

## Regret

(1982)

There is a face I shall never forget and a sadness with it which will never leave me. The face that haunts my mind belongs to my youth, to a time of boyish games and carelessness. I attended a country school and my friends were the ring leaders of a small group of ignorant boys.

I had been there two years when Harold came to our class. Harold was a hunchback with pale, delicate features and reserved manners. He talked very little and smiled even less, but when he did, his eyes lit up his face. It was obvious from the beginning that he cut the typical figure of an outsider in our midst. And when I think of it, how quickly did we outcast him.

Being of too frail a constitution to run far, Harold could not climb trees or steal apples from neighborhood orchards with us, and little did we care about what he might be doing alone when we were at play. Harold was a good student and liked to talk with our teacher, which further alienated us. He sat for hours, brow furrowed, writing and polishing his compositions. How I would like, today, to know his opinions on matters of concern. I had so little understanding of the value of a thoughtful friend and was so preoccupied with my group's disdain for Harold, that I did not dare show him the slightest civility.

My friends were bold and irresponsible, careless and carefree; they despised Harold's seriousness and integrity, which they thought were only the result of timorousness. The day came, however, when we would learn that he had in his frail body more courage than the rest of us.

On a dim January day, we were leaving school early in search of adventures by the local lake, when I saw on Harold's face an expression that I have remembered ever since. His eyes seemed to leave no room for his other features. Big, lost, and desolate, they were full of immaterial hunger and uncertainty. They were the eyes of a lonely child. Suddenly, I felt a pang of remorse for the way we treated him and I wanted to show him that I had read the message in his eyes, but I was a coward in the presence of my friends and walked away without saying a word.

Usually, Harold did not follow us, but this time, he did. He had had enough of solitude and was, after all, a young boy like us and eager to play. From the corner of my eye I watched his movements as he sat down alone at a little distance. None of my friends even cast a glance in his direction. We often played risky games requiring agility and strength, and that day, we climbed up the branches of an old tree that arched over the icy water. The winter was at its coldest and stiffened our limbs, but we scaled the slightly slimy tree with confidence and all had a shock when Larry suddenly slipped from the highest branch. Knocking his head on a lower branch, he

crashed on the thin sheet of ice that covered the lake and disappeared into the water.

We were all petrified and helplessly staring in Larry's wake when suddenly, we saw Harold diving into the lake. By the time he had, in a supreme effort, pulled Larry to the shore with our help, two of our teachers arrived fetched by one of my friends. The teachers ordered us to go home while they looked after Harold and Larry.

The following day, we sat in the classroom quiet and subdued when our homeroom teacher arrived. In answer to our questions about Harold and Larry, he told us that Larry had minor contusions and a cold, and would soon return to school, but that Harold would not be coming back. He had asked his parents to transfer him to a boarding school where he might be happier. Admiration had taken the place of contempt for Harold, but it was too late for him to know.

I never saw Harold again. Since, I have often thought how easy it is for those who have made someone suffer to regret what they have done, but how hard it is for someone who has suffered to believe that indifference and disdain can give way to regret.