

BSS-S

**Boarding School
Survivors Support**

***BOARDING SCHOOL SURVIVORS – SUPPORT NEWSLETTER
SEPTEMBER 2023 (2)***



Looking at these made Jane Barclay think of going back to school

Greetings to all!

September actually meant the Autumn term... Are there any former boarders who do not think about going back to school as summer begins to fade?

The long summer holidays made us *almost* able to forget, for just a week or two, the loneliness, sadness, bullying and homesickness of being sent away from our familiar, comfortable home, leaving the greatest loss of all, our safe private bedroom.

With just two weeks left of the holidays, there were daily reminders that we were indeed soon having to leave home and step into the reality of the

nightmare that was boarding school. There were familiar clothes mixed up with some new uniform, and The Trunk sitting in your room ready to be packed with washed clothes, all with name-tapes on, ready for its journey to that alien place.

Once back at school, the leaves starting to fall were a symbol of the gentle summer games ending and the more competitive winter games starting. We stood impatiently at the notice boards waiting for the chosen teams to be announced. Games could play such a huge part in your life and actually rule how the next term was going to be lived.

Getting into the first teams of Hockey, Rugby, Netball, Lacrosse and other sports could 'make or break' your term... Success was kudos, special clothes and privileges, and escaping the school for the great away-games. Failure was rejection and Games Time spent with a seemingly reluctant teacher making us run around on the wet school pitches for many intensely cold and boring hours...

Apart from games, the Autumn Term was very special in so many ways... Many friends had left school and new arrivals replaced them. The 'new boarders' were often withdrawn and sad, which was felt by all of us but pushed away by 'old boarders' who, fearing being reminded of their own sadness, made everything a joke... This made the first week or so a strange, falsely 'happy' place as you got used to the considerable 'shuffle' of the dormitories. There were losses of old 'dormitory friends' and gains of new ones, and many of these moves slowly developed into new and lasting friendship groups.

In the classrooms there were more changes to get used to; and, as you moved up the school, many seemed quite terrifying... New teachers, new subjects, new languages and worst of all was having to face all these changes on your own.

There was no home to go to and discuss new experiences at the end of each testing school day and no parents to sit and help you through new and daunting work. And no place just to sit and cry. The Autumn term slowly unfolded as you got used to all that was new, different and unsettling; and, *just* as you learned the routine, Christmas arrived with its own special 'Boarding School Traditions' that you had to learn, abide by, or perish!

Being at Boarding School was not easy, however many times it was said of you that you had "settled in very well..."

Margaret Laughton

BSS-Support Conference 2023

We have the Conference on 11th November and we are greatly looking forwards to meeting everyone who comes on that day. Some of you we have known for many years, and others we are looking forwards to meeting for the first time...

What we do all know is that we have one thing in common – and that is Boarding School and what that means to each of us... Most of us were sent to Boarding School and want to hear the speakers, share our experiences and listen to others. Others are interested in the topic and all it means to those who were sent away.

You should all have received this information. If you want to come, please register. You will find all the information on our website:

<https://www.bss-support.org.uk/booking-for-conference-2023-now-open/>

Boarding Story

Food

by Jane Barclay

I'm sitting at Round Table because I'm a new girl. It's the summer term so there are only two of us. This is where Mrs Ford sits too, she's the headmistress, and Miss Brice, who's the Matron. Mrs Ford is called Fodder behind her back, and Miss Brice is Beezer. I learned this in bed last night, after lights-out.

I ate the cornflakes, even though the milk had white spots on it and tasted funny. Now I have a slice of bread and someone's put a cube of butter on my plate and a spoonful of slimy black treacle that smells bitter and is

spreading like an oily puddle. I cannot eat this, I cannot. I want to go home. I don't want to cry. But my eyes do anyway and drips slide down my face. I look down but Mrs Ford notices and says, "Jane, you'd better leave the table. Go and stand in the corridor."

I get up, scuttle across the dining-room in my new noisy clodhoppers, pull open the heavy door and shut it behind me. I stand in the corridor of dark wood walls. After a while I hear everyone scraping back their chairs. The others come out and I join the rush upstairs where I get told, by Beezer, how to make my bed with hospital corners.

