

# THE SIGN OF A LOSER

by  
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I couldn't go through my whole life feeling miserable and lonely.

A loser.

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**M**itch Lathrop headed for the last seat in the corner of the room for his *Family Living* class, miserably aware as he did so that the spot was the right place for a loser. Why had he thought anything would be different in his senior year?

Somehow, ever since he started high school, he had looked forward to that last year, dreaming of the time when everything would fall into place. He'd be eighteen and taller, and his skin would be clear. More important, he'd know how to talk to people, girls, and the adults he had to impress. Like Mr. Redding, for instance, at the discount store where he had wanted a job for the last three years.

Well, here he was, a senior, starting the same old routine. Classes and teachers were new, but nothing else had changed. Why would it be different? He was a year older and taller, yes, and he didn't have problems with his skin any

more, but inside he was the same old loser.

His long legs stretched in front of him, Mitch sat as far down on his spine as he could get. He had started to think about the series of disasters when he woke that morning, and he couldn't seem to turn his mind off.

First, the one with his brother Kevin, two years older and everything Mitch was not: taller, smarter, better looking, more athletic. Sure, he could tell himself Kevin was a stupid, conceited jock. It didn't make him feel any better, not when he couldn't convince himself that he wasn't jealous. All he could do was memorize the moment when Kevin turned away from the mirror, pointing at him with his comb and grinning as he said the words Mitch couldn't forget.

"Face it, kid. Karen's right. You're weird. You're a weird little nothing. So

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stop trying to impress the really foxy chicks. You're only spinning your wheels."

The crazy thing was that his brother didn't say stuff like that just to cut him up. Kevin was entirely insensitive, that's all, a person who figured anybody was better off hearing the complete and honest truth about himself.

His analysis had followed a devastating scene with Karen Lee, the girl Mitch had been dating for several weeks. When Karen stood in the front hall of Mitch's home and told him exactly what she thought of him, Kevin had heard her from the kitchen. He'd been trapped in the role of eavesdropper, to give him his due. When they came in the front door, Kevin had been raiding the refrigerator, and he heard the whole blast.

Karen's voice had been shrill with anger. "No, I don't want you to take me home. I'd rather walk to the corner and catch a bus. I don't want to see you for another ten minutes. In fact, I don't want to see you again, period. The only reason I've been dating you is because I know your brother and I kept thinking you must be a *little* like him. After all, the same family—but you're not. You are *weird*, Mitch Lathrop. And I am, too, for wasting so much time on you looking for something that just isn't there."

Mitch slipped a couple of inches further down in his seat, with her words once more in his mind.

Then, helplessly, he began the next memory, recalling how Mr. Redding had listened politely to his desperate, blurted plea for a job. It was almost the same speech he had memorized carefully three years ago, and it had taken days to work up his courage to approach the manager once more. But Mr. Redding turned him down again, quietly and politely, leaving Mitch with the same old empty feeling of failure.

When the teacher walked in at last to put her books on the desk and wait for their attention, Mitch stared at her, grateful for diversion. This was the last period of the day. He hoped fervently that the class would be interesting enough to keep his mind from wandering back.

Up until the last few minutes, however, the questions she threw out for discussion were only moderately diverting. Mitch had more success in lifting himself out of his mood by watching the girl who had seated herself in the next row, across from the desk in front of him.

She was a little girl with huge dark eyes and long, thick black hair. She wasn't pretty, but her smile was great, and he liked the alive, interested look on her face. Karen had been one of those girls who suffered from chronic boredom. But she had been so beautiful. . . .

"This one would never be bored," he thought. Correction. She might not be easily bored, but he could prove to be the

exception to the rule. She wouldn't be any different, otherwise.

Her name was different, though. He straightened in his seat, smiling, when the teacher read it off at the beginning of class. Anni Hammerland. A few of the kids turned to glance at her. She must be new this year because nobody else seemed to know her, either. Nobody laughed. It wasn't the kind of name that made you laugh out loud, but it sure was—well, different. He watched her for a long time. Then, toward the end of the period he thought why stick his neck on the chopping block again while he was still convalescing from the last wounds to his ego?

With an effort he pulled his attention back to the teacher, who was discussing family problems resulting from the “generation gap,” a phrase her tone put in quotes.

“Part of the problem, in my opinion, is a lack of interest,” she said. “Some young people aren't interested enough in what older people think, why they feel as they do. It works the other way around, too. In any relationship, you have to forget yourself some of the time, anyway, and develop a genuine *interest* in what the other person is saying, in the way he feels about things. You may like or dislike that person, but you should care enough about him and his feelings to give him your undivided attention.”

