

“I need a doctor right now!”

The woman sitting at the table ignored the impassioned plea.

“Did you hear me? I need a shrink!”

The petite, red-haired woman, slowly lowered her coffee cup and regarded the teenager with concern.

“Why do you feel you need a shrink?”

“Don’t *you* keep telling me I need one? Why do *you* think I need one?”

“Why don’t you answer my question first?”

The two locked eyes and stared at each other. Then they both burst out laughing.

“Maybe I don’t need one. You seem to be filling that role.”

“So why *did* you feel you needed a shrink?”

“Why did *you*?” They laughed again.

“It’s good to hear you laughing,” the woman said. “You should do it more often. Now answer the question.”

“Remember how depressed I was just before the summer started? Well, today’s the first day of school and I’m looking forward to it. Dreading the summer and anticipating school? That’s got to be abnormal.”

“But in your case, in view of the circumstances, it was understandable. And in the end, the summer wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“Well, we know who to thank for that, Mom.”

“So you see, your feelings are perfectly normal. Pay the nurse on your way out.”

“So now it’s your turn. Why do you think I need a shrink?”

“Take a look in the mirror.”

“I know what I look like.”

“Do you really?”

Mrs. Ryan scrutinized her child critically. She saw a short teenager with wisps of reddish hair sticking out from under a baseball cap. Blue eyes peered myopically behind black plastic glasses, perched on a freckled nub of a nose. The mouth seemed to contain too much metal for its size. Beneath it was Mrs. Ryan’s dainty chin. An oversized t-shirt concealed the skinny frame, and a droopy pair of jeans completed the ensemble. This was an all-American kid with an apple-pie face, suitable for typecasting as Tom Sawyer. This was the kind of child one expected to see walking toward home plate with a bat slung over his shoulder, and therein lay the problem.

“Do you really know what you look like?” Mrs. Ryan repeated. “Because it is a little annoying when acquaintances make comments about the way boys choose to dress these days.

First, I take umbrage at the insult to your clothing. Then I realize they're absolutely right. So I take umbrage at the insult to the entire gender. It's not like all boys dress badly. Take a look at your friend Race for example. But it's not my job to defend other boys. If they're not my son, it's not my battle. But not having any sons myself, I feel doubly insulted."

"Sorry to disappoint you, Mom, but I'm comfortable this way."

"Can't you be comfortable and look good? You're a pretty girl, Nina. Why don't you let the world see it?"

"Spoken as a true mother. You're the only one who thinks I'm pretty."

"That's not true. Your father does, too."

"Anybody who isn't a relative?"

"Have you ever asked Race?"

"Mom! I'm not going to ask Race if he thinks I'm pretty!"

"So how do you know you're not? Haven't you told me that I'm pretty? Or were you just being polite?"

"No, I meant it. Mom, you're beautiful. Even my friends say so."

"And how many times has someone said that you look just like me? Quite a few, right? So if I'm beautiful and you look just like me, then it follows that you're beautiful, too."

"They just mean that we have the same hair, eyes, and chin. The rest I get from Dad."

"Your dad is a handsome guy."

"What's handsome on a guy isn't pretty on a girl."

"Nina, you're so wrong."

"But I'm not crazy. So I don't need a shrink. I'd better get moving or I'll be late."

"You mean less early. You're never late."

"Bye, Mom." Nina gave her mother a kiss as she left.

Alone in the kitchen, Mrs. Ryan sighed. She was so proud of Nina and wished her daughter would realize how much. A straight-A student, never any trouble, bringing home only the nicest friends, Nina was the daughter mothers wished for. From an early age, she had demonstrated a heart of gold. In first grade, Nina had begun coming home ravenous. Mrs. Ryan had started packing two sandwiches in her lunch bag, but sometimes even that had not been enough. Wondering why her diminutive daughter, who ate sparingly at home, seemed to eat so much more in school, she had called the teacher. Soon the mystery had been solved. Nina had learned that some other classmates never brought snack and often not even lunch. She had been sharing hers with three other children, sometimes giving it all away. This was only one of her many acts of generosity.

But sometime during the past few years, circumstances had robbed Nina of her vivacity, her sunny disposition, and her positive outlook. They had first moved to this neighborhood when Nina was two, and had lived in a small apartment. Nina had always been a contented child, never whining for things just because other children had them. She had been happy in the local public school and had made friends easily with children of all social and ethnic backgrounds.

