

## Who Were You, Miss Billings?

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Miss Billings was gray. She had gray hair, gray bushy eyebrows, and gray hairs that sprouted from her chin. She even wore gray rayon dresses, the kind with little tiny flowers on a huge gray background. She was my fourth grade teacher.

My heart races a little even now when I remember the day I challenged Miss Billings. A skunk got loose inside Judy Jones' farmhouse one night. I guess it crawled through the screen door left ajar. Maybe it was the dog that scared the skunk, or maybe the cat. Whatever the trigger, the skunk did what skunks do--it cut loose the smell from hell. Judy didn't come to school for three days while her mom aired out the place, took the bedding to the clothesline, washed the kids down in tomato juice.

The day Judy returned to school, Miss Billings shoved all our wooden desks willy-nilly out of their rows and screeched them clear across the oak floor, over in the far corner under the American flag. Only one desk with its fold-up seat sat alone by the open door. It had Judy's name on it. When Judy, the shyest girl in the world, came in and saw where she'd be sitting, she cringed. No way did she want to be the center of attention, cast in the spotlight of her aloneness. Her blue eyes watered, but she was brave. Even as the cancer took her away, little by little, she was brave.

I was spitting mad at Miss Billings. At recess, I banged the door against the wall of the restroom when I slammed inside. "Miss Billings is so mean!" I announced to the room, my rant ricocheting off the green-painted cinder block walls. "Poor, poor Judy. She's all alone, she's so shy. What does Miss Billings think, the smell will kill us?"

Right in the middle of my bathroom tirade, a toilet flushed behind one of the stall doors. The metal latch screeched open. Miss Billings' square frame filled the opening. I ducked my head figuring for sure she'd slap me. But she lumbered on by and left the restroom.

After recess, our chairs were back in their customary rows, all of us neatly alphabetized. Miss Billings sat at the helm of her ship behind her desk up front. Judy Jones' desk was back in its place--Row C, Chair Seven--in front of her cousin Kathy Jones.

On we went with our workbook pages.

Miss Billings never said a word about the bathroom incident, not to me, not to my dad. My father would have sided with the teacher, just like he promised when he warned, "You get in trouble at school, and you will get into twice as much trouble at home."

Decades later at a class reunion, I happened to sit by Judy Jones, now ravaged with cancer. She smiled softly at me and I flashed the memory of Miss Billings' skunk intervention. "Do you remember Miss Billings?" I asked Judy. "Yes," she replied, smiling. I told her my memory of her desk all alone in the middle of miles of blond oak floor. Judy spoke in a voice so soft I had to lean over to hear, "You were always fair, Sheryl. You were always fair." Her unexpected compliment made me blush.

Today, after teaching for decades, I've made plenty of my own mistakes. I've been both understood and misunderstood by the kids in my room, and I wonder about Miss Billings, the woman behind the gray exterior. Who were you, Teacher? Did you ever laugh or cry, love or lose? What colors did you hide behind those gray spectacles?

### Author Biography

Sheryl Lain has taught thousands of students in her English classes over the years. Former director of the Wyoming Writing Project, she facilitated writing projects throughout her state. Her book *A*

*Poem for Every Student* chronicles a teacher's life. She is an international presenter for the Bureau of Education and Research and author of numerous articles, monographs, chapters and poems. She can be reached at [sheryllain@aol.com](mailto:sheryllain@aol.com).