

THE NEW KID**by Jack Weyland**

What most students probably noticed on Michael's first day of school at his new school was that he was tall. A couple of guys on the basketball team even stopped to talk to him. Once they found out he didn't play basketball, they scowled and walked away.

Before Michael and his mom and dad made the move from a small town in Idaho to just ten miles from New York City, his folks had told him that he'd have no problem making friends. But after going to three classes, other than the basketball players, he doubted that because nobody had even talked to him.

At eleven o'clock, when the bell rang, he tried to keep up with everyone else, but he couldn't even find the room for his next class. It was supposed to be 132. He passed 131 and then the building ended. The bell rang. The hallways cleared and he was left alone in the middle of the hall looking for 132. He retraced his footsteps. Still no 132.

His new school had something his old school didn't: cops with drug-sniffing dogs. After the bell had rung and the halls were mostly empty, one of the cops came across him in the hall. "What are you doing out here now?"

"I'm trying to find 132."

"Don't give me that! Are you even a student here?"

"Yeah, I am. This is my first day."

"Yeah, right. That's what every punk drug dealer I catch says. C'mon, we're

going to the office. If you're not a student here, then I'm going to have you arrested and hauled away."

The officer, who must have weighed three hundred pounds, grabbed his arm and walked him to the office.

"What's your dog's name?" Michael asked.

"What do you care?," the officer muttered.

"Do you know where room 132 is?" Michael asked.

"It's right by 131."

"No, it isn't. That's the thing."

Ten minutes later, in the principal's office, he was cleared of all suspicion. The assistant principal escorted him to 132. It was on the opposite side of the school from 131.

"Go in. Tell the teacher you're new."

Michael opened the door and entered the classroom.

"What's da matta wit' you?" the teacher called out to him. "You're late!"

"I'm new here. I'm supposed to be in this class."

"That's all I need, right? Okay, I guess I have to let you in. See that vacant desk? Sit there!"

Michael sat down.

The teacher continued his lesson. Because of the teacher's thick Brooklyn accent Michael couldn't understand much of what he was saying. He leaned over to the girl in the desk next to him. "Excuse me. Is he talking English?"

Her hair was light brown near the ends and dark brown near her scalp, but it looked like a train wreck, with hair going wildly in every direction. She also had two large dabs of color on her cheeks. It made her look a little like a robot that was designed to look human.

She rolled her eyes. "You're not from around here, are you?"

"No. I'm from Idaho."

"Where's that?"

"It's near California. What's the teacher talking about?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I wasn't listening."

A few minutes later the teacher was called to the office. "Read Chapter Seven. When I come back, I'm giving a quiz! It'll count half your grade."

After he left, Michael began reading Chapter Seven while everyone else talked to their neighbor.

"What are you doing?" the girl next to him asked.

"Reading Chapter Seven."

"What for? We've taken ten quizzes, each one counting half of our grade. How's he going to do that? He can't, right?"

"No." Michael closed his book. "What's your name?"

"Stella."

"I'm Michael. Thanks for talking with me."

"Look, you seem like a nice guy, so I'll spare you a lot of trouble. If anyone sees you talking to me, then they'll tell you all about me. And then you'll either

start hitting on me, calling out insults every time you see me, or else totally ignore me.”

“I would never do any of those things.”

“Let’s just not ever talk again, okay? That’s usually the best.”

“You’re the only friend I have in this place.”

“Whoa, Cowboy! Let’s get one thing straight. I’m not your friend. I’ll never be your friend. I have no friends. So just leave me alone. It’ll be better for both of us.”

A guy at a desk on the other side of Stella noticed them talking. “Hey, Stella, who you talking to? One of your many admirers? Has he seen you online yet like the rest of us?”

She turned to Michael and spoke quietly. “Two years ago, when I was in ninth grade, I posted a picture of myself in my underwear to a friend. He sent it to all his friends, and within a couple of days, everyone in school had seen it. It’s still out there.” She sighed. “All over the world actually.”

“Why would you do a thing like that?”

“It’s not like I’m the only who’s ever done that.”

“Yeah, but c’mon, don’t you have any self-respect?”

She glared at him, then stood up. “That’s it. I don’t need this. I’m out of here.” She dumped her book in her backpack and headed out of the classroom.

A guy called out after her. “Hey, Stella, where you going? You gonna post another picture of yourself?”

Michael felt bad that he'd insulted her. He followed her into the hall. "Wait! Stop!"

She turned around "What do you want?"

"I want to talk with you."

"What's there to talk about?"

"I don't know. Look, is it going to kill you to talk to me?" he asked.

"Where?"

"I don't care."

"We're both going to get in trouble for leaving class," she said.

