



SWEET POTATO PANTS

It was August of 1970, and I was to be a first-grader in elementary school. Ah, first grade, school all day . . . lunch on a tray. I couldn't wait!

At first, lunch was all I'd dreamed it would be—food, friends and laughter. How I loved the lunch tray built with little sections for each food group. Because at six years of age, one thing you know is that food should never mingle with other food.

My favorite entree was the green Jell-O®. It was fun, full of flavor, and it could fly . . . well, at least with the help of a hard puff through a straw. There was something wonderful about the way Jell-O® wobbles in mid-air, almost as if in slow motion, and then—splat!—as it strikes its target with full force. This went on for a

short time before I misfired at Jason Bobie and landed one just short of Miss Buller's foot. She handled it well, just before she "handled" the scruff of my neck into the kitchen where my sentence was quick and just—one week of cafeteria clean-up during recess.

Sure, I missed a whole week of dodge ball and kick ball, but I was guilty, and the punishment fit the crime. Soon, with lesson learned, lunchtime was fun again . . . until that day of the dreaded orange dish—sweet potatoes. I knew that anything that color should never meet my lips. That's one of the great things about being a kid: You need only to see the food article to judge its taste. Two lumps surrounded by a moat. Oozy and orange.

As I carried my tray back to the clean-up line, blood rushed to my face and I began to sweat, remembering the rule, "You must try everything on your plate." Quickly, I stirred up my cold, lumpy sweet potatoes in hopes of fooling Miss Buller, but she was a cafeteria veteran and that old trick wasn't going to work. "Take a bite of that sweet potato," she said calmly. Her stern persistence got the bite to my mouth, but no sooner had it entered than it shot back, unceremoniously, to the tray.

From that day on, the fear of this food ruined lunchtime for me. I had to find a way to hide those potatoes. At first, I would heave a helping under the

table, which worked until I hit Joey Wattenberger on the leg—then it was back to KP duty. One day I stumbled upon the solution: the milk carton. It was perfect. I always scrunched my carton down anyway, so why not shovel a few spoonfuls of sweet potato into the carton first?

This carried me through winter and most of spring, until I got a little careless one day and left a dab on top of the carton. Miss Buller had me open the carton, and there it was: lumpy and, by now, mixed with milk. Proud of her discovery, she happily handed me a spoon and said, “I want to see a big bite now.”

What happened next is still a blur, but I knew I was in trouble. With just a few weeks of school remaining, I had exhausted all my options—my sane ones anyway.

The fateful day came the last week of school. I sat there silently as time ticked away. With all hope lost, I took a heaping spoonful, opened my front-left pocket, and shoved it in. Math class was miserable as I felt the warmth of the sweet potato against my leg. Even as the gloppy mess cooled, my stomach was every bit as queasy as if I’d eaten it.

Looking back, I know Miss Buller was trying to help me build strong bones and character, but I guess all of us, one way or another, must learn from our Sweet Potato Pants.