and ask a dumb question like, "Is your refrigerator running?" and when the person says, "Yes," the kid says, "Go out and catch ..."

Richard said that was stupid and I agreed.

I told him how my friends and I, in my old town, used to call people up and say we were from the Lottery Commission and the person had just won $1000 a week for twenty years. Hardly anyone ever hung up on us. Usually, they got excited and asked what they had to do to get the money, and then we'd say, "Go get a job," and hang up.

I thought it was hilarious, but when I told Richard about it, he said what if we called a person who truly was poor, someone who had no money and was trying hard to find a job. He said it wouldn't be funny then; it would be cruel. After Richard said that, I never called up strangers anymore. My parents would kill me if they knew I ever did it at all.

When school started that fall, Richard and I walked together. It was nice not to have to walk to a new school alone. Gradually, I made other friends. Richard had no other friends. He's the kind of kid that other kids make fun of, because they don't understand him.

Richard gets all A's in school, but when it comes to getting along with a group of kids, he's practically incompetent. He probably would never have made friends with me except there I was, right next door, where it was impossible to avoid me. And since I didn't know anyone else in town, I made the effort to get to know Richard. No one else was willing to do that.

At first we walked to school together and walked home together, but then I joined the track team which practices after school, so Richard had to walk home alone. I told him to join the team too, but he didn't want to.

I made several friends, including Mark, who will probably be my friend forever, or at least until we finish high school. Mark asked me one time why I hang around with Richard when Richard is so weird. I said I like Richard, and Mark said I was the only person in the world who did.

Sometimes I think he's right. The strange thing is, Richard never asked why I hang around with Mark. He seems to know why, even though I was friends with him first.

Once I invited Richard to come over when Mark was there. I thought if they had a chance to get acquainted, they might like each other, but as soon as Richard got there and found out it wasn't just the two of us, he made up some excuse why he had to leave. Mark said it was proof that Richard is weird and we were better off without him.

My dad says Richard isn't weird, he's just a loner and loners often grow up to be scientists or symphony conductors or famous artists. He said Richard will probably discover the cure for cancer, or invent a new kind of computer that revolutionizes American business. Dad said when I'm forty years old and come back to my class reunion, everyone will be hoping that Richard shows up so they can say they saw their old friend, Richard, again. He says some day even Mark will be pretending that he and Richard were best buddies while they were growing up.

I don't think Richard will come to any class reunions, whether he's famous or not. But I hope Dad's right about him because even though Richard is weird, he's still my friend.