

Growing Pains

by Jennifer Childs

In my small town in East Tennessee, bad habits (and even worse behaviors) seemed to be generationally passed around like the collection plate at church. Most members of the community would line up each Sunday to have their sour attitudes, judgmental hearts, and spiteful spirits washed clean, only for their sins to miraculously resurface as the sun rose on Monday. Unfortunately, this rinse-and-repeat performance filled not only the church pews but the classrooms as well. Unlearning these behaviors and unhealthy coping mechanisms proved to be a tough life lesson to tackle. It took only a bruised ego and a bit, or a lot if you're asking me, of growing pains.

For me, "small town" meant waking up at five in the morning to march myself down our steep, winding, gravel driveway that seemingly went on for miles in the darkness of dawn. It meant standing in the dew-covered grass, soaking the bottoms of my jeans and freezing my socks, before jumping on one of the three buses that served our county. Our town had one singular school building. This decaying institution was responsible for educating preschoolers all the way through the eighth grade. At the very most, roughly fifteen children were enrolled in each grade. It would be an act of God that a new family moved into town and a fresh face would be introduced into our tight-knit classroom. Miraculously for our fifth-grade class, especially for the six girls in attendance, a blessing was bestowed upon us when the new boy, Jacob, joined the group on the first day of school.

The battle had begun; all eyes were on him. Girls left their boyfriends as ashes and dust,

just to be the first in line for this boy's heart. Admittedly, I got in line right there with them, biding my time. Eventually, this peacock dance paid off, and he asked me to be his girlfriend. We stuck together like glue, as inseparable as any pair of kids could be at that age. He did not come from exhausting arguments, cruel words, or foul language; I could tell he had been raised with warmth and patience. Jacob's character radiated throughout the dimly lit hallways of our school building. Sadly, in just an instant, my actions and the ugly character traits that I attempted to distance myself from brought my childhood love story to a crashing halt.

This Friday dragged on, seeming longer than usual. For breakfast that morning, my grandmother provided me with my daily list of household duties and a sermon over the fire and brimstone that awaits the sinners who neglect their responsibilities. On the way out the door, I rushed to ensure my slowly withering mother had everything she needed before my brother and I left her for the day. As I wearily entered my fifth-grade classroom, the chaos of my home life and adult-like burdens seemed to weigh on me like a fifty-pound anchor in my backpack.

The smell of mildewing pages wafted through the air as books passed from student to student. Directly to my left sat Dakota, a kid well known for his wild outbursts and uncontrollable behavior. He had this look of mischief scrawled across his face as he glanced in my direction. Dakota grinned and then picked his book up about three inches from his desk and dropped it, allowing it to slam on the hard surface. Immediately, all heads snapped towards his direction. Dakota acted as if he had done this on accident and simply said, "Whoops." He continued for several more hours, insistently clicking his pen, throwing paper, and making disruptive and off-the-wall comments. Many kids in our fifth-grade class had a reputation for causing disruptions. Dakota, however, belonged to a different breed. No amount of disciplinary action, pleas, or altercations with his peers seemed to be enough for him to give it a rest. After

many years of this, the school staff had basically given up and openly advised students to try their best to ignore his behaviors.

On this day, I had reached my limit. As time passed, so did the threshold for my patience. Dakota could not have known the amount of pressure I was facing that day. He certainly didn't realize that the inner resentment I was attempting to bury was about to be unfurled in his direction, especially after I had gone to scratch my head, only to discover the ten or so pieces of tightly balled-up paper tangled in my curls.

Quietly, I stood up from my seat and passed by Jacob, who sat at the desk in front of my own. I moved toward the front of the classroom to retrieve a graphite-stained clipboard from the table situated next to the door. As I turned back around, Jacob offered me a sweet smile as I continued to my seat. I removed a sheet of paper from my binder and clipped it onto the clipboard. I made a quick scan of the room; most kids were either focused on their reading or on Dakota's shifting antics. The teacher slumped face-deep in his computer screen, none the wiser. On the blank paper, I began to write, "Reasons why no one wants to be friends with Dakota." I was tired of placating him and everyone else in my life. This is it, I thought, my moment to finally take a stand for myself once and for all!