Strangely enough, her problems had begun when her father had received several promotions in the brokerage firm at which he worked, eventually becoming the Chief Financial Officer. The raises accompanying his increased responsibilities had allowed them to buy a modest home only one block from the school, next door to the Jasons, whose son Race was in Nina's class. Nina and Race had become best friends, spending hours together after school.

Then Nina's parents had made their first big mistake. Mr. Ryan had decided that in keeping with his new position, his daughter should be enrolled in the Academy, an exclusive private school for the children of the affluent. Nina had not wanted to change schools, but her father had insisted. When his wife had questioned the wisdom of sending Nina to a place she didn't want to go, not to mention at such a prohibitive cost, Bill Ryan had said that he was under pressure at work to enroll her in the prestigious school. All the children of top management were in the Academy unless they were unable to meet the standards. If Nina didn't attend, it would reflect badly on her and her family. Nina had protested the switch at first but had eventually acquiesced to her father's wishes.

The result had been a disaster. In public school she had started out lower middle class, like most of the students. When she had first attended, wearing the pretty dresses her mother had bought, she had actually felt overdressed. Dressing below their economic level was a lot easier than dressing above it. Even though they had achieved upper middle class status, even affluence, Bill Ryan's two hundred thousand dollar salary paled in comparison to what most of the other Academy parents earned.

Though everyone wore the same uniform to school, on weekends Academy students walked around in outfits that cost more than what Nina would wear to a wedding, and threw birthday parties that cost more than some weddings. No matter how hard Nina tried, she couldn't fit in. Her clothes weren't expensive enough, her birthday party wasn't extravagant enough, she had never traveled out of the United States, her parents weren't friendly with any celebrities. Every day the in-crowd let her know in many ways, some subtle and some direct, that she wasn't one of them.

One particular thorn in her side was Nancy Davis, the daughter of a once famous pop singer. Every school had its queen bee, and in the Academy, Nancy was it. Her wish was a

command; her pronouncements, law. She decided that Nina was not to be admitted into their social circle and all her sycophants acquiesced. They missed no opportunity to ridicule her or play pranks on her. It would have been a year of complete torment if not for one saving grace, Sam Burke.

Every social circle had its prince, and in the Academy, it was Sam. The son of a former champion wrestler who later turned actor and then entertainment tycoon, and a former B movie actress, Sam had his father's powerful physique and his mother's beauty. He was the school god to Nancy's goddess. In fact, the two of them were an unofficial couple. They seemed to be joined at the hip and appeared to agree on everything, with one exception. Sam, while no Sir Galahad seemed to have a soft spot for Nina. When Nancy tormented her, Sam rose to her defense. They had a number of arguments over it but eventually Nancy left Nina alone .

Thanks to Sam, Nina managed to endure the rest of the year. Then she announced at home that she would not be returning to the Academy. Her father had insisted, and her mother had taken her side. In an unusual show of obstinacy, Nina had threatened that if she were sent back to the Academy, she would deliberately flunk all her classes and be expelled.

"Nina, Honey, how am I going to explain this to my boss?" her father had asked. "Everyone is going to assume that you were asked to leave because you couldn't handle it."

"You can tell them I flunked," she had replied. "Tell them I got an F in obnoxiousness, and I couldn't pass the course in 'my father is so rich, he makes yours look like a failure.' I also didn't do so well in 'My dad knows more important people than your dad.'"

When Mr. Ryan had informed the principal that Nina was leaving the school, she had been saddened.

"Is it a matter of the tuition?" she had inquired. "Because we do offer scholarships based on academic merit, and Nina qualifies."

When told that the reason had nothing to do with money, she had sighed and remarked, "Yes, we were aware that Nina had some social problems, but we hoped with time she would overcome them."

Bill Ryan had seethed inwardly at the implication that the problem stemmed from Nina, and realized that his daughter had been right. The Academy was not the school for her. Nina had happily returned to public school but discovered new problems. Some of her old friends saw her move to the Academy as a betrayal. They now they felt she was one of the snobs, and that her effort to befriend them was merely an attempt at "slumming." Others believed that she had been asked to leave the Academy because she couldn't meet their standards.

So now she had to almost start over again as a “new girl,” and in a sense it was even harder. Still, a small cadre of her loyal friends stuck by her, and she still felt that returning to public school had been a good move. Then tragedy struck again.

The Academy’s standards increased steadily with the age of the students. While they accepted D students in the Elementary School, as long as their parents paid the outrageous tuition, at least a C average was required for the Junior High. They also had strict rules of conduct, and students were expelled for disruptive behavior. The year after Nina returned to public school, two new students joined her class: Nancy Davis and Sam Burke.

