

THE BEST ENEMY I EVER HAD

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[Assignment: Describe an experience in your life when you were forced to act under pressure. This may be the story of a relatively small decision, but one which was important to you.]

(1) To this day the name of that big kid, Jaime Conrad, strikes a chord of terror in my heart. Towering at a height of five feet and four inches, Jaime plagued my very existence in physical education every day. Gym class with Jaime would have proven traumatic enough for a skinny, uncoordinated boy of eleven, but some demented person at the scheduling office decided that I deserved an even greater punishment and assigned me to Jaime's lunch hour. Besides tripping me and pushing me into walls, Jaime had an agenda of abuse consisting of rigorous name calling, such as "wimp," "shorty," and "10-pound weakling." I always tried to go along with whatever torture he had picked and to act as if it did not bother me. But on one particularly depressing Monday outside the school cafeteria, Jaime had challenged me for the last time.

(2) It was high noon when I walked through the pale green hallway to throw away the remains of my lunch. As I turned to go back into the cafeteria, I noticed Jaime policing the entrance. His flaming red hair made him stand out from everyone, as did his evil, cackling, half-crazed laugh that I picked up over the noise of the milling crowd. Normally, I would not have subjected myself to such an obviously dangerous situation as passing by Jaime, but my day had gone so horribly that, with some misgivings, I broke from my routine. Cautiously, I shuffled toward the door which appeared farther and farther away with each awkward step I took.

(3) I was about to pass through the gateway of salvation when Jaime shot out his foot and I tumbled over it landing flat on my face. "Whatsa matter, kid, can't walk straight?" Jaime barked out for all to hear.

(4) Feeling frantic, I stood up and met his off-set, hazel eyes. I thought of all the times in my life that I had been preyed upon like this. Now I wanted to fight not simply against Jaime but against everyone who had ever harassed me. For the entire school year he had tormented me and, looking into his eyes, I saw that nothing was going to change for the rest of the year or my life if I did not do something--anything! In a frenzy I yelled, "What are you trying to prove, man? Come on, you want to start somethin'? Then start somethin'!"

(5) My uncharacteristic shouts had attracted the attention of everyone passing by, and soon a crowd started to gather around the two of us. When I called out to my best friend who was standing nearby, Jaime

quipped, "You need help, sissy?"

(6) With my heart racing I replied vigorously, "No, I just want him to watch."

(7) Seconds seemed like hours as Jaime's eyes darted nervously from face to face in the pushing crowd that had enveloped us; he seemed fearful and uncertain. He had realized that the crowd was expecting a fight and knew that I was close to going beserk. Suddenly, assuming a boisterousness that rang false, Jaime announced, "Hey, I was only kiddin'. No big deal, OK?" and thrust his hand toward me.

(8) Slowly, almost regretfully, I slapped it, said, "Yeah," and walked away. The crowd dispersed having been appeased, leaving Jaime standing by himself.

(9) Jaime never bothered me after our encounter, and for what little remained of the school year he and I acted surprisingly civil toward one another. He neither touched me nor uttered any other derogatory comments about me again. Although he never spoke to me in gym class, he would say, "Hey," every once in a while when he saw me. When life at school once again became pleasurable, I regretted that I had not stood up for myself sooner and ended his authoritarian rule earlier. I learned then that it is better to face up to my problems than to try to avoid them, a principle that I have tried to live by ever since my episode with Jaime. So while I still twinge in remembrance of Jaime, I must thank him for teaching me a valuable lesson in courage.