"Fill it out and pass it back," I whispered to the kid behind me. By the time it got to Dakota, it passed between about five or six other classmates, and its contents were gut-wrenching for any kid that age to come face-to-face with. His expression said it all. His eyes remained fixed on the words as his cheeks boiled red with embarrassment. I really thought I had done something to get the point across. Suddenly, I felt a chunk of that anchor I was hauling fall to the floor as I soaked up his reaction.

Some of the kids began to laugh and joke about the things written, while others waited

for Dakota's inevitable reply. After finally standing up for myself, I felt relieved. The satisfaction radiating from Dakota's other victims charged me like a battery. I could have taken on every oppressive force standing in my tiny way. It all came crashing down once I looked over at Jacob and saw his expression. The disapproval shone through his eyes; Jacob looked at me as if I had suddenly become a stranger, as though I had peeled off my skin to reveal a hideous hidden monster.

“Why would you do that?” he asked me. I had no answer. I sat there silently while his glare burned a hole straight through my ego. After what felt like a lifetime of silence, he ended the standstill by saying, “You know. . . what you just did was really mean, and I can't keep being your boyfriend anymore.” Jacob then turned back around in his seat, gathered his things, and moved to the other side of the room. I felt as if a flash grenade went off in my skull, too stunned to process more than the electricity buzzing from the fluorescent lights above. It began to sink in as I realized Jacob's kind spirit had no tolerance for my cold comeback. I had done something cruel, justified or not, and Jacob's opinion of me was forever tainted.

After a long bus ride, filled with streaming tears and desolate stares out of the window, I finally arrived home. I felt shame for the pain I brought upon Dakota but pridefully more so for the new perception Jacob now had of me. Alone in this town, I found myself surrounded by people who unregretfully walked all over me, and I had just lost my only silver lining. I took off my shoes and flung myself into bed, ready to wallow in my guilt and shame, when suddenly the sound of the house phone ringing jolted me upright.

“Hello, Shinlever residence,” I robotically answered. It turned out to be Brandon, a kid who lived about half a mile up the road. He called to tell me that Jacob was coming over to his house and wanted to see if I would like to meet up at the bottom of my driveway. I jumped at the

opportunity to beg for Jacob's forgiveness. They would be heading over on Brandon's four-wheeler, so I had to hurry. I got onto my bicycle and raced as fast as I could down the gravel mountain. As I came barreling down the driveway, nearly reaching its end, rocks were being slung in every direction from my attempts to slow myself down. Before I knew it, the brakes were not catching. I could not stop. I felt the panic wash over my body like a wave of icy needles. No other options remained for me at this point, so across the road I went, and continued to go, right over a set of four mailboxes and into the neighbor's drainage ditch.

Jacob and Brandon were nowhere to be seen. There I would lie for roughly five minutes or so until the neighbor came outside and noticed one of the bicycle wheels spinning up in the air. After being scooped out of the ditch and placed into the back of my mother's beat-up Ford Explorer, I eventually woke up to the sensation of Mom plucking individual gravels from my face with a pair of tweezers. Gashes, scrapes, rocks, and bruises covered me from head to toe, with my face receiving the worst of the damage. I spent the weekend swollen and throbbing in both pain and regret.

I returned to school the following Monday, with a monstrous appearance to match the character I displayed on Friday. Shock spread through the growing crowd as they saw the state of my mutilated face and body. Kids like Dakota jumped right in on making me the butt of every possible joke. And of course, there was Jacob, filled with remorse and heartbroken that he wasn't there to help me after the accident. I experienced permanent facial scarring, which was at the root of much torment for years to come.

While I spent those years battling the effects of bullying and the pains of rejection, I consider myself lucky to have been able to realize the truth that day had to offer. In my desperate pursuit of a healthy and reliable relationship, I fell back onto the engrained coping mechanisms

that covered our valley like fog. It took only a moment to damage the spirit of another valley-trapped kid and to sever the lifeline offered by Jacob's empathetic disposition. This day taught me the most valuable lesson there is to learn in a town like mine: the true difference between simply repenting on Sunday and being accountable come Monday.