, skirts were rolled up and everyone did their best to sunbathe. Everyone except me, that is. I preferred to hide beneath my long, floppy jumper and was uncomfortable with the thought of revealing too much of myself. I decided to play safe and take my lunch into the toilets. I sat in one of the cubicles and unwrapped my sandwiches. It wasn't a pleasant place to sit and eat lunch, but at least it was safe. Or so I thought.

I hadn't been in there for more than five minutes before I heard the door open and two voices call, 'Hey, Tubby, we know you're in here. Come out, come out, wherever you are!'

I drew my legs up and put my feet on the toilet seat, hoping they'd think there was nobody there. No use. There was a hammering on the door of my cubicle, and Kate shouted insults and threats, giving dreadful details of what she'd do to me if I didn't come out that minute. The worst thing was, I knew they could unlock the door from the outside if they had a coin. The locks were old and very badly-designed. Did they know the trick too? It seemed they did. There was a muttered consultation, a clinking of coins and then, to my horror, I saw the lock begin to turn. A moment later, the door burst open and there they stood, grinning evilly.

'Look at her,' sneered Ruth, 'she's like a tank. Have you ever seen such a fat lump, Kate?'

At her words, something snapped inside my mind. A tank, was I? That really was the last straw. Well then, maybe we'd see what damage a tank could do. Everything became crystal clear to me. They were tiny girls, both of them. Funny I'd never noticed that before. I'd always thought of them as ten feet tall. In reality, they were much, much smaller than I was.

I stood up slowly, and was pleased to see a look of uncertainty flash across the girls' faces. This wasn't how it was supposed to go, they were probably thinking. Usually I cowered and bowed my head, waiting for the torment to end. But not today. With a burst of speed I didn't know I possessed, I charged. The girls went flying, like skittles. Kate fell against the sink, and Ruth crashed into the hand dryer before slumping to the ground. Kate recovered herself first, and dragged Ruth to her feet. With a terrified look at me, they dashed out the door.

I stood there for a moment, savouring my victory. I had stood up to my worst fear, and I had won. Sure, it wasn't the way my teachers would have advised me to deal with bullies, but they weren't there. It seemed nobody ever was, when trouble started. But now I knew I could handle myself in such situations. It was a good feeling. Best of all, though, was the

realisation that my size could be my greatest asset. Yes, I was bigger than some of the other girls, but for the first time, I was glad. Calmly, I gathered my sandwiches and drink, popped them back into my lunchbox and walked outside. It was a beautiful day, and the sun seemed to be shining even more brightly than it had earlier. It was hot, too. I shrugged off my jumper and wandered across to the yard to join the rest of my class.