

CASE 7

Alabama

Until last week, Tom attended a small school in Alabama at which almost everyone, teachers and students alike, were people he'd known for years. But now that his family has moved to Indiana, he has enrolled at a junior high school with more than 300 students in just the seventh and eighth grades alone. Naturally, he doesn't know a soul.

On his first day at his new school, Tom is dumbfounded by the other students' language. They talk a lot faster than the people in Alabama do, and no one addresses teachers as "ma'am" or "sir." The students dress differently, too. Most of them wear oversized T-shirts and ripped jeans, and some of the boys wear their pants so low on their hips that their boxer shorts show. Amazingly, none of the teachers seems to mind how the kids are dressed. Back in Alabama, Tom would have been sent home for such attire.

In his first-period English class, Tom notices several of his classmates snickering at his white shirt, necktie, and khaki pants. One of them, a boy named Sam, inquires, "Hey, man, where you from?"

"Alabama," Tom replies. "This is my first day here."

"Don't you wear jeans in Allaaabaaamma?" Sam asks him, stretching out

"Alabama" to mimic Tom's southern drawl.

"Of course we wear jeans," Tom responds. "But I wouldn't dream of coming to school with holes in my pants or with my underwear showing."

Sam winks at the small group of girls who are watching the interaction. "I bet you wouldn't, Allaaabaaamma." Tom hears the girls snicker and feels his face turn red. He buries his face in the textbook his teacher has just given him.

Tom stays after school to try out for the boys' track team, a team on which he excelled back in Alabama. Sam and several of the other boys in his English class are at the tryouts as well. Tom is the only one wearing a bright red lycra jogging suit. Everyone else is wearing blue cotton sweat pants and white T-shirts. Tom realizes that blue and white must be the school colors.

"What's the matter, Alabama, don't they have sweat pants where you come from?" Sam jeers.

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"Who do you think you are-Michael Jordan? Say, sure hope you don't run as slow as you talk."

Several of the other boys are trembling with laughter. Tom says nothing but he grits his teeth and clenches his fists in anger as he walks over to the bleachers to sit near the track coach, Mr. Davis. He wishes his family had never moved to Indiana. The students are so strange here, and he feels completely out of place.

"Okay, gentlemen, let's get started," Coach Davis calls out. As all the boys gather around him, he continues, "There are more than 60 of you here today. I'm very pleased that so many of you have come out. Unfortunately, I only have 24 spots on the team, so we'll have to see which of you are the fastest. I'm going to divide you

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into groups of three and have you race around the track. We'll see who's the fastest in each group."

Tom finds himself in the same group as Sam and a boy named Eddie, who's in his science class. As the three boys run around the track, they are initially neck and neck. But suddenly Eddie trips, knocking Sam, and the two boys fall. Tom looks back and sees both Sam and Eddie lying on the track. Sam seems to have gotten a nasty gash on his knee. Tom immediately turns around and trots over to Sam, grabs his hand, and helps him get up.

Coach Davis approaches the threesome to make sure everyone is all right. "It looks like we'll have to run this race again," Tom tells him.

"Hey, Alabama," Sam says, but he doesn't mock Tom this time. "Why didn't you finish the race? You could easily have won it."

"When I win, I want to know that it's a 'true' win."

A short time later, Sam and Eddie both outrun Tom, and Tom is eliminated from further consideration. Sam offers his hand to Tom. "Good try, Alabama. Thanks for letting me have another go at it." Tom shakes Sam's hand and smiles, trying to hide his disappointment about not making the team.

The following morning, many of the boys in Tom's English class are reveling in their success at making the track team. In an attempt to draw attention to themselves, several of them start to pick on Tom.

"Hey, Alabama, don't you know your way around a track?" David taunts. "Or maybe a circle's just too much for you!"

"Did your Mommy comfort you when she found out you're a loser, Alabama?" Greg adds.

"Wow, Alabama, you're wearing your shirt untucked today," Mick observes.

"Aren't you a cool dude!"

"Why don't you guys just leave Alabama alone?" Sam suggests, obviously annoyed.

"What's with you, Sam?" David asks him. "Maybe you're from Alabama, too, and you're just hiding your accent."

"No, I'm not from Alabama!" Sam exclaims. He lowers his voice and continues, "Anyway, what if I was? Nothing's wrong with comin' from there."

At the end of class, Sam slips Tom a note. It reads: "There's a computer club meeting tonight. None of these boys are in it. Call me."

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NOTE: At Tom's school in Alabama, there had been no competition for extracurricular activities; the school was so small that clubs and sports teams typically accepted anyone who wanted to join them. Tom openly expressed his feelings of discomfort regarding the more competitive atmosphere of his new school. Aside from the computer club, he didn't participate in extracurricular activities.

Possible questions for "Alabama":

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2.

Characterize Tom's initial reaction to his new school.

3.

How successfully does Tom adjust to the "culture" of his new school?

4.

In which of Kohlberg's stages of moral development does Tom appear to be?

Many junior high schools have a "no cuts" policy with regard to extracurricular activities: in other words, teams and clubs accept anyone who wants to join

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them. Do you think that this is a good idea? Why or why not?

It is not unusual for students at this age to make jokes at someone else's expense. As a teacher, what should you do if you hear such teasing in your classroom?

6. As a teacher, how might you help Tom make friends at his new school?