Eileen was special. At least, that's how all of the teachers described her. But all of the kids knew that saying she was "special" was really just a nice way of saying that she was handicapped, or retarded as most of the kids said. The problem with Eileen was that she wasn't completely retarded so she knew when she was being made fun of, which was often. Whenever I'd see her in the halls there would always be a string of kids behind her making jokes and doing impressions of her. She acted as if she didn't notice, but I could always tell from the look on her face that she heard them perfectly, and I could tell that it hurt.

I had seventh period gym with Eileen. This is where, for the first time, I was able to see firsthand the torment and ridicule that Eileen had to go through. We were doing pull-ups on a large metal bar one day. When it was Eileen's turn to go, she got up on the bar, went down, and then began with all of her might to pull herself back up. All of the kids began to chuckle as she struggled terribly, all red in the face. It was at this point that we all saw something fall from Eileen's shorts and plop down on the floor beneath her.

"She's shit herself," someone exclaimed. It was true. Eileen was pushing so hard trying to pull herself up that it came out right there in front of the entire class. After she had gotten down the class was still laughing hysterically. She looked more confused than embarrassed really. To be honest, I couldn't tell if she was indifferent about what had just happened or if she was horribly embarrassed but just didn't quite know how to react to the situation yet. She bolted out the door in tears just moments later.

In the weeks following that incident I didn't see Eileen much. Maybe she couldn't handle coming back to school so soon after what had happened, or maybe I was just lucky enough to have a break from seeing her being constantly belittled and mocked. Not that anyone would ever admit that they really cared, but during those weeks I heard a few kids inquire as to where she was. I think that people liked having her around because she was almost like a safety net for them. No matter how bad off they were, Eileen had it worse. It was almost as if school just wasn't complete without her. Eventually, I started to see her around and things felt normal again.

Back then it was hard for me to realize that Eileen was actually a living, breathing human being. I think that I felt this way because of how she carried herself throughout the day. On many occasions she almost looked comatose, like a robot showing nearly no emotion at all. It seemed as if she either didn't have a care in the world, or that she had so many that she didn't know how to react to them all. My entire perception of Eileen changed however when, one day, I came face to face with her.

That particular afternoon I had stayed after school to work on a project. It was nearly 4:30 when I finished, so I knew that very few, if any kids would still be in the school. I exited the classroom and headed down the hall, rounding the corner towards my locker. And there she was, sitting down next to the drinking fountain sobbing uncontrollably. I was going to turn around and go the other way, but she had already seen me and I didn't want to make it obvious that I was trying to avoid her. As I began to approach her, I realized that I ought to say something to her. But what? What can you possibly say to cheer up the girl who is, in your eyes, the saddest person in the world? I could see that she was eyeing me the entire time so I pretended that I needed a drink and stopped at the fountain. The whole time that I was drinking, she was still staring. I must have taken the longest

**2002 Second Place Personal Narrative**

**Late April, Early May**

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drink ever, just letting the water hit my lips for several seconds. When I had finished I looked up at Eileen and she quickly looked down. Something needed to be said.

"I uh . . . I was just wondering if you needed anything." She continued to look down and then kind of shifted her glance at my knees and shook her head.

"Oh, well, that's fine. I was just wondering," I said, sounding even more awkward than I had the first time. I stood there a moment longer and then turned and walked away. As I waited for my mom to come pick me up, I pondered about what had just happened. Going into that situation with Eileen, I thought that I was going to be her hero, her savior, rescuing her from her bitter state of sorrow with my kind, gentle, understanding words of wisdom and comfort. Instead, somehow I felt that I had made things worse.

I looked at Eileen differently after that. Instead of seeing her as Eileen the retarded girl and object of everyone's cruel treatment, I saw her as Eileen the girl who cries all by herself after everybody else has gone home. She seemed much more real to me, and that is exactly why what happened was that much more painful.

It was either late April or early May, sometime close to the end of the school year. I was walking toward the crosswalk at Orchard Drive, one of the fastest and busiest streets in town. There were several kids with me, all of whom I regularly walked up to the high school for track practice with. I stopped and looked back to try and find one of my friends when I noticed that Eileen was walking with us. I didn't think anything of it then, but now I realize how odd it really was. She wasn't on the track team and I had never seen her walk home this way after school before. As we came to the street, and waited while some traffic went by, I watched as Eileen walked up to the curb and stepped out in front of a moving car. Everything seemed surreal after this point. And nothing is very clear anymore as I've tried to forget about it. I do remember Eileen looking no more real or alive than a rag doll being thrown through the air after she was hit by the car. And I remember running over to where her bleeding, bruised body was still twitching, thirty or forty feet from where the car hit her. Several people said, "Someone call an ambulance," and the crossing guard, in a state of shock herself, kept muttering over and over, "Oh God no, please God, no." I looked around me and saw that nearly everyone there was crying and those who weren't were very close. As the pool of blood surrounding Eileen thickened I realized that it was probably over and I went and sat down on the curb.

After the ambulance had taken Eileen's body away, the police asked a few of the kids who witnessed the accident to stay and answer some questions. I told the officer everything that I saw and then grabbed my books to leave. On my way down to the school to call my mom, I passed the person who had hit Eileen. She was a little old woman, probably in her eighties, and I heard her say to a policeman as I walked by, "Is the little girl all right? I need to go now. I'm going to be late, I must leave."

In the weeks following Eileen's death, the atmosphere around school was very interesting. Kids that wouldn't have thought twice about mocking and teasing Eileen to the point of tears were now mourning her death like she was very close to them. You couldn't go ten steps without hearing someone talking about how "Eileen was such a nice girl" and that what had happened was "such a tragedy." I found it terribly ironic: now that she was gone, people couldn't say enough good things about her.

Almost the entire grade and over half the school showed up at Eileen's funeral. The services were very modest with just two speakers including Eileen's mother. In her talk, with tears in her eyes, she thanked all of Eileen's friends for coming to the funeral. Most of the kids there had never even spoken to Eileen, and those that had were probably ashamed of what they had said to her. But Eileen's mother didn't know this, and I was glad that she was ignorant to the fact that none of these kids were really friends with her daughter. As I look back, I think that Eileen's mom might have realized this but she didn't care. On that day, her daughter was the most popular girl in school.
In the weeks and months that followed, there was much speculation as to whether or not Eileen had committed suicide. The fact that Eileen might have decided to take her own life hadn't even crossed my mind until I started to hear these things. But the more that I thought about that being a possibility, the more that it made sense to me. But then I wondered, was Eileen capable of suicide? Could she even comprehend a thought like that? I don't think that anyone will ever know and I don't think it even matters. What mattered was that Eileen was gone and that had left a lot of kids, including me, wishing that things had been different.