Nancy lost no time in establishing herself as the queen bee of classroom. Fate had made it too easy. She had a famous, wealthy mother. She was gorgeous, with a willowy figure, creamy complexion, lake-blue eyes, and waist-length, luxurious jet-black hair. On top of her beauty and wealth, she had inherited her mother’s powerful singing voice. Despite her nasty disposition, even Race, who was Nina’s best friend, seemed smitten. Nancy wasted no time in resuming her little feud with Nina. Feud was not the accurate word, since Nancy struck and Nina absorbed the blows, mostly in silence. Only Race rose occasionally to defend her.

As for her shining knight, Sam Burke, he was as handsome as ever at sixteen, with a powerful six foot two physique that made him a star quarterback, and blonde-streaked brown hair above brilliant green eyes in a flawless face. Unfortunately, he had become a typical product of the Academy, self-centered and rude. He only rarely objected when he felt Nancy had gone too far. Often he even joined in. So Nina had her heart doubly broken when the object of her not-so-secret affection turned on her.

During those turbulent years, the two school transfers, and the almost constant ridicule, Nina lost her self-confidence. She slowly started to retreat into herself. Getting glasses and braces hadn’t helped the situation. Back in public school, where there was no uniform, she had adopted her own: baggy jeans, large, shapeless t-shirts, and a baseball cap. Like a suit of armor, it gave her something to hide behind. She became content to conceal herself, never volunteering, and answering only when called upon. Though she maintained her straight A’s, teachers always commented that they wished she would participate more in class.

Nina had found a formula which worked for her. She ignored Nancy’s barbs, kept close to her few good friends, wore her protective outfit, and tried to stay below the radar. But fate wasn’t through interfering.

The firm Bill Ryan worked for experienced severe losses and he lost his job. After months of unemployment, he was forced to accept a position some distance away that paid a quarter of what he had been making. He left early each morning and returned late in the evening.

Mrs. Ryan had found a secretarial job to help cover the bills. They had to give up the two late-model cars they were leasing and buy one older one. They were forced to sell the house and rent a small apartment in a less desirable part of town.

Leaving the house, the neighborhood, and her good friends was heartrending but the hardest part was wondering if this would end the special relationship she shared with Race Jason. She worried, too, if in this new area she would not make any friends. It lay right on the border between two districts. While she would continue to attend Dixon High School with the same classmates she had known for years, most of the other neighborhood children attended Hewitt. This would make her a virtual stranger to her neighbors. It didn't help that most of these families were from racial minorities. While Nina had not had any problem befriending her black and Hispanic classmates, she didn't socialize with them much after class, and didn't think she could summon the courage to introduce herself to others.

She had been needlessly concerned. Race, in his usual fashion, had demonstrated that this was just another minor obstacle, easily overcome. He rode his bike over to the playground on Nina's block and began chatting with the children there. With his knack for telling jokes and stories, Race made friends easily. He then introduced Nina to them, explaining that she had just moved in. Suddenly, she was at least acquainted with her neighbors, and no longer felt so alone.

Then the summer approached and Nina was overcome with trepidation. In the past, she had always gone to summer camp with her friends. This year her parents informed her they couldn't afford it. She resigned herself to a long, boring summer with no one to talk to and nothing to do. That was when Race had surprised her by saying that he wasn't going to camp either. Though he used the excuse that he felt he had outgrown it, she knew that he was making the sacrifice for her.

With no counselors regulating their schedule, they were free to do whatever they desired. In addition to the usual activities of biking, and swimming at the local pool, Race introduced her to an electronic world with no borders, the World Wide Web. They chatted with people from across the globe and exchanged ideas with members of different races and religions. Thanks to Race, this had been the most incredible summer of her life.

Nina vividly recalled the moment that Race had brought her to an epiphany that made her view the world through entirely new eyes. They had been sitting in their favorite spot in the park, a plot of grass concealed beneath the overhang of a large rock. Race had been waxing poetic about the beauty of the day and the importance of making every moment last. Nina was suddenly overcome with anxiety about her family's precarious financial situation.

“How long will this go on?” she worried aloud. “I just can’t stand it. I can’t stand what it’s doing to my parents.”

“Things will get better,” Race promised.

“Will they?”

“Of course they will. A few months ago, your father didn’t have a job. Now he does. Things are improving.”

“But his new company is talking about layoffs. You know how that works. The last one in is the first one out.”

“Nina, stop worrying about the bad things that *might* happen. Concentrate on the good things that *are* happening. Let’s try an experiment. I want you to pretend to be a video recorder.”

