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Bird Girl

Clark DeLeon

Preview

“Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names can never hurt me.” Is this old saying true? Or can teasing hurt, and hurt deeply? In the following selection, made up of three columns first published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Clark DeLeon writes about the lasting scars—and the tragedies—that can result from childhood teasing, and his readers respond.

Words to Watch

sallow (1): sickly, pale yellow

tacitly (1): silently

lest (2): for fear that

greasers (3): tough, bullying teenagers

defiant (5): bold

unrelenting (7): not stopping

contend (8): struggle

malicious (8): mean

taunts (8): insults

encounter (9): meeting

eluded (10): escaped

mobile (11): movable

instigators (11): leaders

There was a weird girl in my high school whom we all called the Bird. We called her that because of her nervous, birdlike movements and the way she would hunch her shoulders toward her ears as if she was hoping her head would disappear into her body. She had sallow^o skin that looked as if it had never felt the sun, and there was usually a blotchy red rash in the middle of her forehead. She had fine black hair on her arms long enough to comb, and she wore clothes that had been out of fashion since Shirley Temple was singing "The Good Ship Lollipop." She was also the object of such contempt and scorn, such cruel ridicule, that it shames me to this day to think I was part of it, even tacitly^o.

Oh, I was never one to say anything to her face. I wasn't that brave. I'd wait until she hurried by with her books held tightly to her chest and join in the chorus of birdcalls with the other guys. She was always good for a laugh. And it's important when you're a teenager to join the laughter, lest^o the laughter turn on you.

I remember one day when the Bird was surrounded by three or four suburban-variety greasers^o who had stopped her in the corridor between classes. They were flapping their arms and screeching in her ear. She was terrified. Her eyes darted in panic. A couple of her books fell to the floor. When she stopped to pick them up, they bent over her in a circle, closing in, screeching, screeching.

Then this girl came out of nowhere. I'd never seen such anger in a girl before. She went up to the leader of the tormentors and ripped into him with a hot fury. "Stop it!" she shouted. "Can't you see what you're doing?" The guys backed off, stunned. Then the girl went over to the Bird and put her arm around her shoulder and walked her to class.

I thought about the Bird when I read about Nathan Faris, the little boy who shot a classmate and killed himself after being the target of teasing by the kids in his school. I thought of how I had been a part of her misery, how more than 20 years later it still bothers me. But I also think of what I learned that day about decency and bravery, about being a human being, from a girl whose name I don't even know. And I wonder if that one act of defiant^o kindness may have saved another girl's life.

Targets: Why Are Kids So Cruel?

"I just had to write to you in regard to your item 'Targets' that appeared in today's (March 8) *Inquirer*," wrote Ray Windsor of Lansdowne.

I received several letters about that piece, which concerned a girl I knew in high school who was the victim of cruel and unrelenting^o ridicule because she was unattractive, uncool and unable to defend herself. That

piece touched a chord in people, and I think Ray's story will, too. Here it is:

"Back in high school I had to contend^o with many of the malicious^o deeds and taunts^o from my 'fellow students,' similar but different. With me, however, I was a victim of gross physical immaturity. . . . I actually didn't start shaving regularly until I was 25 or so.

"This problem was very hard for me to deal with, even though it was out of my control. The class 'bullies' and insensitive and uncaring types never hesitated for one moment to knock me around, having read my problems like a book. Gym class, especially, was my psychological encounter^o with hell—twice weekly. Because of my outward appearance, I always skipped showering with the rest of the class. Eventually, they caught on to this and many of the guys would either throw me in the showers, or if they didn't do this, they would spit in my underwear or socks or shoes and then (usually) chuck them out of the window to the ground two stories below.

"Is it no wonder I was sick as often as I could be on Gym Day? Oh, all the wonderful FUN they had at my emotional expense. I once mustered the courage to talk to my 'guidance counselor' about the problems I was contending with, and all he was able to tell me was that this was the type of thing that students like myself go through to become a man. How I was to become a man through all this eluded^o me, primarily because I was being treated as less than human by these jerks.

"Once this pattern was set up, I easily became a target for much the same outside of gym. Often I was pushed and shoved in the hallway. On occasion, I was tripped or punched, and on special occasions, I would even be tossed into the mobile^o trash cans and rolled into classrooms that weren't even mine. I may have been bigger than some of these instigators^o, but I could never seem to get the courage to bring a fist up to their ugly faces. It was always THEM against ME. How often I broke down and cried out of sheer frustration is uncountable. What really gets me is that I let this happen. Is it any wonder that I turned to alcohol and had two major ulcer operations before I was 25?

"As I suspect you know by now, I have picked up the shattered pieces of my adolescence and have gotten my life back together again. The HATE and RAGE I once felt for these ne'er-do-wells has since turned to pity. In fact, they are no doubt half-decent guys now. But if they only knew how much harm they'd caused me, they'd become a little upset with themselves. At least I hope so, anyway. I only wish that someone had yelled, 'Stop it! Can't you see what you're doing?' back at school. It may have saved me from much of the misery I was forced to endure until I

What's Ray's story. I've got my own, and you probably have yours. How did we survive those years? How did we endure the anger, the shame, the emotional brutality? And we're talking middle-class suburban kids, here. We're talking the seeds of the promised land. If parents only knew what their kids were going through, what their kids *are* going through.

I don't know if there's an answer. How can we make teenagers treat each other like human beings? How can we penetrate that closed society of adolescence? How can we let the victims know that life gets better? How can we shame the bullies with what they will feel about their actions, if they ever grow up?

Kids: Lessons Learned Early

I want to share something with you, something nice.