"Is the teacher going to get in trouble too? He left first."

She gave him a slight grin. "Okay, I'll talk to you. One time though is all."

She led him to a desk in the stacks of the library, far away from traffic patterns but close enough to the main checkout desk that both of them would feel comfortable being alone with the other.

Apologies didn't come easy for Michael. "Look, I just wanted to say I'm sorry for what I said."

"You're sorry?"

"Yeah, I am."

"Let me clue you in. Nobody is ever sorry for what they say to me."

"I am."

"Okay, thanks." She sighed. "Look, you seem like a nice guy. Now, of course, I know the picture thing was a dumb thing to do. I thought it would go

away after a couple of days, but it didn't. And then I thought that after all the seniors graduated, it would go away. But it never goes away."

"Look, everyone makes mistakes. You just got to move on with your life."

She shook her head. "There's no moving on with this. Everyone knows about it. They never let me forget it. It's like my life has stopped and I'm forced to re-live over and over again some stupid mistake I made two years ago."

"In the church I go to, if you mess up, you can repent and be forgiven. And then you can move on."

"Who forgives you?" she asked.

"God."

"Why would God do that?"

"Because of Jesus Christ."

"What good would being forgiven by God do for me? It's the idiots in school that make my life so bad. You try walking down the halls with guys calling you all sorts of names. Sometimes I'm purposely late to class just so I can go down the hall when there's not that many people around. I never eat lunch. I bring a granola bar and eat it here. I've never been to a school dance or a basketball game or a football game. It's not worth the hassle I'd get if I went. And as far as guys go, forget it. The only ones who approach me are the scum of the school."

"Oh." He paused. "I'm sorry people don't treat you better. Look, tomorrow, how about if I bring a granola bar and eat lunch with you here?"

"Why would you do that?"

“I don’t have any friends here either.”

“But the difference between you and me is that you can get some.”

“I’m not sure if I can or not.”

“Why’s that?”

“My friends in Idaho were nothing like the people here.”

“In what way?”

“I don’t drink or use drugs.”

“So? Not everyone here uses drugs.”

“I believe in Jesus Christ.”

“There’s some here who do that too.”

“I believe in chastity before marriage.”

She paused. “There’s people here who believe in that too.”

“I also believe that God has a purpose for me being on the earth now.”

“Lucky you, right?”

“No, it’s true for everyone. He has a purpose for you too.”

She shook her head. “No, not me. I’m like one of God’s rejects. Just ask anyone.”

“No, you’re not. God has things he wants you to do.”

“What are they?”

“Look, if you’ll come to church with me Sunday, you’ll start to find out all those things.”

She shook her head. “I can’t believe this. You’re asking me to go to church

with you?”

“Yeah. If you tell me where you live, my mom and dad and I could come for you around about nine fifteen.”

“Your mom and dad would be with you?”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe you’d better tell them about me first. They might not want me being with me, even in church.”

“They’ll be okay with it.”

“Talk to them tonight, okay? Tomorrow you can tell me what they said. I’ll understand if they tell you not to talk to me anymore.”

In his bedroom after school while he did homework, Michael tried to plan out how he was going to tell his folks. But the more he rehearsed it in his mind, the more uneasy he felt about what their reaction would be.

Near the end of dinner, though, he took a deep breath and began. “There’s a girl in one of my classes. A couple of years ago she emailed a picture of herself in her underwear to a friend. He sent it to all his friends and pretty soon everyone in school had seen it. I invited her to go to church with us on Sunday. She wanted me to ask you if that would be all right if she came.”

Her mom’s mouth dropped open. “I see,” she said. Stalling for time, she added, “Who wants dessert?”

“Have you seen the picture?” his dad asked.

“No, and I never will.”

“That’s good.”

“Why does she want to come to church?” his dad asked.

“She doesn’t. I invited her.”

“Why?” his dad asked.

“She says she feels like she can’t get away from what she did. Like guys are always calling out gross things to her in the hall between classes. They won’t let her forget what she did. So it’s always with her every day. So I told her about repentance and forgiveness and starting over.”

“How will her coming to church stop guys in your school from saying unkind things to her?” his dad asked.

Michael thought about it. “I don’t know.”

“I just hope we’re not setting her up for disappointment,” his dad added.

His mom came to the rescue. “Well, one thing we can be sure of. We’ll treat her with respect and kindness when she’s with us. I’m proud of you, Michael, for being kind to her.”

The next day when Michael and Stella each had a granola bar in the library, she asked, “What did your mom and dad say about me going to church with you?”

“They’re okay with it.”

“Did you tell them about the picture of me?”

“Yeah, I did. They still want you to come to church with us.”