“How?”

“Take a look around. Memorize the scene. How the sun shines on the grass. How the grass looks when the wind ripples through it. Record every detail.”

Nina took a few moments to scan the park, following Race’s instructions. “Now what?”

“Now add sound. You hear the birds chirping. You hear the insects buzzing. In the background you hear children at play.”

“Okay. What next?”

“Now use your other senses. How the grass feels under you. How the sun feels on your back. How good it feels when a breeze blows across your face. Savor every sensation.”

Nina made a sincere effort to do so. “Now what?”

“Now close your eyes and play back what you recorded.”

Nina closed her eyes and tried to recreate every sensation in her mind. She was amazed to find it surprisingly easy. “Okay, I can do it. But what good is it?”

“You’ve captured a memory. When the summer’s over, you’ll never be able to experience the same summer again. But sometime in the winter, when you’re walking to school in a few inches of snow, you’ll be able to play back this memory and for a moment, it’ll be summer again.”

“What good is that? When the playback is over, it will still be winter.”

“Yes, but before you know it, winter will be over and it will be summer again. The point is that life is a series of experiences, mostly good and some bad. Some people dwell on the bad and never recover. You have to forget the bad memories and lock in the good ones. Use the good moments to get you over the bad spots.”

“I never thought of it that way.”

Suddenly, Race launched into one of his famous stories. “There was once a king named Solomon, who was said to be the wisest man who ever lived. When he became king, God offered him a choice of wealth, power or wisdom. Solomon chose wisdom. God told him that he had made the right choice, because wealth and power cannot acquire wisdom but wisdom can acquire wealth and power, if that is what the wise man chooses to do.”

“And what did Solomon do with his wisdom?”

“He had the most successful reign of any king in history. During his rule, he brought peace to his people. There were no wars. As news of Solomon’s sagacity spread throughout the world, other world leaders traveled to his country, seeking his advice. In return for his counsel, he made treaties with the kingdoms around him. He built the temple. He wrote several books on philosophy and the meaning of life. But that’s not the point of this story.

“Many wise men are overcome with feelings of their own importance and never give weight to any opinion but their own. Solomon realized that a key to wisdom was to constantly seek knowledge. He traveled about his own kingdom, often dressed like a commoner, to speak with others and learn what he could. One day he heard about a silversmith who claimed to have fashioned a ring that could make happy people sad and sad people happy. He visited the smith and offered him a fortune to produce the ring. The man handed Solomon a simple silver ring with three words engraved on it. Solomon gazed at the ring. He turned to the silversmith and said, ‘You have achieved exactly what you claimed.’

“The ring contained three Hebrew words, ‘Gam Zeh Ya’avov’ which means ‘This too shall pass.’ A happy person should avoid that thought, because it would remind him that happiness doesn’t last forever. But for an unhappy person, the thought is a pleasant reminder that sadness doesn’t last either.

“The trick,” Race concluded, “is to lock in the happy memories and play them back in times of sadness. As for the sad memories, erase them, because there’s no need to revisit unhappy moments. Don’t dwell on bad times that are over and don’t worry about bad times that haven’t even arrived and may never come. And if they do arrive, just remember G. Z. Y.”

Since then, every time a worry strayed unbidden into her mind, Nina chased it away with the mantra “G. Z. Y.,” and by recalling that day and playing back her memory of sitting under the protection of the rock, with the sun warming her shoulders and the wind caressing her face.

Now she faced her second year of high school. She knew this year would be better than any she had experienced before. Last year the school had hired a new teacher, Mr. Whitaker, a former actor. He had started the class on creative writing, then added drama and speech. Nina had always been shy but under Mr. Whitaker’s tutelage she was learning to express herself more

openly. This year he had promised to introduce them to debate and to help them put on a play. Despite her shyness, Nina was looking forward to it.

From her family's new home, Nina had six long blocks to traverse to school, about half a mile. On her way, she would stop at Race's house and they would continue the final block together. She liked to get there early because it gave them a chance to talk.

She sped toward the Jasons, taking pleasure in the wind blowing at her face, the stretch of her muscles as she pedaled, and the way the sun warmed her shoulders. Her bicycle, a Sloan's Wind Racer, was her prized possession. It was one of the few luxuries which remained from their period of affluence. She had offered to sell the bike and buy a cheaper one, but her father had pointed out there wouldn't be much difference between what they would realize for a used Wind Racer and the cost of another bike. Now, as she pedaled along, she savored every sensation, so that she could recall it later. Her tires crunched over a cicada. With a pang of guilt, she slowed down and avoided the few late season insects that lay on the sidewalk. Cicadas had very few moments of pleasure and she wanted to let them enjoy life while it lasted.

