

MY BOOK

DIANE HOWELL

LINNEY AND ME

When I was a child, life wasn't in such a hurry. A summer day was a lifetime, and the sun set slowly, sad that it had to leave the sky.

My favorite season was all of them.

And each season had a different flavor.

Summer was fun.

Fall was cozy.

Winter was icy mornings and warm hearts.

Spring made me glad but also made me wonder, "Who will I be when I grow up?"

In the spring of 1959, I was ten years old, and my best friend, Linney, moved away. Until then, I never knew my heart could hurt.

My story isn't special.

But maybe it is because it happened to me.

Your story is special, too. But before we get to yours, let me tell you mine.



LINNEY and I were best friends before we were born.

Our mothers were best friends, too, and they would feel us kicking in the womb always at the same time as if we were trying to get each other's attention.

She lived one hundred and one steps away. We counted it out once, one hundred and one steps from my bedroom door to hers.

Close enough for "I have to tell you something!" emergency meets. But far enough away to hide out when we fought. Which didn't happen that often, and usually, once we made up, we couldn't remember what we were fighting about in the first place.

When we started walking and fell down a lot, we would try to help each other up. Grandpa says that's the main thing life will ask of you. Keep getting up after you fall, and you'll be okay.

On the day of my tenth birthday party, Linney came down with a case of *The Worries*.

My guests sang "Happy Birthday" as best they knew how. Some sang in one key and some in another.

*Happy birthday Rose O'Reilly
Happy birthday to you!*

I closed my eyes, wished for a dog, and blew out all ten candles in a single breath.

For icing on the cake, so to speak, Mom held a hula-hoop contest in the backyard, and Linney hula-hooped the longest. She made it to thirty-two twirls before the giggles messed her up, and she lost her rhythm. The prize was a miniature xylophone Mom picked up at Woolworth's Five and Ten Cent Store.

That was the grand finale, and everyone except Billy Drummond knew the party was over. Billy never knows when to leave, and Mom is too polite to tell him to go home.

Finally, after all the cake was gone and the candy dishes were empty, he said, "I have to go now."

Linney and I scooped up the presents and escaped to my room.

PEANUT BUTTER AND JELLY

We sat cross-legged on my bed with all my gifts in a pile between us. I pulled out the diary with a Golden Retriever on the cover.

“Thanks, Linney. I like the dog.”

“I got you the one with a lock to keep snoops out.”

I flipped the pages to August 25th. “What should I write?”

Linney took the mini-mallet and picked out a tune on the xylophone.

Plink-a plink, plink-a plink, plink.

“You know what you should write?”

“No. What?”

“You should write, ‘We’re not getting any younger. Before you know it, we’ll be freshmen in high school, and then we’ll fall in love, and *then* we’ll get married, and *then* we’ll have kids, and before you know it, we’ll forget about each other.’”

“No, we won’t.”

“How do you know, Rose? You don’t know!”

“I do so.”

Why was my best friend trying to ruin my post-party high?

“You worry too much, Linney.”

“Maybe. But what proof do you have that we’ll always be best friends?”

Proof enough for me that I can’t picture my life without you.

“I don’t need any proof,” I argued. “And anyway, why are you so gloomy?”

“We’re ten years old now. Almost adults, and we should start thinking like adults.”

“You mean, learn to expect the worst?”

“Something like that.”

“You’re acting creepy, Linney.” I tore open a package of colored pens, a gift from my brother. “There’s plenty of time before we have to start being adult worrywarts.” I slid the purple-colored pen out of the pack.

“And we’ll always be besties. My dad says we’re joined at the hip.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, I think it means...we’re so much alike. We’re almost the same person. Ooh, scented ink!”

Linney held my pen under her nose. “It smells like my mother’s potpourri, and don’t change the subject.”

Linney stopped to gather her thoughts. “We’re *not* the same person. But we make a good pair...like macaroni and cheese.”

“We’re not macaroni and cheese!” I groaned. “Ew!”

“What are we, then?”

“We are...” My first entry in my new diary in purple ink was—*Peanut Butter and Jelly*.

Reading what I wrote, Linney shrieked, “*Yes!* Because peanut butter tastes better with jelly!”

“And vice versa,” I said. “But who is what? Am I peanut butter or jelly?”

“It’s your birthday, so you get to choose.”

“Okay, I’m peanut butter, creamy smooth, not chunky.”

“And I’m jelly, black raspberry jelly.” Linney plinked the xylophone merrily to make her point.

“And stop worrying, Lin. I’ll always be your best friend. Oh! We should swear an oath on it.”

“I’m not supposed to swear.”

“We *have* to swear. That makes it binding.”

A PINKIE SWEAR

I learned the meaning of the word binding from my older brother, Jeremy.

He and his best friend, Nick, cut their fingers open with a rusty pocket knife. Dad had to rush home from work and take Jeremy to the ER because the cut was so deep.

To be on the safe side, the hospital people gave him a tetanus shot, and overnight his temperature shot up to one hundred and three degrees!

I paid him a visit. When somebody is sick, you have to be nice.

Surrounded by Super Hero comics and propped up by pillows, red-hot cheeks made his freckles more freckly than usual.

I got the customary greeting.

“Whadda *you* want? I’m busy.”

“I brought you a ginger ale with ice.”

“Okay, but don’t get too close.”

“You’re not contagious.”

“I didn’t say I was.”

My older brother could find the skimpiest reason to be contrary.

He’d make one up if he didn’t have a reason handy.

I set the ginger ale on his nightstand and took a step back.

“Why did you cut your finger open, Jeremy?”

“You don’t know *anything*, do you?”

“I know enough not to slice my finger for no reason.”

“There *was* a reason.” He raised his chin, proud of himself. “It was for a binding pact.”

“A binding pact?”

“Yeah, a blood pact.”

“What does binding mean?”

“It means people have to keep their promises.”

“Oh. What did you and Nick promise each other?”

He slid out of bed, put his *clammy-from-fever* hands on my shoulders, and hustled me to the door. “You ask too many questions. It’s your Achilles Heel.”

“What’s an Achilles Heel?” I asked as he shut his bedroom door in my face.

The next time Grandpa visited us, I asked him about Achilles’ Heels. “If you have one, does it mean you ask too many questions?”

“No. Asking questions is a sign of a bright mind.”

“Jeremy thinks my bright mind is an Achilles Heel, Grandpa.”

“Jeremy always has to be right. That’s *his* Achilles Heel.”

Grandpa was right about Jeremy always needing to be right. And I still don’t know what an Achilles Heel is.



LINNEY AND I DECIDED A ‘PINKIE’ swear would be solemn enough for our oath to be binding.

We made a list.

I’d help Linney with her English homework, and she would help me with math. We vowed to stand up for each other when we got to high school.

Girls get mean in high school.

It must be the hormones.

The list also included:

- I would be her maid of honor, and she would be mine unless she was already married. In that case, she'd be my matron of honor.
- Linney would name her first girl child after me, and I would call my first girl child Linney.

And Linney insisted on a footnote. "I may never marry," she said. "I may want to teach mathematics instead. At the college level."

After putting our left hands on my new diary and hooking our right-hand pinkie fingers, we recited—"We swear to be best friends till death do us part. Even after death, we will meet up in heaven floating on clouds of pink cotton candy."

Linney's case of *The Worries* was almost clairvoyant. A life-changing bombshell was about to drop.