She went on after that, but Mitch

turned her off. He wasn't sure whether he made a sudden gesture that showed he disagreed or if he made a sound of dissent.

At any rate, Anni turned her head to look at him. She smiled then and nodded slightly as if she were telling him, “That's right, you know.”

A moment later the bell rang, but she didn't move. She just kept looking at him all the while the other kids were getting up and hurrying toward the door.

Without thinking, Mitch said to her, abruptly, “It's not that simple.”

She grinned. “Is anything? It was just something she threw out to think about, to build on—if you happen to have a hang-up about other people.” She put her head a little to one side, studying him.

“Do you?”

“As a matter of fact, yes,” Mitch said, beginning to feel irritated again. “That's why I said it's just not that simple.”

“Sure it is. Everybody uses a different gimmick, that's all. I mean, I know how it is to be shy, awkward around other people. You have to work at forgetting yourself for two minutes at a time. So you find a way to do it. After that, the rest just kind of falls in line.”

Somehow he found himself in step with her as they got up and walked to the door, then over to the locker corridors. He waited while she picked up her books. Then she tagged along to his locker, still talking. A few minutes later they

were sitting in his car in the parking lot.

He was never sure afterward how it happened that fast, that easily, but at the moment he first wondered about it, he put up the caution flag in his mind with a vague feeling of panic. Once he had shaken himself alert to the danger, he relaxed. There wasn't any real harm in listening to her tell how she'd solved her own problem in "reaching out to people" as she put it, and it was sort of interesting.

"In junior high," she said, "I used to suffer agonies every time I had to give a report in class, every time anybody *looked* at me. My mouth went dry and my knees shook—the whole bit. I knew I had to do something about it. I mean, I couldn't go through my whole life feeling miserable and lonely. A loser. You know?"

A loser. Mitch's head jerked up. "So what did you do?"

She laughed, and once again her small face, almost plain in repose, came alive, dark eyes luminous. "It may sound crazy, but it worked. I'd picture everybody I met, every person I had to talk to for any reason at all, as someone standing behind an invisible door. Then I'd make myself work hard enough to figure out a sign to put on that door, something to describe that person, their effect on me."

She paused, smiling. "I began with people I knew well, like my aunt. She's forever talking about her operations, so she was *Closed for Remodeling*. My dad

has a hair-trigger temper, so of course his sign said *Caution—Flammable*."

Mitch grinned.

"The thing is, it worked. I'd forget myself for a couple of minutes, and that was usually long enough for me to get kind of curious. I'd want to find out more about the person I'd just hung a sign on. Seemed the least I could do."

"What happens when you meet somebody who isn't about to let you get to know him? Not well enough to figure out any kind of sign, I mean."

Anni laughed again. "That's the easiest one of all. *Positively No Admittance*." She looked at him. "For a while there in class, I thought that might be your sign."

"What do you think now?"

"I don't know," she said, her eyes serious once more. "I'd have to know you a little better."

This time, the second-stage alarm buzzer went off in Mitch's mind. She was moving in even faster than Karen had, the day they met on the beach. He'd take this girl to Farrell's for ice cream or something, he thought, and then drop her off fast. The thing was, he had to admit he was anxious to try out her crazy idea.

He didn't get home till 5:30, mentally kicking himself for coming so close to making a date with her when he dropped her off. She had expected it. He could tell by the way she paused when she said, "Well—see you."

No, he told himself firmly. He wasn't in any condition to get something going before he had healed from the last encounter with Karen. It wouldn't be fair to Anni, either, to let her think—what she was probably thinking already.

By the time he hit the sack that night, however, he realized he owed her a lot. That wild suggestion of hers had paid off. It happened just the way she said it would, too.

Kevin had wandered into his room to tell him how he was going to burn up the track in college this year, classes that would start for him a week later than Mitch's. As always, the mirror drew him like a magnet. Still talking, he stood for several minutes combing his hair, then standing back to study the effect.

As he lay across the bed watching, Mitch suddenly saw Kevin's sign as clearly as if it had flashed on in neon lights. *The Whole World Is Watching*. He burst out laughing, so tickled he couldn't stop.

He was still laughing when Kevin left, disgustedly muttering under his breath.

"What did I tell you? *Weird*."

Mitch almost got up right then to call Anni. At the last moment, he got the impulse under control. He needed a week, anyway. He needed time to try out this new thing. He needed the opportunity to change himself.