Race had taught her that cicadas were called seventeen-year-locusts because they spent their first seventeen years underground. Then they emerged wingless, attached themselves to a tree or wall and appeared to die. But from inside the "corpse," a winged insect broke out and flew away, leaving the empty husk behind. The flying insect resembled a giant bumblebee but had no stinger and was harmless. The males produced a somewhat annoying high-pitched sound to attract females. A concert of cicadas sometimes sounded like an invasion of space aliens from a science fiction movie. By the end of the summer, exhausted cicadas lay all over the sidewalk, barely able to move. Birds and other predators carried them away. Once they were gone, it was as if they had never existed. Race was full of information like that.

Just as she expected, he was sitting on the front stoop when Nina reached the Jason home. As always, her heart melted at the sight of him. His hair was so blonde, it often looked white in the sunlight and his blue eyes were startling. His features were so delicate and perfect, he could have been a model or an actor. Though just sixteen years old, he had inherited his father's physique. He stood several inches over six feet, and had the build of a college athlete in prime shape. Nina called out an enthusiastic hello, greeting him by name.

"Hi, Nina," he muttered, almost in a monotone and continued to stare at the ground.

At least he had acknowledged her. That was a good sign.

"What's the matter, David?" she asked, sitting down next to him and putting an arm around his shoulder. She had learned that it was important to reinforce contact by physical touch and mentioning his name often.

“I start school again today,” he answered.

He was aware of his surroundings. That was good.

“You like school, David,” she reminded him.

“I guess so,” he said, unsure.

“Yes, you do. You’re going to have a good day, David.”

“Hi, Nina, Race will be out in a moment,” Mrs. Jason said, stepping outside. “I was just going to wait with David for the school bus.”

Gloria Jason reminded Nina of her own mother. Both were pretty, petite women who, when together, were often mistaken for sisters. Nina’s mother had red hair and blue eyes while Mrs. Jason had black hair and brown eyes but other than that, they were amazingly alike. Lately, Nina had started noticing the crow’s feet forming around her mother’s eyes, as the family’s financial burdens began to take their toll. She couldn’t help wondering why Mrs. Jason seemed physically unaffected by problems much more severe than anything the Ryans had faced.

“Good morning, Ballerina,” a voice greeted her. The nickname was his reference to the Abba song *Nina, Pretty Ballerina*, and the ballet lessons she had taken. “Long time no see.”

Silly as it was, since she had just seen him yesterday, Nina couldn’t help grinning. She turned to face him and saw that he was in his “business suit.” Gone were the shorts and t-shirt of summer. In their place he wore his customary light blue dress shirt and navy pants. He reminded her of a miniature policeman. Race had campaigned to have the school adopt this mode of dress as a “uniform.” He had argued that the items were easily found on sale in many shops. Having all students dress in a similar fashion would avoid the caste system where students who wore expensive designer clothing looked down on those who couldn’t afford it. But the school decided a dress code could not be mandated, and Race’s efforts to establish a voluntary one had failed.

“Long time,” Nina agreed. “It’s been a whole twelve hours. I’m sure a lot has happened.”

Race flashed a toothy smile. He was not the least bit self-conscious about his slightly crooked front tooth. Nina had never met a more self-assured person. Well, yes, there were the football players and the wealthy kids, but Race didn’t get his confidence from affluence and definitely not from physical prowess. He was an undersized, scrawny kid with short, curly black hair, who wore black plastic-framed glasses, participated in no active sports, and excelled in every subject. It was practically a given that a certain clique in the school would dub him a geek. When Nina began wearing her glasses, in addition to her braces, cap and shapeless t-shirts, it had only been a matter of days before she and Race became the Geek Twins.

At least Nina had the saving grace of being good at certain sports, such as soccer, dodge-ball and volleyball. Whenever one of those games was organized, Race urged her to go. “Just because I can’t play, doesn’t mean you have to sit it out,” he would say. “Besides, I participate vicariously by rooting for you.”

“Let’s put your bike in the garage so we can walk to school together,” Race suggested. As they started off toward the school, she began the conversation.

“This morning I was discussing with my mother whether or not I needed a shrink.”

“And did you reach a conclusion?”

“Yes. We decided I didn’t.”

“Oh, no! That’s terrible!”

“Why?”

“Because crazy people never believe they’re crazy. So if you think you need a shrink, you’re normal. If you think you don’t, you’re crazy.”

