

COMPETITION

BY: MICHELLE P. HEATHERTON

In my second-grade class at Miami Elementary School, math races were practically a daily occurrence. My teacher, Mrs. Martha West, seemed to be obsessed with the idea of forcing a bunch of seven year olds to either perform or perish when it came to arithmetic.

The desks in our classroom were arranged in a rectangle, girls on one side of the room and boys on the other. The winner from the previous race would stand behind each seated student and attempt to answer math problems faster than the seated student in order to keep the title. The person who answered first would continue to advance around the rectangle of desks until every student had been conquered.

Mrs. West, who must have been a Roman gladiator in a former life, was a tall, big-boned woman with an enormous backside. When I talked about her to my parents, I endearingly referred to her as "Butt." Well, Butt had the ability to instill fear in the heart of any second grader; she would frequently stomp around the classroom in a militant fashion and call on students who avoided her eyes. Even if I didn't know the answer to a question, I quickly learned to look directly at her to prevent her from calling on me.

However, no one could hide from the torture of the math races. I went to school every day with a lump in my throat and butterflies in my stomach. If I lost during the races, I would be the object of ridicule; but winning didn't solve the problem either because the more I won, the more I was expected to win.

My archrival was a pretty, blond brain named Laura. For all intents and purposes, she was Mrs. West's pet. Laura had two younger sisters and was accustomed to playing the role of

the dutiful, albeit bossy, older sibling. When it came to joking and playing tricks on other students, Laura was a virtual stiff; she was the one who always spoiled the fun, tattling on the rest of us to her beloved Butt. Laura was the portrait of the model female student: she loved to read, she refrained from boisterous behavior, and she helped clean up garbage on the playground. However, she was extremely competitive and wanted to be the best at everything. But Laura hadn't counted on running into someone else who also aspired to be the best.

On one particular day in October, 1976, I walked into my second-grade classroom with my usual throat lump and fluttering stomach, only to be greeted by perky Laura who was adjusting the tautness of her ponytail.

"Guess what?" she beamed. "Mrs. West says that we're gonna have another math race today!"

So, what's new? I thought.

"It's gonna be subtraction," she continued, "and you won't beat me this time!"

I felt very queasy as I watched Laura bounce down the hall towards the bathroom. Apparently, she didn't experience the anxiety that I did. Why wasn't she nervous? Why did she seem to enjoy this competition stuff so much? Where did she get all of that confidence in herself? Of course, I had confidence, too, but I was never overly confident. After all, anything could happen during a math race. One split-second determined who the winner would be. You could lose your title if your voice cracked!

Laura and I actually had a strange kind of friendship, like rivals sometimes do. We respected each other but there was always a distance between us because of the pervasive atmosphere of competition in Mrs. West's class. The two of us took turns winning. At times, I wanted to ask Laura if she was as nervous as I was during the math races, but I just couldn't do

it. She might have interpreted this kind of confession as a weakness; then she'd tell Mrs. West and all the other kids, and they'd laugh at me for being a wimp. I never revealed my true feelings to any of them, and I continued to wonder whether Laura was also perpetuating this same kind of charade. We probably would have been close friends if it hadn't been for those awful races and the nagging of Mrs. West.

As I sat down at my desk and opened my school box, I overheard a couple of the boys talking about someone vomiting on the bus.

"This kid Mike puked on the bus, and the bus driver had to pull over and put that brown, flaky stuff on it."

"Yeah, but it still stinks. Did you get sick?"

"No way! That gross stuff's neat."

The vomit story certainly didn't help my stomach feel any better. I tried to do something to get my mind off the subject of the math race. If I continued to dwell on it, I would drive myself crazy.

Luckily, I discovered my amber-colored, liquid glue and proceeded to finish the project I had started the day before: gluing Leslie's school box shut. Leslie, an obese, obnoxious girl who resembled a walrus, sat at the desk next to me; she was the closest thing we had to a pervert in the second grade. For some reason, the gorgeous, long-lashed, dimple-cheeked Tim really liked her. I guess some things never change.

For six weeks, Leslie had been bragging to everyone about how she had gotten Tim to come over her house during the summer. Leslie had an above-ground pool, and she claimed that Tim's bathing suit had slipped off while he was swimming one day. Apparently, Leslie had taken a photograph of his swimming trunks as they were floating on top of the water. She was

showing the pictures to everyone in the class so they wouldn't think she had fabricated the whole incident. However, darling Tim, Mrs. West's male version of teacher's pet, was too busy with other matters to be concerned with Leslie's photo display; he was wrestling around with Scott in the corner of the classroom.