She walked to the window and looked out for a long time. When she turned

to face him, he could see tears in her eyes.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’m good. Okay, like at church, what if I do something wrong, like not kneeling when I’m supposed to or something like that?”

“We don’t kneel in church. We just listen, and uh, sing. Oh, and we close our eyes for the prayers.”

“I can do that.”

“I know. And I’ll be next to you letting you know what’s going on.”

“Why do you want me to go to church with you and your folks?”

“It’s not right for you to be stuck in the past because of some dumb thing you did a long time ago. That’s not what God wants.”

“You know what God wants?”

He thought about it. “Not always. But in this case, I do.”

“How do you know this?”

“Because I’ve made mistakes too, so I know the process. In our church we call it repentance. It really works.”

She sighed. “Okay then, I’ll go.”

On Friday before class started, Stella was asking him what she should wear to church when a guy came up to them and handed Michael a piece of paper that was folded in half. “Open this and look at it,” he said.

“Why?”

“You need to know who you’re wasting your time with.”

Michael looked at Stella. She looked depressed. From her reaction he could guess what was on the paper. “No thanks.”

“Look at it I said!”

Michael stood up. He towered over the guy. “No! Go to your seat and quit harassing my friend here!”

“You’re making a big mistake being friends with her.”

“I don’t think so.”

Just then the teacher came into class. “Everyone sit down! Class is starting in ten seconds. I’m giving a quiz and it’ll count fifty percent of your grade!”

The guy looked at Stella and insulted her, and then returned to his desk.

Stella looked devastated. Michael leaned over to her. “It’s okay. That guy’s a jerk.”

“He’s right though. You shouldn’t be friends with me.”

“Well, too bad, because I am.”

“I’m not good like you. Ask anyone.”

“You think the people in school who try to make you feel like dirt are good people? Well, I don’t. Whatever happened to compassion? Whatever happened to letting a person who messed up get a second chance? What they’re doing to you isn’t right. Everyone deserves another chance.”

She shook her head and wouldn’t talk to him the rest of the class.

At noon when he went to the library to have lunch with her, she wasn’t

there.

He wandered through the halls looking for her. Finally he spotted her in the gym. She was sitting in the last row of the bleachers. The place was deserted except for her. He walked up the stairs to the top row and sat down next to her.

“How’s the game? Who’s ahead?” he asked.

She fought back a smile. “We are, by two points.”

He sat down next to her. “How come you didn’t come to the library for lunch?”

“I don’t think we should see each other anymore.”

“Why not?”

“You expect me to change.”

“What makes you think that?”

“That’s why you invited me to church, isn’t it?”

“I invited you to church because it’s the most important thing in my life. And so, naturally, because you’re my friend, I want to share it with you.”

She stood up and hurried down the bleacher stairs.

“What’s wrong now?” he called out.

“Quit saying I’m your friend!”

“Why?”

She stopped to look up at him. “Don’t you get it? Someone like me can never be friends with someone like you!”

“Who else can I be friends with? I have no respect for anyone in this

school, especially the ones who treat you like dirt.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that maybe I am dirt?” She turned and went the rest of the way down the bleacher stairs and then headed toward the door.

He yelled out in the empty gym. “You are a daughter of God! And He loves you!”

She shook her head and ran out of the gym.

He started down the stairs to catch up with her. By the time he reached the gym floor, she opened the door again and stepped inside. “What did you just say?” she asked.

“Before you were born, you lived with God. You knew Him as your Father in Heaven. He has loved you a long time. For thousands of years.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Come to church with me and find out.”

She sighed. “Okay, I guess I will.”

Four weeks later Stella, after having been taught by the sister missionaries assigned to their ward, was baptized by Michael.

The Monday after she was baptized. Stella and Michael were finally bold enough to leave their sanctuary in the library and eat lunch in the cafeteria.

No one came up and harassed her. The guys who had done that in the past didn’t seem to recognize her. To Michael it seemed like a miracle.

Stella did look different. But it wasn’t just because she’d toned down her hair style and makeup, although she had done that. And it wasn’t because she’d

bought different clothes because she didn't have money for that. But, even so, she was dressing more conservatively. It was something else, something he couldn't explain. But it was real.

On Sunday when they talked to the sister missionaries, they said it was because the influence of the Spirit had brought a change in her countenance.

He'd heard the term before and had never known what it meant. But now he knew, and it was real. He could see it in Stella.

On Monday when Michael made his way down the crowded halls for his first class, he thought, *Look at all these people. There's got to be others who are ready to hear the gospel. I wonder who they are and how Stella and I will find them.*

This is so great! he thought. *I'm glad we moved here.*