Nina giggled. Trust Race to always have a silly point of view that sounded logical!

“I know the others will call me crazy, but I’m really looking forward to school this year.”

“Are you looking forward to school in general or Mr. Whitaker in particular?”

“Well, of course, Mr. Whitaker. He’s such an incredible teacher! And this year we’re going to have debate and drama! I’d love to see you in a debate.”

“Don’t forget, you’re going to have to participate too,” Race reminded her.

Nina’s face clouded. “I kind of forgot about that,” she admitted.

“Maybe Mr. Whitaker can give you a few pointers on developing some self-confidence. There’s absolutely no reason for you to hide, you know. You have a lot to offer, if only you’d show it.”

“Not everyone can be like you, Race.”

“Like me? How?”

“So confident and outspoken.”

“Well, it’s easy when you’re movie-star handsome, rich as Bill Gates, and captain of the football team.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“It’s simple, Nina. Look at me.” She stopped walking and just gazed at him. “I’m the stereotypical ninety-pound weakling. I stink at sports, wear glasses and dress like a dork. So what do I have to offer that you don’t? At least you’re good at sports. And you’re real cute, if you only stopped hiding it. You have a lot to offer, Nina. I can’t understand why you’re holding back.”

“You think I’m cute?” she asked in a sarcastic tone.

“Absolutely. But you don’t try to make the most of it. You don’t even try to make the least of it.”

“Am I cuter than Nancy Davis?”

Race blushed. For all his levelheadedness, he often became tongue-tied in Nancy’s presence. At one time, he even did her assignments for her, until the day she pushed him too far and he took his revenge.

“You’re definitely cuter than Nancy Davis,” Race announced.

“Okay, now I know you’re lying.”

“I’d never lie to you. Nancy isn’t cute. Cute means pretty and sweet and someone you enjoy spending time with. Nancy may be beautiful but she’s dumb, arrogant and entirely self-absorbed. Cute means someone who looks good even when you knock on their door at seven in the morning when they’ve just woken up. I’ve seen you like that and you still look cute. I know Nancy looks good in class but that’s after how many hours of beauty treatments? You’re a lot cuter than Nancy and that’s also because you’re pretty on the inside.”

“Thanks, Race. That was really sweet.”

“Sweeter than Sam Burke?”

Now it was Nina’s turn to blush. Unfortunately, Nina could not rid herself of the crush she had on him. It became obvious in his presence and made his mockery of her even more painful.

“Sam Burke may be a lot things,” Nina said, “but sweet isn’t one of them.”

“I hope that means you’re over him,” Race said.

“I hope so too,” Nina whispered.

As they entered the school yard, they saw that they were not the first ones there. On a bench in the corner of the yard sat four children. All had the same dusky complexion, black hair, and dark eyes that seemed too large for their small faces. The oldest was a girl their own age. Then there was a boy about ten, a girl about eight, and another girl about six.

“The Patels,” Nina whispered. “They moved into an apartment on my block two weeks ago. There are two younger children at home.”

“So you know them?” Race asked.

“We haven’t actually met. My mother tried to bring them a pie, but they wouldn’t take it. When I tried talking to them, they seemed afraid to answer.”

“Maybe they don’t know English,” Race suggested. He approached the children and stuck out his hand. “Hi, I’m Race Jason. And this is Nina Ryan. She lives on your block.”

The children looked at him in suspicion. Race could only wonder what they had gone through to have such distrust of someone their own age.

“I’m Parvin,” the oldest girl said in a soft voice. She made no move to take Race’s proffered hand.

“Welcome to our school,” Race continued casually. “If you need anything, you can just ask either of us.”

“If it isn’t the Geek Twins,” a sneering voice called out. “Be careful. Hanging around with strays will get you fleas.”

The comment was greeted with raucous laughter. Sam Burke, Nancy Davis, and their sycophants howled as if Nancy had just said something hysterical. Sam was looking particularly fit and tan, like a model out of a television commercial. His wavy brown hair now had golden highlights. He had probably spent most of the summer on a beach. He was wearing his usual designer clothing, with the famous names showing. His sneakers alone, genuine Sloan Air Jumpers, probably cost more than Race’s entire wardrobe.

Where Nancy had gone was not obvious, since she had probably spent most of her time avoiding the sun. Her form-fitting stone-washed jeans looked like they had been custom-made for her. Race couldn’t help noticing that she was even more beautiful than he had remembered, or maybe she had improved over the summer. Her jet black hair hung to her waist and her blue eyes were as mesmerizing as ever. The familiar smirk played at her lips.