"Look at these pictures of Tim, Michelle," Leslie said coyly.

I quickly shoved Leslie's school box back into her desk as she approached me with the group of photos. Let's see her pry that open, I thought.

"So, where's the picture of his swimming trunks?" I asked.

"It's right here," she answered, handing me the photo.

I examined the Polaroid for a minute, and, due to the glare on the water, I could only distinguish some kind of blob floating in the pool. It could have been anything.

"That just looks like a towel you threw into the pool," I remarked.

"It is not! That's his bathing suit. I swear! You're just jealous because he came over my house and not yours."

Well, she was right about that at least; I was jealous. The crush that I had on Tim began in the first grade and continued to intensify. Although the blob in the picture certainly didn't look like a bathing suit, it was only a minor consolation since he had still gone to Leslie's house during the summer. I just couldn't understand what Tim saw in that girl. If he had liked Laura, it would have made sense. But, then again, Laura and I were the only ones in the class who could beat him in the math races. Even though I was extremely fond of Tim, I wasn't about to concede to him. I was too proud to do something like that.

As Tim and Scott were running back to their seats, Scott threw a spitball at Leslie and me. When it bounced off Leslie's head, I grabbed the spitball and fired it back at him. Scott tried

to avoid it, but it hit him anyway; he responded by spraying himself with an imaginary can of girl repellent. It was obvious that Scott didn't share or understand Tim's interest in the opposite sex.

"Speds!" Scott yelled at us.

"Nerd!" I screamed.

I didn't realize that Mrs. West had been watching the entire transaction from the hallway as she was talking to another teacher. Of course, she marched into the classroom with a disapproving expression that was clearly directed at me, not Scott.

"I just don't understand your behavior, Michelle," she tsk-tsked as her big butt passed by me. "I expect more from you than that. And would you please erase those drawings on your desk?"

At that moment, Laura skipped over to her seat; she was grinning cleverly, probably anticipating her moment of victory. Her desktop was completely clean.

"Okay, boys and girls," Mrs. West began, "let's hold off on our Dick and Jane readings until a little later and start the day off fresh with a math race. Come on, wake up, sleepy heads! Let's get those little minds working!"

My stomach jumped and my heart started pounding rapidly. Everyone but Laura moaned. I glanced over at her, and she still looked as composed and confident as ever. What could I do to rattle her?

Mrs. West continued, "Well, Michelle, since you were our winner last time, you get to start."

I stood up slowly, thinking that every student in the room could hear my heart pounding. I took my place behind Leslie's seat and waited for Mrs. West to give the problem.

"Fifteen minus seven."

"Eight," I answered instantly.

Leslie was no threat. She didn't even attempt to answer; she just sat there (most likely daydreaming about Tim and his swim trunks) and waited for the moment of humiliation to pass. Unfortunately, this is how the majority of girls reacted to the dreaded math races. Most of the boys weren't any better, but they usually acted foolishly and yelled out ridiculous answers. I moved around the rectangle of students, eliminating them one at a time. Then, I came to Taylor, a painfully shy and gaunt boy who never really talked to anyone. I don't think I ever saw him smile or ever heard him speak. He looked like he was ready to die, leaning on his pale face and waiting for the torture to end. I wondered if I should tell him that I hated the math races, too. After all, he probably wouldn't reveal my secret to anyone because he never talked. But finding the opportunity to tell him would definitely be a challenge; one day I had tried to approach him on the playground, but he ran away.

"Twenty minus twelve," Mrs. West barked.

You're an evil woman, I thought, abusing little kids like this. I paused for what seemed to be an eternity and gave Taylor the chance to answer, but he just sat there and stared at the floor. I always felt extremely guilty whenever I came to Taylor and some of the other students who never even tried to win. How could they just allow me to beat them without a fight?

I finally realized that everyone but Taylor was staring intensely at me, wondering why I was taking so long to answer.

"Eight," I sighed.

Pretty soon, I made my way around to Scott. He was still making obnoxious faces and pretending to spray himself. Scott was actually fairly smart when he wanted to be. He could

give me a run for my money if he tried, so I had to be on guard.

"Ten minus ten."

"Zero," I said firmly.

"Zero!" Scott yelled a half-second after me.

"Close, but not quite fast enough, Scott," Mrs. West observed.

"Ah, c'mon, teacher," Scott whined.

"I'm afraid you'll have to practice a little more if you want to win, Scott," she said.

I moved on to Tim who also had the potential to answer faster than me. Since I had romantic designs on him, I always became a little flustered whenever I was in close proximity to him. However, I got angry again when I thought of him swimming in Leslie's pool.