She smiled at him every day in class and spoke when they met in the

corridors, but he thought he detected a puzzled question in her eyes and wondered if it was his imagination—or if he had a guilty conscience.

He used the week to study the situation at the discount store, trying to size up Mr. Redding, the manager who did the hiring. He didn't get much help from the guys he knew who already worked there. They would just shrug and tell him Redding never came on very strong unless you fouled up on the job. Then he let you know about it.

"Not much to go on," Mitch thought. Still, he went into the store every day after school to browse around, making a point of nodding at the slight, balding man if he met him in the aisle. He caught him a couple of times looking back with a half-smile.

Then, Friday afternoon, it happened again, the business of the signs. Mitch had been watching Mr. Redding as he checked out the cash register at the service desk in the center of the store.

As he stared at the manager talking now into the phone, quietly, briefly, everything fell into place. He knew in that moment that he had used the wrong approach when he asked for a job, bursting out with a set speech, overwhelming him with words, arguments, promises. Mr. Redding wasn't a person to come on strong, and he probably didn't appreciate people who did, especially if they stuttered with clumsy eagerness. No,

his sign would read *Stop, Look, and Listen*. And then, maybe, *Wait for Green Arrow*.

He already knew Mitch wanted a job. He'd been in the store every day this week. Maybe he'd already blown it by looking too eager. Abruptly, he turned and headed toward the door. Then he heard someone calling his name.

"Lathrop! Mitch Lathrop!"

Mr. Redding was coming after him down the aisle. "How did he remember my name?" Mitch wondered.

"Got a minute?" That half-smile again.

"Yes, sir." Mitch almost bit his tongue stemming the torrent of words ready to pour out, pleading his case once more.

For a long moment, the older man studied him. Then he gave him a wide grin. "No speech this time?"

"No, sir." Mitch was afraid to return the grin, not sure what was coming.

"I figure I may have—sized you up wrong," Mr. Redding said slowly. "I've been seeing you in here on a pretty regular basis. In fact, I got to wondering if you might be doing a little shopping. That's always a problem around here. But I asked a few of the boys and they said, no, you're just interested in a job here. I figure you may be more serious about it than I thought you were."

He held up his hand, though Mitch had no intention of interrupting. "Yeah, I

know what you said. But sometimes that kind of speech means the sort of kid I call a short-timer. They're greased lightning for maybe two, three weeks. Then they quit and they're off looking for another job. No staying power. No discipline. No real interest in a job *here*."

Still Mitch said nothing.

"So—I'm willing to give you a try, son. After that, it's up to you. All right?"

"Yes, sir!"

He left the store a few minutes later, still dazed by his good fortune. He would start work in the morning. How about that for luck? No, not luck. A wild nutty routine handed to him for free by a little girl with the wild nutty name of Anni Hammerland. He ran two blocks to the nearest phone.

He was still out of breath when she came on the line. "Anni? Mitch Lathrop. Listen, I know it's awfully short notice, but I've got something to tell you. Can I see you tonight? It's about your signs, that business with the signs."

There was a short pause. Then he heard her warm, delighted laugh, and he relaxed.

"It worked, didn't it? I can tell from your voice. Well, I've got a baby-sitting job at eight, but if you came by around seven——"

"I'll be there."

He was at her door on the dot, still trying to figure out how he really felt about her. The ensuing hour didn't help solve that puzzle. In fact, he left

feeling more ambivalent than before.

They talked fast, one eye on the clock. Anni heard what he had to say first, smiling at him, intent on every word. Then, only a few minutes before eight, she told him seriously, "There's one thing I forgot to tell you. The most important sign is the one you hang on yourself. That's probably the biggest part of the problems you're having with your brother."

"My own sign?" Mitch snorted.

"Whatever it is, it must be written in disappearing ink. Hey, can I drop you wherever you're going?"

"No, it's just two doors down the street. Thanks, anyway."

"Come on. I'll walk you there."

He thanked her again on the way. Then, on the verge of asking for a date, he reversed mental gears in the nick of time, stammering something dumb about seeing her again—in school.

She looked up at him, her face a pale oval in the shadows, but she said nothing.

Mitch bent over and kissed her, in spite of the caution sign sputtering off and on in his mind. Still she said nothing.

"All right, you tell me," he said awkwardly. "What should my sign be?"

He heard her soft sigh. "Somebody at school told me—about you and Karen," she said then. "I'd been—wondering. So right now, I guess your sign still says *Quiet, Hospital Zone.*" She turned and

ran lightly up the walk, leaving him to stare after her.