“Don’t tax yourself, Nancy,” Race said. “Another comment like that and your brain will overheat. How many hours did it take you to think of it?”

“Nothing you say will bother me today,” Sam said. “I just spent a fantastic summer surfing in Hawaii.”

“And my Dad took us to Paris,” Nancy announced. “For those of you who have never been out of the neighborhood, and those of you who got here hiding in the hold of a ship with the rotten fish you still smell of, that’s in France.”

“Are you sure, Nancy?” Race asked. “I thought it was in Texas.”

“Shows how much you know,” Nancy scoffed. “There’s no Paris in Texas.”

“Shows how much *you* know,” Race countered, “because there is. Are you sure you know which one you went to?”

“Of course I do. The people didn’t speak English.”

“Definitely Texas then,” Race said, and even Sam laughed until Nancy flashed him an angry look.

“No, it was France,” Nancy insisted, “and folks there thought I was an actress. So I played along and told them I had my own show.”

“You should have your own show,” Race said.

Nancy brightened. “You really think so?”

“Sure. You could be a teenage super hero.” Pretending to talk into a microphone, Race intoned, “Just a failing high school student, Nancy Davis spent the first seventeen years of her life lying around on the couch, flunking classes, whining and making everyone miserable. Then her powers kicked in and she became Cicada Girl, able to whine in a voice that can shatter nerves. Evil doers surrender just to get away from that awful voice. Thanks to Cicada Girl, the prisons are filled with people, because everyone is begging to be locked away from Cicada Girl.”

By now a crowd of students had formed, and to Nancy’s dismay, everyone, including Sam and her other friends, was laughing.

“Where did *you* spend the summer?” Sam challenged Race. “Let me guess. The two of you stayed up in your bedroom, parked in front of your PC, surfing porno sites.”

Another outburst of laughter greeted this remark.

“Not at all,” Race answered calmly. “After accidentally stumbling on your mother’s site, I put blocking software on my PC to make sure it didn’t happen again.”

A few students chuckled and a few gasped. It was an open secret that Sam’s mother had been a B movie actress who starred in low budget thrillers that used violence and nudity to compensate for the lack of good acting or a script. She had given up her dubious career to marry Sam’s father. A few years later, she had abandoned her husband and child to reclaim her movie career, and was rumored to be filming even poorer material.

“You’re going too far, Jason,” Sam growled, stepping forward threateningly. “That’s below the belt.”

“Then let’s establish some ground rules,” Race said, “You want to insult me, go right ahead. I can take your moronic attempts at humor. But leave Nina out of it.”

“Race, don’t do anything on my account,” Nina begged, pulling at his shoulder.

“Go ahead, Race, hide behind your girlfriend,” Nancy called. “Assuming that she *is* a girl. It’s kind of hard to tell.”

“Hey, you think this Nina creature is really a guy?” Chris Byron asked. Chris was one of Sam’s friends, whom Race had dubbed “the Neanderthal” because he was huge, ugly, and had the manners of a caveman. Race suspected that his IQ matched his failing grades.

“I think she’s a Ken doll,” Nancy replied. “There’s nothing there at all.”

Chris's girlfriend, Gladys Snow, a large, ungainly girl who followed Nancy around like a pet, laughed uproariously.

"Shut up, Nancy," Race snapped, seeing the tears form in Nina's eyes. "Before you go making fun of others, maybe you should tell everyone why your father took you to Paris."

Nancy flushed and gasped. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm not talking at all," Race answered. "In fact, I'm not saying another word. Unless of course, you want to continue this conversation."

"Listen Mr. Know-It-All," Sam said. "I get tired of your veiled insinuations. If you have something to say, spill it."

"No!" Nancy shouted. "I have better things to do than waste my time talking to you. Come on, Sam, let's split."

"What was that all about?" Nina asked, after everyone had walked away.

"I'm not really sure," Race answered, "but I found that sometimes when you want to make someone go away, you just pretend that you know something. People get weirded out and quickly end the conversation."

"It helps if you're Mr. Know-It-All," Nina observed.

Some years ago, Race had been dubbed with that nickname because he seemed to know things. He shrugged it off as nothing more than wild guesses or obvious deductions, but there were times - like this - when he seemed to have some unexplained knowledge. The last time he had wanted to end a confrontation with Nancy, he had threatened to reveal the real reason she was no longer at the Academy. With fear in her eyes, Nancy had stomped away that time as well.

"More often than not, they really believe I know something, even though I'm just guessing," Race said.

