



THE QUILL

My Private Toolbox

By Susan Hodara

I am lying flat on my back across the tiled floor in Carl Bindman's downstairs bathroom. It's not a large room; my head is beneath the porcelain toilet bowl, my feet under the sink. My eyes are shut.

There is a party beyond the bathroom's closed door – Carl's Bar Mitzvah party, I think, which means I am probably wearing a nice dress and patent leather shoes. There are hamburgers and hotdogs. There is music – Beatles, Beach Boys – and the other kids are dancing the Pony and the 88. But I don't care. My stomach is a knot of pain, and I need to make it stop.

I know how to do this. I have to lie entirely flat – on either my back or my belly, arms by my sides – and will the ache to leave my body. It does so in a slow downward movement, stomach to bowels, urged by my silent focus. It doesn't take too long – five or ten minutes – but I have to be patient; I can't rush it. I lead the pain with my mind, usher it out.

From my earliest years, I have concocted many ways of managing my body's discomforts. I didn't know what other people did in similar circumstances, and I didn't ask. I developed my own techniques, and I kept them to myself: private solutions to personal challenges.

Like maneuvering my tongue to avoid the gag reflex that happened every time my mother brought me to the doctor and he needed to look down my throat. As a little girl, I had sore throats often enough that they considered taking out my tonsils, and each time the doctor examined me, he'd press down on the back of my tongue with a fat popsicle stick, and

I would gag. That involuntary spasming, an unfulfilled retch that rose all the way up from my belly – I hated it. I gagged, but he'd leave the stick there, pushing down.

So I learned how to depress my own tongue. I stood in front of the mirror in my bedroom and stretched my mouth open, and sure enough, the tongue that emerged covered up everything behind it, tonsils included. But if I engaged the muscle at the back of my tongue and drew it downward, the whole thing curved itself into the space behind my lower teeth, and everything beyond was revealed: tonsils, uvula, the darkness into which I swallowed. I got good at it. So good that the doctor didn't need the depressor anymore, and even when he did use it, I no longer gagged.

Another solution: I found that tiny sips of water were the only way to quell a cough. I'm not talking about a phlegmy expulsion or a few loud hacks. I'm talking about those unprovoked but unrelenting fits of coughing that explode from your mouth if you try to suppress them. You're going to have to just cough it out unless you can get to water. And so, rather than endure that humiliation, I would flee from classrooms and religious services and slumber parties to the nearest fountain or faucet. Just a few small sips would do.

One of my most successful practices was getting myself to pee. I don't know how I discovered the connection between my bladder and my words, but all I had to do was say "wee wee wee wee wee," and I would feel the tingle of an urge. Every time. It was a chant – "wee wee wee wee wee," "wee wee wee wee wee," "wee wee wee wee wee," – whispered to myself in the bathroom stall at school or whenever my mother told me to "make a 'wee-wee'" before bedtime or the start of a car trip. It worked so well that if I said it right after I peed, I could make myself pee again.

On the flip side, I mastered (or I should say *almost* mastered) *not* peeing by adopting a walk that originated mid-thigh, with my upper legs clenched together to forestall that which was inevitable but which I could delay for unhealthy amounts of time. I'd jiggle my body and pace around in fast circles. Yes, there always came the point where I had no alternative but to sit on a toilet, but I could, usually, avoid disaster.

A further triumph was dodging the braces I was threatened I'd need if I didn't stop sucking my thumb (left thumb only). Thumb-sucking itself might

be considered a self-devised means of easing my inner anxieties, but it was so intuitive, so unconscious, that I can't take credit for coming up with it. As for evading its ill effects, I accomplished this by using the pad of my right thumb to push in against my upper front teeth, the same way I imagined braces would. I'd do it for 15 or 20 seconds after each bout of thumb-sucking. Additionally, I ensured no damage was being done by clenching my jaw and inserting my right index fingernail into the space between my upper and lower teeth to measure the distance, making sure it hadn't grown. If it felt like it had, I'd press against my teeth for a little bit longer.

As a young teen, I soothed myself by tearing off slivers of my toenails and the flecks of skin that surrounded them, and I taped my bangs to my forehead at night so they'd be straight in the morning. I found my father's brass razor and shaved the black hairs off my legs so if I wore nylons, my legs wouldn't look like there were frozen insects beneath the fabric. When I decided I was fat, I memorized calorie counts and calculated meals that would keep me below 800 a day. I stuck with it for months.

Over the years, I accumulated a toolbox full of clandestine fixes, odd habits and coping mechanisms. By the time I became a mother to Sofie and her little sister, Ariel, the stomachaches of my childhood had subsided. But Ariel had lots of them, especially during elementary school, first thing in the morning when she lay groggy in her bed. "Just stay still and let it go," I'd say, and I'd close my own eyes, as if I could do it for her.

It never worked. She'd get up and head to school, leaving her pain behind or, who knows, bringing it with her.