

LUNCH TROUBLE

by

Sandra de Helen

Kathy Morris and I were practically inseparable. On schooldays when we had extra money, Kathy and I went to Jack's Drugstore for a hamburger and a small Coke, cost a total of twenty-five cents. Most of the time she and I had already spent my weekly \$1.50 at the variety store. So usually we went to Kathy's for a glass of milk and Velveeta cheese sandwich with Miracle Whip. Since Kathy helped me spend my lunch money she felt obliged to feed me.

Actually, I preferred going to Kathy's house for lunch. Not that I was addicted to Velveeta, but going home at noon to a dark, cold house was a dreary prospect. It seemed sunny at Kathy's.

Some days Kathy and her mom would play a duet on their upright piano, right there in the dining room. I would sit at the big old wooden table with its eight chairs, lingering over my sandwich on its squishy Wonder bread, and just beam at them. My friend and her mother, playing the piano together!

Sometimes Kathy's sister Kay would be there too. She would take Kathy's place at the piano, and Kathy and I would sit and punch each other under the table. Best of all, once in a great while, Kathy's mom would play and sing by herself. It was always the same song: "Alice Blue Gown." I loved that song. Mrs. Morris had a fine, sweet high voice that filled the room. I believed that was her very own song, and that she had indeed stepped out on the town in her Alice blue gown. I would imagine her in it, shy and smiling as she took Sergeant Morris's arm and headed for the ball.

One day, Mrs. Morris sent Kathy out of the room. She pulled out the chair next to me, leaned her left arm on the table, looked me right in the face, and said, "Diana May, I have to talk to you."

I nearly choked on the Wonder bread. My heart was racing, I couldn't breathe. The Velveeta turned to stone in my stomach. What was it? Was Kathy going to die? Did she have a dread disease? Did Kathy need a blood transfusion, and I was the only one who had the right type? Had she heard about Kathy's reputation with the boys, and wanted to check it out with me? Were they going to move away?

"Diana May, I don't want you to come here for lunch anymore. I know your mom gives you money to eat on, and I think you should buy your lunch downtown."

The shame, the humiliation. I thought my heart would stop beating altogether. I wished it would. But no, it just kept on, and I had to decide whether it was okay for me to drink the rest of my milk. No, I didn't think so. And anyway, I couldn't have got it past the lump in my throat that grew up there. Where was Kathy? I wanted to leave, at least let me leave if I had to continue living and suffering this embarrassment.

"Do you understand?" Oh God, she's still sitting there, looking at me. It was impossible for me to speak. With my eyes cast into my lap, I simply nodded.

"Okay then, I won't expect to see you here with Kathy at noon. Unless, of course, you want to bring your lunch along. Yes, that's a good idea, why don't you bring your own from home? Then you and Kathy could eat here together."

I still couldn't speak. I shook my head.

"Well, you think about it. You're always welcome here, Diana May, I just don't want to feed you all the time."

It was okay. I'd probably never eat again anyway.

Where the heck was Kathy, did she fall in the toilet? I sat twisting my napkin, staring at my pleated skirt.

When Kathy finally returned to the dining room, I could see she knew what had happened. She was almost as embarrassed as I was. I didn't say a word. Until we were out of the house.

Out in the street, I punched her in the shoulder. Hard. "Why didn't you tell me your mom didn't want me here?"

She couldn't give me a satisfactory answer, of course. She had been too scared to tell me herself, she thought her mom wouldn't actually go through with it, and even if she did, that I wouldn't know that Kathy had known ahead of time.

The worst part was, it was only Tuesday. Since Kathy and I had spent my money as soon as I got it, I went hungry the rest of the week. Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, I sat out behind the high school on the creek bank, dangling my feet in the water, wallowing in self-pity and humiliation, and reliving the scene.

Bring my food from home, that was a joke. We never had anything to bring for lunch. Oh, Mom took her lunch to the factory, that's true, but she ate stuff like leftover mashed potatoes with sliced onion on bread. I wanted Velveeta.

Finally, it was over and the next week, life went on. I budgeted my thirty cents a day, and spent every lunch hour at the drugstore. This was the place to be anyway. Jack made the best hamburgers in the world. They were very thin and well done. The buns were so fresh, they practically melted in your hands. The whole thing was hot, greasy, and steamed nearly flat.

My burger always had bright yellow, runny mustard. Just the right complement for the sliced dill pickles that were crunchy and juicy and dripped vinegar on your blouse if you didn't keep the waxed paper around your burger.

Small Cokes cost a nickel, came in a glass, and were drunk from a paper straw. When you were finished, you took two paper straws, flattened them, and folded them over each other in tiny squares, then accorded them out. After that, it was time to walk back to school. Most kids, most days, bought a candy bar and ate it on the way.

Some weeks I saved my extra 25 cents and bought stuff at the variety store. Kathy and I had spent hours there, poring over the different colors of lipstick and nail polish, the hair combs, the costume jewelry, the cheap perfume that cost a dime, and smelled like a funeral home on fire.

I still invited Kathy on these forays, but I now spent my money on myself.