Here is my first letter home, written two days later:

Dear Mummy and John,

I hope you are well, I am. (I'd learned the format from seeing my older brothers' letters.) For meals I am on round table. I go to bed at ten to seven. I am in Remove A, but I am working in Remove B. We have not started work yet. So we can get settled in. In our dormy we have great fun, and play catch with my Gonk. On Saturday we made our timetable and gave out books. Each classroom has it's own libery, and I have been reading 'I wanted a pony'. We have gorgous food, and today for breakfast we had cornflakes and butterd rols. I ride on Thursday 2nd ride. There is one girl who is five years old in our dormitory. Yesterday some of the girls cleared out the swimming pool. Our form mistress is Miss Kenwright. On Saterdag Joanna and I went second bed because everyone said we were 2nd bed. I am greatly looking forward to seeing you in three weeks time.

Lots of love,

Jane

I already knew I mustn't bother or upset parents. And had learned to lie to them, and to start the process of convincing myself I was 'fine'.

My first breakfast at prep school, aged nine, was what I call the defining moment – when I realised care was and would be absent, when I learned that crying was abhorred, and when I decided to 'refuse to mind'. To not show distress (suppressing) meant not letting myself know I felt it

(repressing). This worked even when my mother's letter arrived on Monday mornings. I did sometimes feel wistful if I looked out of my dormitory window – the Sussex downs were in the distance and my house was just behind them, but no-one else would have known. My resolve didn't work when Mrs Ford employed her key instrument of torture. Whenever shamed, my cheeks let me down, flushing red. What could I do but apologise for not being perfect, and try harder to make not one mistake; and at the same time cling to some trace of aliveness – rejected as bumptious, impertinent, obstreperous, bolshy.

Food offered with love is very different from food delivered as reward or punishment. Food offered with love can be tasted, taken in or not, swallowed if desired, then digested. Food offered with love nourishes the soul as well as the body, and fosters self-love, self-value. My first breakfast at prep school severed any residual connection between food and heart – at my Victorian pre-prep school I'd already witnessed my friend being forced, every day, to swallow repellent-to-her rice pudding; competition with my brothers, back home for holidays, obliterated discernment regarding quantity: I just wanted as much as them.

The message I did swallow from being banished from the dining-room was, 'Your distress, your you-ness, is not welcome here.'

Food became my enemy, fighting desire for sweets and stodge was a battle I couldn't win. My body, hunger included, became my enemy too. Being shamed at home (my name was Fatso, then shortened to Fat) didn't stop me eating; neither did the dread of end-of-term weighing. Through my teens I tried diets, skipping meals, starving; the idea of eating less immediately made me crave, this beast called 'need' would not relent. I was caught in a loop that fed self-loathing, and led to seeking proof I wasn't disgusting: being wanted was the goal, however temporary, whatever I had to do to earn it. The impasse lasted for as long as I didn't realise it was love I was hungry for, emptiness I was attempting to fill.

It wasn't until I found a therapist I could confess my greed, and learned that need for nurturing wasn't greedy but natural, that I dared opening my heart to digest love. Not in one gulp, any more than someone deprived of regular meals over years can tolerate more than a mouthful at first. Years later, self-love and value much restored, I eat mostly shame-free and with

pleasure. Early evenings can still activate the urge to stuff: memories of not going home need ongoing tender attention.

Discovering the sensual pleasure of eating is a delight: the smell, taste, touch, sight, even sound. Shaming sensuality is, of course, central to boarding school regime: deprivation, a known torture, keeps a child striving. Success in terms of achievement becomes the goal rather than joy in living.

Not any longer...

Poetry

Flashbacks

by nyree

Faded flashbacks to decades ago
images and memories recalled in a show
A highlighted reel of hard events endured
was I comforted, no, of that I'm sure

Glimpses of deliberately buried memories
hidden to ensure their not offended
Resurfaced feelings from the past
such wounds do continue to last

Vividly captured yet doubted
a reaction withheld on that you counted
Enough of pretending it was accepted
wounds were inflicted, were they intended?

Frozen in shock by relived feelings
over and over they leave you reeling
Practice self love, to lift the emotional block
stuck by the floodgates of memory shocks

We have quite a variety of Poetry now as we have been collecting poems from our supporters over the years, from our Poetry Corner at the conference...

Because of this, we have started looking into the possibility of having a collection of Boarding School poems published...

If you would like to add to the collection please send to:
margaret.laughton@bss-support.org.uk.

We send this with all good wishes for a happy Autumn from
The Directors of *Boarding School Survivors – Support*
Sam Barber, Jane Barclay, Paul Fray, Margaret Laughton and Allison Ujejski.

info@bss-support.org.uk
www.bss-support.org.uk