It's what some kids have had to say in letters to me about the column about the Bird, the girl I knew in high school who was teased and tormented by everyone, until one day another girl stood up to a group of guys who were picking on the Bird. You wonder when you write something like this about growing up, how kids will receive your message. Here are some of their reactions:

"I read your article about the weird girl called the Bird," wrote Stephanie K. "I am in the sixth grade, and one of my classmates is weird like in your article, and we too make fun of him. We don't make fun of him as much anymore. We used to make fun of him all day long. . . . I really thought about what you've said and I want to thank you for taking time to write something that will prevent other people from feeling bad."

"I have read your story about the girl that was called the Bird because she had pale skin and acted weird. In the story, you said that you were one of the ones who teased the Bird," wrote Cuong N. "You also spoke highly of the girl who came up to you and your friends and told you guys to stop teasing the Bird. If you spoke highly of that girl, why didn't you do the same thing, or were you scared of being teased too? If I was in your place, I would have done the same thing you did and prevented myself from being teased. Please write back to me if you can."

"I would probably have done the same thing as you did," wrote Katie M. "Now that I read the story and understand the problem going on, I wonder why more people aren't like the kid who came and helped the Bird."

"I think the girl who stood up for the Bird was very brave," wrote Nicole G. "She could have been beaten up or teased, but she did it anyway. I really look up to and respect people like that."

"I think that you shouldn't have held back what you thought about the other kids teasing the Bird, because that makes you in a way worse than the others," wrote Michael C. "If you felt that the girl reacted bravely for sticking up for the Bird and that she was a good person for doing what she did, why didn't you at least find out who she was?"

I wish I had found out her name, Michael. And I respect people like that too, Nicole. And I too wonder why more people aren't like the girl who helped the Bird, Katie. And the reason I spoke highly of the girl is that I was afraid to do what she did, and her bravery inspired me, Cuong. And I'm especially glad that you've stopped teasing your sixth-grade classmate, Stephanie. Thank you all for thinking about the story the way you did.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

To the Student: The three "First Impressions" questions that follow each selection allow you to write freely about your first reactions to what you have read. Normally, you won't be handing in this writing to your instructor. It is personal writing that focuses your ideas about the selection and its relationship to your own life. Don't worry about making mistakes. Just get your reactions down on paper.

Freewrite for ten minutes on one of the following.

1. Did you enjoy reading this selection? Why or why not?
2. Who do you remember being teased at your school? Why was this person teased? How did you respond when you saw the teasing?
3. Why do you think teasing is so common among children and teenagers?

VOCABULARY CHECK

The explanations below each question on the following pages are provided to help you understand how to answer the questions and complete the other items in this book. Try to figure out each answer yourself first. Then check your answer. Study the explanation, especially if your response wasn't correct. As you work on the exercises, cover the explanations below the items with a card or piece of paper so you're not tempted to look at them until *after* you've tried the items yourself.

...ary words covered in the list four items are not correct. Words to Watch," so it's up to you to figure out what they mean. But that doesn't mean you have to guess the answers blindly. First, read each item to see if you already know the answer. If you don't, start by crossing off one or more of the words that you're sure are wrong. Then try replacing the *italicized* word in the item with each answer that's left. The word that fits best is right.

A. Circle the letter of the word or phrase that best completes each of the following four items.

1. In the sentence below, the word *contempt* means
- praise.
 - disgust.
 - envy.
 - love.

"She was also the object of such contempt and scorn, such cruel ridicule, that it shames me to this day. . . ." (Paragraph 1)

The sentence suggests that *contempt* has a meaning similar to that of "scorn" and "cruel ridicule." Knowing this should help you rule out "praise" and "love." Then you can try "disgust" and "envy" in place of *contempt* in the sentence. "Envy" doesn't make sense, so your answer is "disgust" (b).

2. In the sentence below, the word *insensitive* means
- intelligent.
 - friendly.
 - unfeeling.
 - far away.

"The class 'bullies' and insensitive and uncaring types never hesitated for one moment to knock me around, having read my problems like a book." (Paragraph 9)

To answer this item, ask yourself how bullies would feel about someone else's problems. The sentence says they are "uncaring," a clue that the answer is c, "unfeeling."

3. In the sentence on the next page, the word *mustered* means
- fought.
 - gathered.
 - refused.
 - ignored.

"I once mustered the courage to talk to my 'guidance counselor' about the problems I was contending with. . . ." (Paragraph 10)

Here, the question to ask yourself is what Ray would do to his courage before talking to someone about his problems. Discussing personal problems would take courage for anyone and would probably have been especially difficult for Ray. He would not want to fight or refuse or ignore his courage. So the right answer is b, "gathered."

4. In the sentence below, the word *endure* means
- commit.
 - enjoy.
 - borrow.
 - put up with.

"It may have saved me from much of the misery I was forced to endure until I graduated from that hell hole." (Paragraph 12)

What would the writer be forced to do with misery he couldn't avoid? He would have to "put up with" it, so the correct answer to this one is d.

- B. Circle the letter of the answer that best completes each of the following four items. Each item uses a word (or form of a word) from "Words to Watch."

The second set of vocabulary items checks your understanding of terms from "Words to Watch." Each item requires you to choose the word from "Words to Watch" that best fits the situation. If you need to, look back at the definitions that appear before the essay on page 31. Then try each possible definition to see how well it fits. Cover the answers at the end of this exercise while you do the items. Then check to see how well you did.

5. If a girl has a very *sallow* complexion, you might conclude that she
- spends a lot of time inside.
 - comes from a wealthy family.
 - spends a great deal of time in the sun.
6. When the enemy captain demanded, "Surrender!" the leader of the rebels *defiantly*
- put down their weapons.
 - burst into tears.
 - shouted, "Never!"