

# Shame

## A Child's Dilemma

by R. Renée Bembry

*Is the grass really greener someplace else?*

"Come with me little girl," directed a deep voice in a policeman looking uniform. Annie knew he wasn't a policeman though because he wore a star shaped badge. Policemen in her town wore oval badges; and her brother had told her people called security guards worked in this store.

But, security guard or policeman, Annie knew he'd caught her red handed even though he had yet to ask her for the candy she'd tucked away in her pocket. His quiet whispering voice sounded a little nice, but a lot serious. She figured he talked that way because he didn't want anyone except her to hear him; and he wanted her to know he wasn't playing around.

The man escorted Annie through the crowd that consisted mostly of women with children seated in carts or tagging along beside them. A shameful feeling gutted Annie's insides as she realized all eyes were on her. She didn't think she could've felt more ashamed. Everyone in the store, it seemed even when they didn't appear to be watching watched as the guard took her away.

Quickening her steps to keep up with the guard's long strides, she let her eyes scan beautiful dresses she'd inspected before deciding to take the lousy candy bar. That was right before she'd been prepared to leave the store empty handed. She wished she had left empty handed the way she had so many times before.

They passed the sparkled red shoes that reminded her of Dorothy's ruby slippers. Right now she completely identified with Dorothy's dilemma of wanting to go home. If she could put on those fake "no place like home" slippers and click them together stopping this man from taking her some place she didn't want to go, she would.

Annie knew, no fantasy, or dream, or magic would save her. And though she'd brought this problem on her self; she didn't understand why a problem like this could happen in the first place. She didn't understand why a store, filled with so many colorful, enticing, expensive new things couldn't let her have a lousy candy bar.

Ignorant to the fact that stores were businesses people ran in order to earn livings enabling them to enter other stores to "buy" things they wanted, Annie was of the impression that things in stores were there simply because they were there. To Annie, things seemed to have appeared from thin air; and she didn't think it was fair that she couldn't have some of them. Annie didn't know about manufacturing, or distribution, or merchandising. But she knew she liked hanging out in stores because they were clean, and fresh, and the furniture departments had nice sofas with beautiful upholstery. Stores were so much more refreshing than her messy home that no wanted to clean up.

Yes, stores had things Annie wanted and things she needed. But unlike the children she passed while the guard escorted her away, she rarely came to this store with her mom because her mom didn't have much money. In fact, she had almost no money; and when she took Annie shopping, it was usually to buy food, big bags, and boxes, and cans of food like rice, beans, flour, sugar, and oatmeal. Annie's mom stretched her nonexistent budget to buy her a toy or a candy bar now and then, but she mostly got them from Purchase & Save where she bought most of Annie's clothes and shoes.

Annie was thankful for all her mother did for her. She knew life was a struggle because her dad wasn't around. Still, she liked pretty things; and Purchase & Save didn't have the kinds of dresses, and shoes, and pants, or even candy she'd see while hanging out in big department stores. Besides, she hated being home alone all the time. Her sisters and brothers always left her to go play with their friends. Annie didn't have any "real" friends. Most of the kids around the neighborhood teased her because of the way she dressed. This didn't make sense to Annie because her sisters and brothers had friends. She figured kids must not have liked her for some other reason and only teased her about her clothes and shoes to make her mad.

The guard took Annie upstairs to a small room. "Sit right there," he ordered, turning to talk to another guard seated in front of a big window.

Annie was amazed. Several guards in here were seated at big windows. She stood to look across the room so she could see out one of the windows and was even more amazed when she saw the entire store through the single window. Now she knew how the guard had seen her slip the candy into her pocket.

"Please sit down," he said coming toward her with a female guard carrying a clipboard and an ink pen.

"What's your name," asked the woman chewing gum with an open mouth.

Annie didn't answer.

"I said, what's your name, Hon," repeated the guard.

Annie figured the guard wanted to write her name on the clipboard. But she didn't see any reason to give her her name.

"Look, Honey, if you don't tell me your name I'll have to take you to the police station."

As frightened as Annie felt already, the idea of going to a

police station frightened her even more. She gave the guard her name, rank, serial number, and everything else the guard wanted to know.

"Why are you asking so many questions?" cried Annie.

"The question is, why did you put that candy bar in your pocket without paying for it," interjected the male guard. "Let's have it," he demanded.

Annie's face dropped into her chest as her chest dropped into her stomach and emptiness in her stomach intensified the shame that had somehow been subdued while the candy bar lay in her pocket. Slowly, she slipped her hand into her coat, removed the candy, and handed it over.

"We have to phone your mother," stated the woman.

Annie was glad their clunking old car only had to drive five minutes before she could jump out and run into the house because her mother screamed at her all the way home. Dodging her siblings, she ran straight to her room vying to never come out again.

"It's time to eat," announced Julie, entering Annie's room an hour later. "Come on before the food gets cold."

"I don't want to eat," refused Annie scrutinizing her older sister's shabby dress and worn out shoes. "I never want to eat again."

"Why not, because you're ashamed of what happened?"

Annie nodded to the floor.

"I used to be ashamed," sighed Julie.

"You don't have anything to be ashamed of," insisted Annie. "You don't even know what shame feels like."

"But I used to."

Julie told Annie how she used to feel embarrassed because she was the only girl in class who wore her brother's hand-me-down jeans whenever she wasn't wearing clothes from Purchase & Save. Then one day, the girl across the street moved in. She and her mom had been living in her mom's car. She used to go to fast food restaurants every morning to wash up and brush her teeth in the bathroom before school. Sometimes, she'd hold signs up on street corners begging for money so her mom could buy a loaf of bread. They did this for months before her mom got a job washing dishes. Then she became a waitress. And finally she saved enough money to rent the house across the street.

"You were only six then," continued Julie, "too young to understand."

Annie couldn't believe it. Here she'd been feeling sorry for herself because she couldn't have a lousy candy bar while her neighbor had been sleeping and hanging out in a car for months. She imagined the girl doing her homework at night under the car's vanity light; trying to stretch her legs, while she slept, on the vehicle's bench-seat that wasn't long enough for her legs, and she imagined the shame the neighbor must've felt traveling from restaurant to restaurant to use bathrooms.

Annie felt more ashamed than ever.

Ashamed for being ashamed in the first place when she didn't really know what "true" shame was.

Ashamed for complaining in silence instead of doing something to make things better like the neighbor girl and her mother had.

Next morning, Annie ate her bowl of oatmeal and washed the dishes. Before she left the house, she straightened the worn out covers draped across the living room furniture and swept the floor. Hustling around the corner, she walked six blocks

toward the department store. But instead of going to the store, she stopped in front of a house where a woman was weeding her lawn. "Can I help you pull those weeds," offered Annie. "You don't have to pay me very much."