"Okay, sixteen minus nine."

"Seven!" Tim and I yelled in unison.

"Well, what do you know? We've got a tie," Mrs. West commented as she shifted her rump on the chair. "We'll have to do another one. Let's see...eighteen minus nine."

"Nine!" We both answered again.

My mouth was starting to get very dry, and I was breathing rapidly. Leslie was smiling at Tim from across the classroom; Laura was looking incredibly smug. She probably thought my winning streak had ended.

"C'mon, Tim, don't let a girl beat you!" Scott taunted.

"Yeah, Tim, show her who's boss," another boy yelled.

Mrs. West was flipping through her papers to make sure she gave us a problem that hadn't been used recently.

"Okay, you two, how about thirteen minus zero."

"Thirteen!" I exclaimed.

The zero concept had apparently confused Tim somewhat; he hadn't been anticipating a problem like that. He sat at his desk blushing profusely and sulking. I thought he looked absolutely adorable with his crimson face.

I advanced around the rectangle and finally came to the calm, always mature, and smirking Laura. As I stood behind her chair waiting for Mrs. West to shout out another problem, I wondered if Laura could hear my heart pounding against my chest wall. She would have to be deaf not to hear it, I thought; it was so loud.

"Well, we're back to you two girls again," Mrs. West commented. "The rest of you should really practice more if you ever want to beat Laura and Michelle."

Come on, lady, get on with it! I said to myself. I was starting to feel light-headed. Laura was perfectly poised in her chair, biding her time until she could reclaim her title.

"Hmmm ...nine minus seven."

"Two!" Laura and I both answered.

"Eighteen minus seven."

"Eleven!" we shouted.

My hands were cold and clammy, and it seemed that my teeth were beginning to chatter somewhat. Laura was smoothing out some wrinkles in her dress. A couple of the other girls in class whispered and giggled. I had the feeling that I looked as white as a ghost (and obviously nervous). In an attempt to appear carefree and slightly tough, I shifted my weight to my left leg and folded my arms.

"Okay, girls, twenty-five minus eighteen," Mrs. West said in drill-sergeant fashion.

We both paused for a second.

"Seven!" we yelled.

"Minus two," Butt added.

"Five!" we both answered.

Butt had thrown us a curve. She was increasing the difficulty of the problems.

She's hoping that Laura will win, I thought. Maybe I should just give it up. This stuff is taking years off my life (like Mom always said). Why did I insist on subjecting myself to all of this anguish? Dignity, I guess. That was the answer.

"Well, you two are really something today," Mrs. West remarked. "Try this one.

Twenty-one minus thirteen."

"Eight," we said in unison.

"Minus four."

"Four," we answered.

It could have gone on all day if Mr. Kirby, the guidance counselor, master test administrator, and Phil Donahue look-alike, hadn't knocked on the door.

"Hello, Mrs. West," he began, "I'm sorry to interrupt your class, but I need to borrow Michelle Heatherton for about 45 minutes."

"Okay, Mr. Kirby, we were in the middle of our math race, but I suppose we can just finish up tomorrow," Mrs. West replied.

I finally released all of the air that I had been holding in my lungs. Gradually, my heart rate decreased, and I started to feel normal again.

As I walked out the door, I glanced over at Laura; she looked extremely disappointed. I heard some of the kids making the usual goofy speculations in regards to the reasons why Mr. Kirby mysteriously yanked me out of class.

"Ooooh, Michelle's in trouble!"

"Michelle's gonna get a swat!"

Of course, the excursions to the main office had nothing to do with being in trouble or getting a swat. They had everything to do with the perpetual I.Q. testing of certain students at Miami Elementary. At first, I found the trips to the office to be very daunting; the questions that Mr. Kirby asked were even more intimidating. None of the school officials ever voluntarily provided information about the seemingly top secret experiments. I had to repeatedly ask Mr. Kirby why I was being taken out of class so often. He finally told me that the smart students (like Laura, Tim, and I) were being tested so our "intelligence quotients" could be determined. I was supposed to be flattered by all of this attention. Most of the time, I felt like a laboratory rat; but on this day, I was extremely grateful for the I.Q. test because it had ultimately rescued me from the math race.

As I entered the testing chamber that was illuminated with blaring fluorescent lights, I looked up at Mr. Kirby's nostrils to see if they still contained the same abundant amount of hair. They did.

"I'm really sorry about taking you away from your math race," he began. "You looked like you were doing real well. How do you like those math races?"

"Oh, they're fun," I said with a gleam in my eye.