

Kissing Jail

Shelly Unsicker

“Are you ready to kiss him?” Now what was I going to do?

It all started on the girls’ merry-go-round. The recess bell had rung and 27 first graders had lined up and filed outside as orderly as six-year-olds could manage. I had been counting the moments until I could find a good spot on my favorite playground toy. Oh... I loved the monkey bars and the tall metal slide, and even the teeter-totter, but my favorite, my all time favorite, was the merry-go-round. The merry-go-rounds at B.C. Swinney Elementary were BIG. At least they looked big to my six-year-old self. There were wooden boards for standing and wooden boards for sitting and six places for grasping metal bars and pushing – with all the might and strength that elementary students could muster.

Once I crossed the boundary from the indoor quiet of Mrs. Gail’s classroom and neat rows of desks into the outdoor noises of children and scuffling feet on a gravel playground, I ran. I ran as fast as my black patent MaryJanes could carry me, heading straight for the girls’ merry-go-round. It was late September in 1969 and most of us, first graders, had mastered the playground rules. Well, at least the one that segregated the girls from the boys. The merry-go-round closest to the fence line was designated for girls – the one closest to the school building was for boys. No one ever crossed that boundary. Not ever.

But that day would be different, that day with the autumn blue sky and the sun shining like maybe it was still summer... that day, someone dared to cross the line. I had just leapt onto the six-sided merry-go-round crowded with squealing girls twirling and giggling round and round and round, when I looked up and found myself almost nose to nose with a boy. Yes. George Schultz, first-grader and male, had leapt onto the girls’ merry-go-round, as if he’d been dared to. Maybe he had, but it didn’t matter. I would not stand for this kind of injustice and clear violation of the playground rules. “You’d better get off the girls’ merry-go-round, George.” I demanded.

“Yeah?! Shelly Kay Gerber Baby Food, what are you going to do about it?” Ergh! I couldn’t believe he was making fun of my last name... again.

“Ger-big. I’m Shelly Kay Gerbig,” and then I added, “Georgie Porgie.”

George didn’t care, he just continued to taunt me in a sing-song kind of voice, “Shelly Kay Gerber Baby Food! Shelly Kay Gerber Baby Food...” With my brow deeply furrowed and my blonde hair blowing with the swirl of the merry-go-round, I gave George my best scowl. And I thought about his challenge. What could I do about it? Think, think, think as the merry-go-round twirled and twirled.

“Well, George, if you don’t get off the girls’ merry-go-round, I’m... I’m gonna...” Really, I had nothing. George’s face curled into a sneer matching the waves of his thick, chestnut brown hair. Behind him whirled the school’s beige cinder blocks mixed with the colors of blue sky, green grass, and rest of the psychedelic playground. I began to feel dizzy and adjusted my grip on the cold metal bar.

Then, George just started laughing at me, “See, I’m on your merry-go-round and there’s nothing you can do about it, Shelly Kay Gerber Baby Food!” His taunting laughter and the injustice of this clear boundary violation infuriated me. Something had to be done about this boy.

“George, you better get off this merry-go-round. I have a secret weapon and I’m not afraid to use it,” I declared with the greatest of confidence.

“Yeah... what secret weapon?” I knew he didn’t believe me, but George’s sneer began to fade. Fighting back the dizziness, I inched closer toward him, carefully maintaining my footing and grasp of the metal bar.

I was close enough to whisper, “If you don’t get off this merry-go-round, right this very minute, I’m going to...” Leaning right into his face, I shouted, “KISS YOU!”

“Kiss me??!!! Arrrrggghhhhhh!!!!”

George leapt off the girls’ merry-go-round running as fast as six-year-old legs and knobby knees could carry him. The chase was on. I could feel the power I suddenly held over a boy, and that sudden surge of energy propelled me to leap off the merry-go-round and run after Georgie Porgie, while peals of little girl giggles twirled round and round behind me.

Fast and wiry, George fled from my reach and I just could not catch him. Round and round we ran and laughed and laughed. When I finally ran out of breath, I found myself back at the merry-go-rounds and ready to give up. I turned to see if my spot on the merry-go-round might still be there, and a small posse of first grade girls swarmed all around me. Some of them I knew from my class, but others I did not know by name. Everyone seemed to be laughing and pretending to be outraged at the grave injustice of a boy jumping onto our merry-go-round. “We’ll help you catch him!”

I couldn’t believe it. Three girls charged George and caught hold of the little boundary violator. Flanked by militant six-year-old females on all sides, George was still trying to catch his breath. They marched him right up to me and asked, “What do you want us to do with him?” Huh. I had not exactly thought this out.

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The girls looked at me expectantly. I didn’t want to disappoint my new merry-go-round allies. But I wasn’t sure I really wanted to kiss Georgie Porgie either.

“Um... what if we put him in jail, and... then we can kiss him later?”

Silence.

I wasn’t sure they were going to buy into this plan, but the more I thought about kissing George Schultz, the more certain I was that I didn’t want to.

“Jail?” inquired Cynthia with her soft brown hair and big, brown, eyes. She was in Mrs. Gail’s class with me and while she wasn’t as tall as me, she always seemed to know about things and the way they ought to be.

“Yeah, Cynthia, like a kissing jail,” I explained.

“A kissing jail! And if any more boys jump onto our merry-go-round, we can put them in there too!” Everyone agreed it was a good idea.

And that’s how it began. For the remainder of the autumn months, first grade boys jumped onto our merry-go-round and ran from first grade girls who caught them and put them in kissing jail. I don’t remember actually kissing any of them, but I’ll never forget the laughter as we chased those boys round and round and round.