

Chapter 2

From Tired Shoes to Overcoming the Blues

Because of all the trials I had to endure in my early childhood, I quickly learned that if I was going to survive in life, and have any quality of life, I needed to take charge of my emotions. For me, this meant setting aside the pain and focusing my energies on improving myself socially.

Some of the first friends I made in junior high school were girls I perceived to be more like myself. Since I had always felt like I didn't fit in, I was naturally attracted to other kids I thought could empathize with me. I soon found myself hanging out with the two smallest girls in the school. Nevertheless, I did my best to be friendly with everyone I came in contact with.

Before long, I felt like I was being accepted by many of the other girls, including some of the more popular girls in the school, like cheerleaders and class officers. They allowed me to hang out with them in the halls, and at some extracurricular activities. But whenever boys were involved, I was conspicuously not included.

I'm not sure if the girls felt uneasy having me around, or if it was the boys who were uneasy about it. I did prove to be very useful, however, to my new friends. Whenever the girls wanted to know how a particular boy felt about one of them, they'd send me to find out. I posed no threat for any of these girls, and the boys didn't look at me as a prospect for romance, so they were comfortable talking with me. I really didn't mind being used as a "go-between." It's how I survived, and it made me feel like I was being a good friend.

By now, I had become very thin. I was about five feet tall and weighed sixty pounds. Believing that some of my problem might have metabolic ties, I went on all kinds of diets to try to gain weight. Mom tried to help too. She used to sneak away and buy me malts and pastries... anything she could do to put some meat on my bones. She even ensured that the other children didn't eat all the food, by serving me first, before the other kids were even called to the table. And then she made sure I finished every bite!

Mom and Dad had to watch their pennies. With ten children, there was no tolerance for wastefulness. Each year, at the beginning of the school year, Mom would take us to the store to buy new school clothes. We each got a few shirts or blouses, some socks, one pair of shoes, and a few school supplies. During the course of the year, all the other kids would wear out or grow out of, their clothes and shoes and go back to the store for new ones.

I was so small and weighed so little that my shoes simply refused to wear out. In spite of the fact that I had only one pair and wore them every day, they never got thin in the sole, and the sides *never* broke down. This was a dilemma for me. I wanted new shoes so badly, but I just wasn't wearing mine out. So, I devised a plan to get some new ones.

At night, when I was sure that everyone was asleep, I'd sneak out the door and put one shoe behind each of the rear tires of my dad's work truck. Then, when he'd leave for work the next morning, his tires would run over my shoes. I'd hurry outside, pick them up, and put them on for school. I did this for about three weeks and finally my shoes looked awful. I showed them to my mother and she agreed that it was time for me to get some new ones.

Well, we went to the store and Mom bought me some new shoes. At first I was very happy. Then I got to thinking about how hard my dad had to work to earn money to buy our clothes and how I'd caused him to spend more money on my shoes, when they really hadn't worn out "**honestly**". That night I felt so bad, I couldn't sleep. I started to cry and went to my parents' bedroom to confess the whole thing. Instead of being scolded, my dad started to laugh. He told me he already knew what I'd been doing and wasn't angry with me at all. I'll never forget his understanding and patience with me on that occasion. I loved him for that.

My social dilemmas weren't confined strictly to school activities either. When school was over for the year, it was sometimes even *more* difficult to find inclusion in close-to-home activities. For most kids in our neighborhood, summer vacation was such a fun time. They'd organize ballgames, bicycle riding trips, soccer and football games, and even just running around the neighborhood together... but I wasn't included in any of those things.

I tried going on a bicycle trip with the other kids once. By the time we reached our destination, I was so exhausted that I literally collapsed onto the ground. The other kids had to call my parents and tell them what happened, then wait there with me until my parents arrived.

Another time, I tried getting involved in an organized softball game the kids put together, but I couldn't hit the ball very well, and if I ever did get a hit, I never made it to first base. Not surprisingly, the other kids were never excited for me to participate in any type of sports with them.

I very much wanted to be involved in all the things the other kids were doing, but that just wasn't possible. I just wanted to fit in.

