
SEVENTH GRADE

FROM *THE GOOD TIMES ARE KILLING ME*

Lynda Barry

*Lynda Barry grew up in Seattle, Washington. At Evergreen State University she began producing cartoon strips that reflected her youth: her neighborhood, family, school, romances, and friends. Now a syndicated cartoonist and a novelist, she still writes about the complex emotions of teenagers. "Seventh Grade," excerpted from the novel *The Good Times Are Killing Me*, explores how prejudice and group pressure affect friendships between black and white students.*

FROM THE FIRST DAY OF SEVENTH GRADE EVERYONE WAS NEW. Even if you had known them all of your whole life they were still new. And from the second we walked through the doors we all automatically split apart into groups of who was alike. Everyone knew exactly what to do, like someone was whispering instructions to our hands and eyes and feet and hair. Every kid from my old school, all of us who had ever lived on the same street together and played together all our lives stopped talking and walking with each other and never talked or walked with each other again.

This was our new main rule of life even though it wasn't us who created it. It just grew there, like big permanent teeth after baby teeth.

We had to constantly read books and poems about equality in English, and I wondered sometimes if Bonna ever thought of me the way I thought of her when I read them. *To Kill a Mocking Bird*. *A Raisin in The Sun*: "What happens to a dream deferred?"

If she didn't that's OK. It wouldn't hurt my feelings.

And we had to write our own stories and poems and discuss them and they would put us in a mood that felt so real and true to us because we could each write the answer and the answer was always the same: love each other, love each other, love each other. And we would really believe things could change until the bell would ring and we would go back out into the hallway and know there was no way some puny poem or story could ever touch this huge big thing. This Kal-Tiki The Immortal Monster.

There were a lot of fights. You would get pushed in the back on your

way to class or pushed at your locker. One day I got shoved so bad I cracked my head against a toilet stall and when I turned around I saw who did it was a girl I didn't know standing with two other girls, and one of them was Bonna. For a second I forgot the rule of Bonna and me not talking anymore and I said "Why didn't you tell her? What'd you let her do it for, stupid?" And we both froze. Bonna didn't have a choice. By the time I tried to run it was too late. She pushed me into the corner and her friends stood there watching and I remember looking at her and not believing she would really hit me because I had been to her house, because I knew her mother, because inside we were still friends, we were, I knew it, and I knew she knew it, rules or no rules. When she raised up her hand and slapped my face hard I told her so, I said "Remember? Don't you even remember?" and I started crying, I couldn't help it, and she slapped me again and kept slapping me until I started naming everything in her house—the lamps, the chairs, the TV, the color of the walls, the couch, the rug, and I couldn't shut up and I couldn't shut up and the next thing I knew a teacher was yanking both of us by the arms and dragging us down the hall to the office just like I had seen girls being dragged every day since I got there.

We sat on two chairs in front of the secretary, waiting for the vice principal to come. I turned to look at Bonna and she was staring straight ahead and I could see the streaks on her face.

In the vice principal's office we acted like we had never met. Like all it was was any black girl slapping any white girl who had mouthed off to her, something that happened every single day and would just keep on happening world without end.

When he called my mother to tell her, she never knew the girl was Bonna, just like Bonna's father never knew the other girl was me.

FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. *Did you and your classmates experience a transformation similar to the one Lynda Barry describes when you began junior high school or middle school? What changes in friendship patterns, if any, occurred when you left elementary school?*
2. *Why do you think the girls' friendship changed in the seventh grade and not earlier?*
3. *What do you think would happen if the speaker in the story and Bonna were to meet again as adults?*
4. *In what ways can schools help slay "Kal-Tiki The Immortal Monster"? What books and materials might be useful? What could teachers and administrators do to help? Can dances, sporting events, or assemblies be structured to create friendships between groups?*

4 HEAR MY VOICE