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I hope you enjoy my story.



Lauren -- Age 13

“Then What?”

By

TJ Fritz

Mark swung shut the door of his locker. The between-classes clamor in the hallway was deafening. Hundreds of students carrying books and using cell phones were heading to class. Mark pretended not to see the boy who was standing behind him, waiting.

“Well? Do you want to join or not?” prodded Sean.

“I’m still thinking about it,” Mark snapped.

“Well, you’d better hurry up. We’re considering increasing the dues. We might even stop adding new members. So make up your mind. Quick!”

“Okay. Give me a day or two to think about it. I have to get to Algebra.”

Mark walked toward class and left Sean standing there.

Mark was torn. Though he was only a Freshman the SICKY’s invited him to join. Should he be a SICKY or not. They were pretty exclusive. They didn’t let just anybody join. They were the five coolest Juniors in the school, the most

popular guys. They took the first letters of their first names: Sean, Ian, Carl, Kevin and Yancy, and called themselves the SICKY's. If you were a SICKY you were "in." You got respect.

* * *After school Mark's mom picked him up. On the way home they stopped at the mall that was decorated for Easter which was only a few weeks away.

"Why are we stopping here, Mom?" Mark asked.

"I'll show you," she answered.

Inside the mall Mark's mom stopped at the front window of a jewelry store. She pointed to a beautiful gold locket and chain.

"One of these days I'm going to get that," she said. "I'll put tiny pictures inside of you and your dad, and I'll wear it every day."

"I can loan you the money," Mark offered.

"Thanks, Mark. I've been looking for a part time job. I'll be fine. Everything comes to him who waits."

* **

That night at supper as Mark sat at the table with his parents, his dad asked him about school. Mark was still thinking about joining the SICKY's.

“Hey, Dad? When you’re not sure if you should do something, how do you decide?”

Dad put down his fork. “When I’m not sure what to do I always ask myself ‘then what?’” he said.

Mark was confused. “I don’t understand.”

Dad explained. “Think about the results of your decision down the road, in the future. If you decided to do something you aren’t sure of, later on would you be proud of it? The next day or when you’re older, as you look back would you be ashamed of what you did? Would you regret it?”

“Ask, ‘then what?’ Huh?”

His dad nodded and picked up his fork. Mark turned toward his mom who seemed to want to say something.

“I just try to live by the Golden Rule,” she offered. “Treat others the way you want to be treated. It always works for me.”

* * *

The next day SICKY Sean again met Mark at his locker.

“Well? Have you made up your mind?”

Mark glared at him.

Sean continued his pitch. “You’re still a nobody in this school, you know. Join the SICKY’s and you can be somebody. All you have to do is prove yourself.”

“What do you mean?”

“Tomorrow is Saturday. Be in the Food Court at the mall at noon. We’ll give you an assignment. If you pull it off, your in.”

* * *

At noon on Saturday, the five SICKY’s . . . Sean, Ian, Carl, Kevin and Yancy. . . were sitting at a table in the Food Court when Mark walked up to them.

“There you are!” Sean’s voice echoed. “We were taking bets you wouldn’t show.”

“I’m here. What do you want me to do?”

Yancy spoke. “You know that computer game you like to play and you want so bad?”

“Yeah. What about it?”

“We’ve decided that to prove yourself worthy of joining you have to go to Sears and get a copy.”

“You mean steal it!”

“You don’t have 150 bucks do you?” Sean joked.

“You’re crazy,” Mark argued. “I’ll get caught. I’ll get arrested.”

“No you won’t,” Ian assured. “I do it all the time.”

“Look,” Sean interjected. “If you want to be a member you have to prove yourself. Go down there, take the program and bring it back to us. Then you’re in. That’s all you have to do.

Mark put his head down. He was uncomfortable with the thought of stealing. But these were the coolest guys in the school. Afterwards he’d be a member. He could do this, couldn’t he? They wouldn’t lie to him about getting caught would they?

“Okay,” Mark agreed and headed down the concourse toward Sears. The five SICKY’s cheered him on, “All right! Way to go! Soon you’ll be one of us!”

* * *

Mark strutted confidently through the concourse, entered Sears, went up the escalator and strolled casually to the Computer Department. The lady clerk smiled politely, "Can I help you?"

"Just looking, thanks," Mark answered. He stood in front of a computer and started playing with the demo games that were available. Within reach was a display of video programs that included the one he wanted.

Some other customers walked into the Computer Department and began talking to the clerk. Now's my chance, Mark thought. He reached over, took the game, and slid it inside his shirt. He continued playing at the computer for a few more minutes. He glanced over to the clerk and saw that she was still occupied with the customers. Then he turned and slowly walked away.

That was easier than I expected, he thought. He weaved through the housewares and bedding departments, found the escalator, took it down to the main floor and headed for the exit. He'd done it! Now he would be a SICKY. He had proven himself. A few more steps and he'd be into the mall.

Suddenly, coming out of nowhere two men appeared. One grabbed his arm.

"Come with us, please," said the grabber. "You were just caught shoplifting on a hidden camera." With a security man on each side Mark was lead through the

sales floor and into a behind-the-scenes area of offices occupied by managers and secretaries. He was brought to an office and told to sit at a chair in front of a vacant desk.

“Wait here,” ordered the grabber. He sounded angry. Then he and the silent security guard stood in front of the exit door.

Mark was embarrassed, ashamed, and devastated. He lowered his head, put his hands over his face and tried to hide the tears. He could feel the box of stolen software in his shirt.