One area I felt I did have natural ability in was singing. So when the youth group at our church was going to put on a musical play, I summoned the courage to try out for the lead role. I worked very hard to learn the songs and my lines. After the auditions, I was thrilled to learn that I'd gotten the part. However, when the boy who was to play the "leading man" found out that I was his "leading lady", he shocked us all by saying... "If Linda gets the part, I don't want to be in it." Rather than make a big deal out of it, I just said... "Oh that's Okay, just give it to so-and-so. It doesn't really matter to me." But of course that wasn't true. I was devastated! But, what could I do? I didn't want to make a scene in front of all those people and ruin the fun for the rest of the kids. All I wanted in life was to be able to excel in just **one** thing, to prove to other people **that I was worth something**. And now, even in my own little church group, I wasn't given that opportunity. I think that hurt the most.

Now I don't want anyone thinking that all of my experiences were negative as a result of me being so terribly thin. As a matter of fact, one of my most cherished memories in life came as a direct result of my condition. It happened like this.

One year, my church entered a float in the "24th of July Parade" that's held in our city every year... it's one of the largest parades in the entire country. As I mentioned, my church group built a float to enter in the parade, and six girls were to be chosen to ride on the float. Because there were so many girls who wanted to be on the float, and since only a half dozen would be able to ride, the leaders decided to draw names out of a hat. I couldn't believe it... my name was the fourth name chosen from the hat!

The men worked very hard on the float to get it prepared for the big day. The other girls and I arrived downtown early to set up for the parade, which started promptly at nine o'clock. I decided that I'd better make a trip to the "little girls room," since there would be no more chances for that kind of thing once the parade got under way. I went to a nearby Hotel to use the restroom and was just leaving the building through the main entrance when I looked up, and to my surprise,

there was the President of our Church, standing about ten feet away from me! He walked over to me and took me by the hand. He looked into my eyes, and as he patted my hands he said words I will never forget. "I want you to know that you are a very special and choice spirit, and your Father in Heaven loves you tremendously."

I could hardly believe it. This man whom I had seen countless times before in pictures and on TV had spoken to me and given me words of comfort and encouragement that I would never forget. As I walked back to the staging area, I was floating on air. When I arrived, I learned that our float had a small problem. On the front of the float was a high platform, on which two girls were supposed to sit and wave. However, when they climbed up, their weight was just too much for the float to handle and it became lopsided, causing the adult leaders to worry that it could become a very dangerous situation.

"We need *someone* up there. That's the focal point of the float, and it wouldn't look right if nobody was up there," one man said. Then someone yelled, "Put little Lindy up there. She won't make it tip!" One of the girls protested, "That's not fair. She'll probably be the only one to get on TV. We can't have her representing us." "It's Okay," I said. "I don't need to be up there. One of the other girls can ride there." But this was one time when I would "literally" come out on top. The other girls tried to sit there, but their weight was just too much. So, it was decided that I had to be the one to ride in the seat of honor.

In 1966, I finally entered high school. It brought new trials, heartaches and struggles. I had almost always chosen younger girls to be my friends as I was growing up. I just seemed to fit in with them better. So, when I graduated to tenth grade, all my friends were left behind in junior high. It was like starting my life all over again.

One of the first ordeals I encountered was finding someone to be "locker partners" with. Our school didn't have enough lockers to give one to every student, so sophomores and juniors had to share lockers. It seems like a minor problem now, but at the time, it was very stressful for me. I remember worrying for days, wondering who I could find to locker with. All my friends were in junior high, and I didn't really have any other friends I believed would *want* to partner with me.

My older sister Marian was a junior that year. One day before the school year began, I overheard my mom talking to her... trying to persuade her that she should locker with me. I think Mom had a hard time convincing her, but, eventually,

Marian gave in. I was so excited to be locker partners with her because I thought she was the most awesome person in the world.

I think Marian was disappointed at the thought of being my locker partner for a number of reasons. First, it wasn't *cool* to locker with your little sister. I also believed I was kind of an albatross around her neck. She didn't want to have her little sister tagging along behind her cramping her style. I understand that now, but at the time, I just wanted to be with my sister.

I was so proud of her. She'd tried out for Pep Club and made it. My dream was to be just like her. I remember when the girls from the Pep Club came to our house early one morning and "kidnapped" her. I had been praying so hard that she'd be chosen to be in Pep Club, so when they came and took her away, I could hardly contain myself. I vowed that someday I would make Pep Club. Then they would come and "kidnap" me, too.

