

I Was There Too

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I guess we all say and do things that we later regret. At least I hope that's true. I talked to Jenny, she's my older sister, and she remembers when she was a teen-ager, she said that many times she "stuck her foot in her mouth." She said that she remembers talking to a group of her girlfriends about how she hated a particular kind of dress – and she never realized that one of the girls was wearing a dress exactly like the kind she was describing! But that's different. My problem is a little different than that – and a lot worse.

I know that it happens because I want to be part of the gang. Don't we all? I don't think any of us want to be on the "outs" with our friends. The problem is that sometimes what we know is right and what the kids think is right, doesn't go together. That's my problem.

Last Tuesday we were walking to school – all the freshmen walk up Railroad Street – about fifteen kids. Angelo, he's a new kid who just moved here from New York City, suddenly came out of his house and walked about a half-a-block in front of us. Rollo, he's sort of the "big deal," began mocking him because of his coat. He didn't talk loudly enough for Angelo to hear him. It was only among ourselves. I must admit that he did look funny. The coat was a grey color and much too heavy for the nice day. It was too big – like it probably belonged to an older cousin about five years ago.

The rest of us had only light jackets since the weather was still warm in Ohio in October. Anyway, we all joined Rollo. He was really funny – I can't remember all that he said, but the one I do remember is this: "I'll bet he bought that coat by selling pencils on street corners." That broke us up! At first I didn't say anything. I almost felt sorry for Angelo. But finally when I saw all the other kids talking and laughing at him, I joined in. I only hoped that he couldn't hear.

That's when it all started. On Thursday afternoon we have Physical Education. We were playing basketball. I guess Angelo never played or something. He couldn't even dribble the ball. Of course, when we went to get changed back from our trunks, there was a lot of whispering and giggling about him and how funny he looked. Once again I joined the talking. I knew it was wrong, but everyone else was doing it.

That evening, walking home from school, Skip, who lives behind Angelo's family, was telling me that his mom told him to stay away from Angelo. She told him that Angelo's father suddenly "took off" and left his wife and the kids. She also said that Angelo's sister got pregnant and had to leave school when she was a senior in high school. And so Skip was ordered to stay away because he and his family were "no good."

I guess I was kind of shocked to hear Skip's mother talk like that. She sings in the Choir at St. George's and she's always in Church. And Skip belongs to the Orthodox Youth Organization. It just didn't seem right. But why not – I was probably thinking the same thing!

Anyway, Saturday afternoon I had to go to the store for my mom. On the way out of the store I spotted Angelo who was walking the same way down Railroad Street. I don't know what came over me, maybe it was hearing what Skip's mother said or something, or maybe I started to feel self-righteous, but I began to talk to Angelo – you know, “how do you like living here” and “how was New York” and so on. After we split at my door, I really felt lousy.

I saw the whole thing in front of me. The first morning on Railroad Street and Rollo's cutting him up. I remembered the gym. And Skip's words. And his mother's words. I was glad that I didn't tell my mother – I guess I was afraid that she would tell me the same thing and I didn't want to hear it.

After all, I reasoned, what right did Rollo have to mock his coat? He was poor – and it's that simple. What right did we have to talk about his lack of coordination and ability in basketball? He never played basketball much. And Skip's mother, what right did she have to condemn him because his father ran off or because his sister got pregnant?

I guess you all know what I mean about slander and being bad and all – but what really gets me is the fact that I always seem to get caught in it. What's frightening about it is the thought that someday, for some reason, I will be the subject of the same kind of slander.

I guess I shouldn't ask what right Rollo had, or Skip's mother, or anybody, in slandering Angelo. After all, I was there too.

Well there goes Angelo, down Railroad Street. He's going to deliver newspapers. I guess he's really helping his family. Slander – that's terrible.