The door to the office opened and an older man with gray hair and wearing a suit entered and took the chair behind the desk.

“What’s your name?” he asked, and Mark answered.

“What grade are you in?”

“A Freshman.” Mark put his head back down. He thought about the conversation with his parents at dinnertime the night before. Boy, had he ever blown the Golden Rule! He had crushed it into the ground. As for Dad’s idea of “then what,” Mark knew that there was no question that he was thoroughly ashamed of what he had done, and he always would be. He looked up at the man with gray hair. “Am I going to go to jail?”

“Juvenile Detention,” said Grayhair. “Same thing.”

Mark put his head down again and began praying quietly to himself. “Oh, God. I am so sorry for what I have done. I know it was wrong. I will never do it again. Please forgive me.”

When Mark looked up, Grayhair was staring at him. Mark looked over to the door where Grabber and the Silent Man had been standing, but they were gone. Then Grayhair spoke.

“Mark, you look like a good kid. Did you learn a lesson today?”

“Oh, yes sir,” Mark answered. Then he reached into his shirt pocket, pulled out the stolen computer program and handed it to Grayhair. “I’m sorry, sir. What I did was wrong.” Grayhair set the program on the corner of his desk and stared at Mark.

“Mark?” said Grayhair. “I don’t know why, but I’ve decided to let you go.” Mark stared at him. “I don’t ever want to see you sitting in that chair again, understand?”

Mark looked at him and said weakly, “Yes, sir. You won’t.”

“Now go.” Grayhair motioned toward the door.

Mark raised his head and looked at Grayhair. “Thank you!” Then he got up and walked out of the office. Mark didn’t see Grabber or Silent Man anywhere. He walked through the sales area, out of the store and into the main concourse.

Mark was still scared, still shivering, still feeling guilty and embarrassed as he walked toward the Food Court where the SICKY boys were waiting. The closer he got, the angrier he became.

When the SICKY boys saw him approaching, Yancy yelled out, “So? Did you do it?”

Mark nodded, “Yeah.”

“Good,” said Kevin. “Give it to me,” and he held out his hand.

“I don’t have it,” Mark confessed.

“Wait a minute,” Carl interrupted. “What? You took it but you don’t have it?”

“I gave it back,” Mark told them.

Ian said with a condemning tone, “You mean you *failed* your mission?”

“Looks like it,” said Mark sarcastically.

Sean spoke. “Then I guess you don’t want to be a SICKY.”

Mark shrugged.

“Why not?” asked Sean, as if he couldn’t believe someone would blow such an opportunity.

Mark scanned all five. “Because it’s just not worth it!” he told them firmly, and he walked away. Mark exited the mall, unhitched his bike from the rack and peddled home.

* * *

After Mark left, Kevin looked at his buddies who seemed unconcerned that the SICKY’s had lost out on adding a new member. “Hey guys? Let’s have some fun!”

“Okay,” said Yancy. “What do you want to do?”

Carl spoke. “Remember when we used to do ‘Barney Bashing’ a few years ago?” The others nodded and smiled. “How about ‘Bunny Bashing’?”

“Great idea,” Ian agreed. “Let’s do it!”

The five boys headed for Center Court. As they arrived, the Easter Bunny was just returning from a break, and they found themselves walking in step right behind the costumed character. They sped up and surrounded the Bunny. Then

Sean stuck out his leg. The Bunny tripped, screamed, and went down hard onto the cold, hard tile floor. The five boys pounced on their furry victim and started pounding on it. The Bunny covered it's face and screamed for help! Sean took out a cigarette lighter, snapped a flame and held it against the Bunny costume until it burst into flames.

“HEY!” someone yelled. It was a huge mall security guard, running toward them. With his mighty hands the guard yanked the boys off the flaming Bunny. Then he picked up the burning Bunny like a baby and tossed it into the nearby fountain. There was a piercing scream from the Bunny, then a huge splash. A giant wave of water poured over the rim of the fountain and spread across the tile floor.

“Come on guys,” Sean yelled! “Run!” Before Sean could escape the security guard grabbed him by the shoulders and shoved him hard toward the fountain. Sean's knees hit the fountain's curved, marble edge, and he flew head first into the water. Dozens of mall patrons were screaming and yelling at the incredible site.

By the time Sean regained his footing the Easter Bunny was sitting up with it's head and shoulders above the water. The flames had been extinguished but the Bunny was obviously hurting. Sean was about to run from the fountain but froze.

A half dozen uniformed police circled the fountain. Sirens could be heard. Sean had no escape.

* * *

When Mark arrived at home his dad was talking to someone on the phone.

“Okay, I will,” he said. “And you’re sure she’s going to be all right?” He shook his head. “I don’t either.” He closed his eyes and listened. “About a half hour,” he said. “Thanks.” And he hung up and turned toward Mark.

“That was the hospital. You know that part-time job your mom wanted?” Mark nodded. “She was the Easter Bunny at the mall. Some teenage boys just beat her up.”

“Oh my Gosh!” Mark exclaimed. “Is she okay?”

“Mostly bumps and bruises. No broken bones. But the doctor wants to keep her overnight for observation. I’m going there now. Wanna come?”

“Sure.”

“The kids that did this even tried to set her on fire. They go to your school. The police caught one of them, and the kid told on the rest.”

Mark thought to himself, I hope it wasn’t the SICKY’s.

“On the way to the hospital I want to stop and get your mom some flowers or something.”

Mark shook his head. “No, Dad. Let’s stop at the mall. I know the perfect gift.”

* * * The End * * *