There were so many things that Marian did that brought happiness to my life. In some ways, I lived a lot of my fantasies through her. I was always hoping and dreaming, that the day would come when I would be able to do those same kinds of things. I swore that I would do whatever it took to become *just like her*. In my junior year, it was finally my turn to try out for Pep Club. I knew it would be difficult, given my physical condition, *but I truly believed that if I pushed myself hard enough, I could do it.*

Prior to Pep Club tryouts, I worked very hard to learn the right steps, the right moves, and all the other things I'd watched the girls do in order to make the cut. Marian even gave me some valuable pointers. I really believed I had a chance.

The day for tryouts arrived at last. I lined up with all the rest of the Pep Club hopefuls in the school gym, waiting my turn to sign up and show them what I could do. I remember standing patiently in line, hoping my preparations would be adequate. The longer I waited, the more excited I became. When I finally reached the front of the line, I was so excited. It was almost better than Christmas! I had been waiting for this for years!

Suddenly, the teacher sitting at the table looked up at me with this befuddled look on her face. Her eyes raced up and down my body as if she couldn't believe what she was looking at. Slowly, she repositioned herself in her chair, clasped her hands together, leaned forward as if she were going to tell me some secret, and asked... "*Can I help you?... You're not going to try out, are you?*" I didn't know what to say... but it didn't actually matter... she never *let* me respond.

"Are you here with someone else?" She asked.

"No," I said, "I'm here to try out for Pep Club."

She just shook her head and said, "*There's no way you can do this. You're too thin and too sickly. **NEXT!***"

I don't know if I was more heartbroken or more embarrassed. I know several of my friends in the line behind me were embarrassed for me and shocked by what they'd just witnessed. I had no words for the moment. I lowered my head and walked away. My best friend June was close by when this happened and was obviously irritated at how the teacher had treated me. She spoke up, and asked, "**Hey... why can't she try out?**" I wanted to crawl under a rock. The last thing I wanted to do was draw more attention to myself by making a scene. I looked at June and said, "It's all right. It's no big deal. I probably wouldn't have made it anyway. You just go ahead." I walked to the bleachers and sat there for what seemed like an eternity, watching everyone else have their chance. I tried to appear excited for my friends as they auditioned, but I was really hurting inside. It seemed so unfair, that not even the adults were willing to give me a chance.

Finally, tryouts were over. As I walked home with my friends, it was obvious that the anticipation of making the cut was foremost on their minds. I felt awful. It's true that I probably never could have made the cut, *but I wasn't even given the chance to try. **That's all I wanted really... just a chance to try.*** I tried to share in their excitement and conversations as we walked home that day, but the hurt was too deep and my emotions too close to the surface. I went home and closed the door to my bedroom. As I hugged my pillow, tears began to flow once again.

It was just one more setback in my life. I wanted so much to be able to do **one** thing that could bring me happiness, recognition, and personal satisfaction; just **one thing** that would demonstrate *my personal worth*. However, it became very clear to me at that moment, that anything that had to do with physical strength or ability would never be that **thing**.

Even walking to school each day was becoming more and more of a challenge for me. As the autumn days got colder, my steps slowed until it was virtually impossible for me to get to school on time. I usually walked with my older sister Marian, and her friends, but every day I'd fall behind the others and they'd yell, "Hurry up, we're gonna be late!" I could tell they were irritated. Eventually I'd just say, "I can't go any faster... just go on ahead."

When winter arrived, things really got tough for me. The winter air caused my bones and joints to ache, and the pain was almost unbearable. I'd arrive at school long after the tardy bell had rung. My body was so cold and in so much pain. The school nurse would take me to the nurse's room, wrap me in warm blankets, and do whatever she could to warm me up, just so I could function.

Since I'd been to so many doctors, and they had all concurred that I didn't have a "*legitimate*" problem, it's understandable that even my own brothers and sisters misjudged my situation and were not very sympathetic towards me. I recall one particular experience that demonstrated my brother's frustration.

I woke up one morning and looked outside. It had snowed a lot, and I did **not** want to walk to school in that awful snow. I begged my brother to let me ride with him.

My oldest brother was a senior that year and had his own car. He drove to school every day, but like so many other boys, he didn't want his sisters riding with him. After all, it wasn't **cool** to have little sisters hanging around, especially if you were looking to impress the girls.