She was right, of course. He knew that. But in a way, he hadn't really known till she told him. After that, he could tell Anni was avoiding him. He rarely saw her in the corridors, and she came into the last class late every day, only seconds before the bell rang. Then she'd take off afterward before he had a chance to talk to her. He'd really blown it.

The thing was, he couldn't forget what she'd said about his own sign being the most important one. Self-image, naturally. It was wild the way everything about her idea had a sound basis in psychology. She had said it best the day he rejected what the teacher told them about being interested in other people. All of that had a sound basis in fact, too, but Anni gave it the little twist that made it interesting—and made it work.

For the first time, Mitch found himself really listening to other people, studying them, figuring what made them tick. His classes began to be more interesting, and he found his efforts paying dividends at the store, too.

He had started by bagging at the check-out counter as all the new boys did, but after two weeks Mr. Redding started working him part-time in the sundries department.

"You're a good worker, Mitch," he told him. "Keep it up and I'll give you the department full-time one of these days."

Mitch thanked him and stood for a moment, looking around at the shelves stocked with merchandise. Shampoo, shoe polish, cosmetics, toothpaste—his department. He'd worked hard for it. Still, if it hadn't been for Anni, he never would have been signed on in the first place. Somehow, with Anni always on his mind but no closer than that, nothing seemed very exciting any more.

He was healed now, too. He could smile at Karen when he met her without feeling anything but amusement at the puzzled look in her eyes. She couldn't understand, probably, why he hadn't been cut up a whole lot worse. He looked at her with brand-new vision now, thanks to Anni. Karen, usually the center of a huddle of boys, wore a sign in glowing pink—*Available Immediately*. Well, lots of luck to her.

As for him, it was time he sat Anni down somewhere and spelled it out. While he was planning how he could do that, short of kidnaping her, he made the most startling discovery so far. The best thing about Anni was the fact that he never had been able to figure out a sign for her. She was just—Anni Hammerland, a little girl with a big warm smile and a genuine interest in other people. Maybe there came a time when you outgrew the need for a self-image, or at least when it wasn't all-important any more. The best way to find out about Stage Two was from Anni, herself.

That proved more difficult. The day he flipped a note on her desk asking her to go to Farrell's after class, she turned and smiled. But then she shook her head, her lips silently telling him, *No, thanks.*

Mitch sat for several minutes trying to think of some way to persuade her, but he didn't have a clue. Finally, he gave up, sliding down in his seat, back to the familiar cold depths of the feeling of failure. If he just had a chance to talk to her, to tell her he wasn't a hospital case any more—

But was he still a loser? No. Abruptly, he sat up straight, goaded by anger and the voice in his mind that said, "Then don't act like one."

He was the one who had hung the loser tag on himself. He knew that now. People like Kevin and Karen had only taken him at his own self-value. Well, he'd changed part of that. He was planning to change a whole lot more, now he had the key.

But how could he prove that to Anni? Then, suddenly, he had it. Ripping a page from his notebook, he scrawled on it with his red felt pen, the letters big and bold. Then he flipped a paper clip on her desk to get her attention. When she turned, he held the sign up against his chest, his grin broad above it.

WATCH THIS SITE!

She stared for a moment. Then her shoulders shook with silent laughter,

and she bent to write an answering note. "That one's a winner. OK, Farrell's."

She looked at him, a long serious gaze, and he could see that she was the

least bit pink and flustered when she finally turned away.

Mitch leaned back in his seat, smiling. "That was a good sign," he thought.



### Comment

1. What events in the story show how Mitch gains in self-confidence?
2. What do the signs "Quiet—Hospital Zone" and "WATCH THIS SITE!" reveal about Mitch's character in different parts of the story?
3. What do each of these signs reveal about the personalities of the people they are assigned to?
  - a. Anni's father—"Caution—Flammable"
  - b. Kevin—"The Whole World Is Watching"
  - c. Mr. Redding—"Wait for Green Arrow"
  - d. Karen—"Available Immediately"
4. What sign do you think is appropriate for Anni?

### Activity

At the top of the chalkboard or a bulletin board, pin two signs, one of which should read "You know you're a winner when. . . ." The other sign should read "You know you're a loser when. . . ." Over the course of a week, class members should add statements to complete each sentence. Example: "You know you're a winner when you find a five-dollar bill in an old coat pocket." "You know you're a loser when your mother misspells your name."