

The Closet

Once there was a shy, ordinary boy who attended a small town Catholic grade school in the early 1960s. Even though it was a poorer parish, the socio-status of his 5th grade class consisted of the elite, the average, and the less-fortunate. Most of the elite boys were involved in athletics and participated in other social activities, but this boy did neither. His conduct was never conspicuous, in fact, he preferred it that way. He preferred to be inconspicuous, and found his natural fit within the average rank. He spent nearly all of his free time with his two best pals, playing in the woods, or pretending to be the Beatles or just goofing around as young boys do.

During the summer before 6th grade, he started playing a musical instrument and achieved some startling accomplishments in a very short time. Then, something happened that changed his life; he began playing that instrument for mass. Soon, the entire congregation was taking notice of him and holding him in esteem. This made him uncomfortable because he was very shy. It became difficult for him to cope with all of the attention that he did not seek. He just wanted to play his musical instrument and be happy.

On a chilly spring evening, and without any prior rationale, his two best pals called him on the phone. After some unintelligible prank call joke playing, they cynically informed the boy that, "*We decided that we are not going to be your friend anymore. We decided that we don't like you anymore.*" Understandably, the boy was shocked and upset. Friends are important. What was he going to do?

The next day, and for many weeks to follow, the two boys taunted him, ridiculed him, danced around him calling him hideous names, tugged at his clothes, pushed him down, laughed at him, insulted his mother, pointed fingers at him, hit him with a stick, threw mud at him, encouraged others to join in the ridicule, and relentlessly mocked him for not have any friends. They even ridiculed him for befriending the son of a migrant worker. He felt helpless and hopeless, and never wanted to go back to school. He often pretended to be sick. He even thought about running away....anything to alleviate the ache. He didn't know why this was happening, and was so ashamed that he was unable to tell anyone. This was a cross that he bore alone.

Then he discovered a sanctuary. In the school basement, under the stairs was a closet. This closet was used to store the Patrol Boy's raincoats and galoshes. It reeked of stale mildewed air and of wet rubber.

Whenever recess or lunch occurred, he fled downstairs and sought refuge in the closet. For weeks and weeks, he ate his lunch in the dark, under the steps, in a musty closet...all alone. He hated it; the minutes seemed like hours, but it was better than facing the abuse he would endure if he went outside.

One morning during recess, a nun opened the door to the closet and found him in the dark. She was startled and asked him what he was doing, assuming the boy was up to no good. The boy was so frightened that he couldn't speak. The nun took him by the arm and forced him to go outside for the remainder of the recess.

As he feared, the two boys ganged up on him and pushed him to the ground. Luckily, he was rescued by the very nun that sent him outside. Although he was trembling profusely, he never divulged what had been happening. For the remaining few weeks of the school year, he continued to seek the safe haven of the closet.

To him, those weeks seemed like an eternity. Throughout the summer months he made new friends, and fortunately, the two boys had lost interest in continuing their taunt. Life went on.

Many years later, he had become a successful musician and had achieved a modest degree of notoriety. After a performance, his former pal, one of the tormenters, had sought to make contact with the musician and requested access to the backstage area. The musician eagerly agreed and was genuinely glad to see the man. The man expressed that he was very proud of the musician and what he had accomplished. They had a nice conversation and reminisced about the Beatles, the Man From U.N.C.L.E. and Hullabaloo. There was no reference or mention of the abuse. They parted on good terms and never saw each other again. In his mind, the musician forgave the man for what he had done....but he would never forget.

The musician, now in his 50s, had not consciously dwelled on the grade school bullying. But one sunny day, perhaps out of curiosity, he returned to his home town and to his Catholic Parish. The church remained virtually unchanged. He toured the choir loft where he played music as a young boy; music that gave him a start in his career. There were so many delightful and precious memories there. The school building was no longer a school but had been converted to a day care center.

He reluctantly walked down the stairs leading to the closet, which had been his safe haven for so many weeks. He hesitated before opening the door, presuming that it would be unchanged too. Surprisingly, he found that the closet was completely different. Long gone were the Patrol Boy's rain coats; long gone were the galoshes, and long gone was the stench of rank air and wet rubber. The walls were freshly painted in vivid colors. There were new bright lights which illuminated the closet like sunshine. The closet was being used as a storage facility for happy things; toys, games and children's books.

He stood there, recollecting the painful details that brought him to this closet 40 years before. Then he understood; the closet had become a wonderful and welcoming place, and it could no longer be the loathsome and lonely place from his past.

He left feeling peaceful, knowing that he would never need to go back to the closet...ever again.

Glen Shulfer ~ March 30, 2008