After considerable groveling, he finally agreed to allow my sister and me to ride with him. She was allowed to ride in the front seat, and I was allowed to ride in the back. He let me ride in the back seat *on one condition*. I had to lie down on the floor so no one could see me. When we got to school, I had to promise to stay down and out of sight until he got out of the car and into the school. That way, nobody would know that I came with him. I happily agreed.

I remember carefully peeking out the window to make sure he'd gone in. I saw my sister looking back in my direction, and the look on her face actually gave me some comfort. I believed that she was sympathetic to my situation and really felt sorry for me. I appreciated her for that.

As I mentioned before, the one gift I felt I possessed was a natural ability to sing. I'd been in various choirs in school and really felt happy when people would complement me on how well I sang. During my junior year, I decided that since I wasn't allowed to try out for the Pep Club, I'd try out instead for something that didn't require a strong physical body. I decided to try out for Madrigals. I was sure I had the talent and ability to make it into that choir.

Madrigals were the elite singing group in the school. Only the best voices and the most talented individuals were considered for the group, and the choir director in my high school was one of the premier choir directors in the entire state. I told

my closest friends that I was going to try out. They all encouraged me to “go for it”. They knew of my talents and abilities in this area and assured me I would be a shoe-in.

Well, I went to class the day of tryouts, and felt very confident. We did our auditions right there during class, and the choir director told us he would choose the kids who would qualify for Madrigals and post their names on the door the following day. I felt very confident about my performance, and when class was over, we all filed out of the room and into the hallway. As usual, I was the last to leave.

As I was leaving the room, the teacher asked me to come back. He wanted to have a word with me. I thought that he probably wanted to congratulate me on my great performance. But instead of offering congratulations, he dropped a bomb on me.

"Linda, you have a beautiful voice. You sang very well today. You have great range and you're a great little girl, but I have to tell you that you won't be in Madrigals next year." "What? Why not?" I asked. "I thought I sang well enough to make it. Didn't I?" He looked me in the eye and said, "Madrigals is a very important choir, and I need people I can depend on. You're too sickly, and I don't feel I can depend on you being there for every performance." I objected. I assured him that I could do this. I **promised** I would be at every performance. "Please," I begged, "please don't do this to me. Singing is the only thing I'm good at. It's why I come to school. I promise **I WILL be at every performance.**"

Once again, my pleas fell on deaf ears. The following day, a list of those who qualified for Madrigals was posted on the music room door. My name wasn't on the list. My friends couldn't believe their eyes. "I thought sure you'd make it!" said one of my friends.

No one could figure out why I didn't make the choir, but I knew why. This was one of the deepest cuts ever inflicted on me. What made it hurt even worse was the fact that I had known and admired this teacher for many years. He had been my choir teacher in junior high school as well and transferred with us when our class entered high school. I sincerely believed he cared for me. Even though I felt very angry that he hadn't given me a chance to be in the choir, I knew it would only make matters worse if I told my friends what had really happened. I kept it to myself. I thought it would be wrong of me to say anything unkind about a teacher who was as popular and well-loved as this man was. I didn't want to undermine his

authority or his relationship with the other students.

Many of my friends excelled in their personal endeavors, and for that I was happy. I never felt any bitterness towards them, but I'd just about given up trying to accomplish anything noteworthy for myself. I felt like the deck was stacked against me. Why was I even here? Why should I even keep on living?

My junior year was nearing its end, and I was looking forward to my senior year. I didn't believe life would get any better for me, but I knew that I would be that much closer to getting out of school entirely. I simply wanted to be done with school. For me, it was a place with few fond memories and no hope for any personal achievement.

Many of my friends became involved in activities with people or organizations that I either didn't fit in with or wasn't welcome around. For this reason, I found myself almost subconsciously pulling away from them. I was becoming a little reclusive, at times wanting to be alone just so I could just think.

It was on one such occasion that I found myself sitting alone in the lunch room one day, just observing. I was noticing all the little groups of friends that accounted for the social make-up of the school. I wished that I could have been more involved with friends and enjoyed my school experience as much as they seemed to be enjoying theirs. Suddenly my attention was diverted to a group of boys arguing about something. They were about ten feet away from me, near the end of my lunch table. I could tell by the way people were gathering around that this was **not** a circle I wanted to be any part of.

It's one of those things that happens so fast, and is so out of the ordinary, that you really don't have time to prepare yourself for it, and it leaves you feeling dizzy and disoriented. Two of these boys were nose to nose and apparently very angry about something. I knew one of them, or at least I knew who he was. His name was Jake. He was one of the stars of the football team, the biggest kid in the school. The boy he was arguing with was **much** smaller than he was. He had a "Beta" hairdo, pork chop sideburns, and a mustache that was... how should I put it... umm... struggling. Out of the blue, the smaller kid hauled off and punched Jake right in the mouth, sending him reeling backwards into the growing crowd. I thought this guy was crazy! He'd definitely chosen the wrong guy to pick a fight with!

Before I knew what happened, Jake got up and slugged the smaller kid right in the chest, sending him sprawling across my table. It all happened so fast. I barely

had time to react! Here came this boy, flying towards me and my lunch. I grabbed my tray and lifted it up in the air, narrowly averting this guy's head as he went sailing down the table right under my nose! Food was flying everywhere and girls were screaming, but within seconds it was over. The vice-principle was right there and hauled both of them off to his office.

I wondered what would have happened if he'd landed on me? He could have squished me! My heart was just pounding. It was probably the most exciting thing that happened to me in all my years at school, but I wasn't looking for *that* kind of excitement.

Because of the way I looked, no boy as yet, had ever asked me on a date. The boy sliding under my nose was as close to a date as I'd gotten. There was one dance left that year. I had one chance left to enjoy what other girls had been experiencing for years - the excitement of going on a date and, hopefully, being treated like I was someone special. I probably never would have had the experience of a date in high school except for the fact that this last dance was girl's choice. I decided that I would step out of my comfort zone (or more accurately, my uncomfortable zone) and ask someone to go out with me.

Eventually I settled on a boy from my own neighborhood. I was very familiar with him and thought he would probably say yes. I didn't want to set myself up for another rejection. I remember asking him if he would mind going out with me, and before he could even answer, I gave him a whole list of excuses he could use if he didn't want to. I tried to make it as easy as possible for him to turn me down, if that's what he wanted to do. He finally told me to be quiet, then said, "I'd be happy to take you to the dance." I couldn't believe my ears. This boy actually said that he would be happy to take *me* to a dance... and he said it as if he really meant it!

My sister was so good to me. She knew how much this dance meant to me, so she sewed a dress for me that had a high waist and a long skirt to help hide my skinny legs. It was the first time in my life that I really felt like I was doing what normal girls all dream of doing.

We had a wonderful evening, and then he took me home. A few days later he called me on the telephone and asked if I wanted to go out with him again. I thought he was just trying to be nice. I couldn't believe that anyone would actually want to take me out *again*, so I told him that he didn't have to do that. One date was all I would ask of him.

I never really gave this relationship a chance to grow, and even found myself pulling away from old friends at school. However, I started to grow closer to an aunt of mine who spent a lot of time around our house. Her name was Amy. She was my mother's younger sister. As we grew closer, I began to confide in her the feelings and frustrations I was experiencing. She said she understood what I was going through and wanted to help. She asked if she could take me to a doctor one more time, believing that there was something that they just kept overlooking. Maybe this time they would find it. I agreed to go with her. What could it hurt? I was about to graduate from high school and I was five foot six inches tall and weighed 78 pounds - dripping wet! I really hoped that *this* time, the doctor would be able to tell me something which would be helpful.

After our visit, the doctor told me that he believed there was something **very wrong** with me, but he had no idea what it could be. He also told me that it was his opinion that I probably wouldn't live very much longer and therefore should not consider getting married. He also said that I would never *ever* be able to have children if I did get married. I was shocked, saddened, and numbed by his words. What was the purpose of my life? Had my youth and childhood all been for nothing? How much **more** sorrow and disappointment did I have to endure?

About the only thing positive happening in my life at this time was the fact that I would soon be getting out of school and could finally leave all the bad memories behind.

What will I do with my life now? I wondered. What kind of job am I suited for, and what will become of me? Will I ever find anyone who can love me? What could life have in store for a skinny little nobody? Such were my thoughts at the time.

When graduation finally arrived, I was glad to be finished with school. It did sadden me to think that this might be the last time I would ever see many of my friends. I wondered if I would even be around for very long, given the things the doctor had said. Even if I did live longer than he thought I might, what kind of life would it be? I feared that my life would soon be one of boredom, pain, and solitude.

Fortunately for me however, my life **was** about to change. I was about to experience what I considered a miracle that would change my life forever.