"It has to be more than guessing," Nina insisted. "Are you psychic?"

"Not at all."

"Then how do you know so much?"

"It's not easy to explain. You didn't happen to read short story called *The Nine Mile Walk*, did you?"

"No."

"It's a story about a prosecutor and a professor who are sitting at a diner when the professor claims that given any sentence of more than nine words, he can deduce all sorts of information the speaker never intended to divulge. As they sit there, they overhear someone say, 'A nine mile walk is no fun, especially in the rain.' The professor analyzes that sentence and

figures out that the speaker is a hired killer who snuck out of his hotel room in middle of the night in order to murder someone in a town four and a half miles away.”

“So what’s your point?”

“The killer in that story never dreamed that someone would overhear his sentence and figure out the whole scheme,” Race explained. “In the same way, a lot of people don’t realize what they’re revealing when they have what they believe to be innocent conversations. Without meaning to, they allude to things that only they and the person they’re talking to understand, never expecting anyone else to put it together. But I guess my mind just works differently. I remember things, even silly, innocuous things. When I hear part of a story and some details are missing, it bothers me. It sticks in my mind and I can’t let go until I’ve figured out the rest. So I can overhear a comment Nancy makes to Sam, then another one she makes to her mother, and at some point I put it all together, or enough of it to reach a logical conclusion. So I can guess that there must be some reason why Nancy’s dad, who pretty much ignored her since the divorce, is suddenly sending her to France.”

“I still can’t believe you just did that,” Nina said, as they headed inside. “You actually stood up for me and insulted Nancy.”

“When it’s a choice between you and Nancy, there’s no contest.”

“Thanks a lot, Race. It means a lot to me.” Nina smiled. “You really got her good.”

“With Nancy, it’s almost too easy. You know, sometimes I envy the fact that she has beauty and wealth. Then I realize that she lost out on brains and personality. She actually got the worst of the deal.”

“She’s the oldest in the class, after Chris and Sam. She just flunks everything.”

“Actually there’s one subject she’s good at. Nancy Davis. Too bad it isn’t on the test.”

“Chris is also stupid,” Nina observed. “Sam puzzles me. Sometimes he acts stupid, but I know he’s not as dumb as he pretends to be.”

“I think Sam is wrestling with some complex issues,” Race said.

“I wonder why Sam transferred from the Academy. Even with all her money, Nancy couldn’t make the grades, but do you really believe Sam left just to be with Nancy? I guess that would make him as dumb as he pretends.”

“Sam’s father would never let him leave just to be with Nancy,” Race said. “There has to be another reason. As far as I know, you’re the first person to leave the Academy by choice.”

“There aren’t that many kids who transferred here from the Academy,” Nina commented. “And most of them aren’t in the top of the class, so it’s easy to figure out why. Of course there’s Weird Girl, whose problem is obvious.”

Nina was referring to a girl who was seen around the school dressed entirely in black, with her face whitened with makeup, except for her black eyeshadow and lipstick. With her long raven hair, she resembled a witch. Students in her classes reported that she was a space cadet, lost in her own little world. The teachers had given up calling on her, since she not only never knew the answer, she often didn't even seem to know the subject. She could often be found off by herself in the school yard, or sitting at what was called the Loser's Table in the cafeteria. Even the other geeks and nerds avoided her. It was common knowledge that she came from a wealthy family and had transferred from the Academy a few years before. In her case, it was obvious why the prestigious school had decided she wasn't acceptable.

"Sometimes I think you can compare people to certain video games," Race observed. "There's a game where you pick a character and you get to choose its attributes by allotting points for various characteristics, like intelligence or strength. But you only get a limited number of points to distribute. So if you give them ten points for brains, you might only have two points left for strength. I think people are the same way. Some are beautiful but stupid. Some are wealthy but unhappy. Today's society places too much emphasis on physical appearance and not enough on what really counts. So people believe that a good life means wealth and beauty, and don't realize that so many beautiful, wealthy people are desperately unhappy."

"When *you* play these games, how do you distribute the points?" Nina asked.

"I always go for maximum brain power. Even though the character may be weak, intelligence can usually defeat strength."

"So I guess if you get to choose a trait, wisdom is first on your list. Isn't that right, Mr. Know-It-All?"

They found their customary seats in the classroom available. Nina liked to sit in the back, where she felt safe from the gaze of other students. Race liked to sit up front where he could debate with the teachers. They had compromised by sitting in the exact center of the room.

"Hi, Nina, Race. How was your summer? I hope it was as good as mine." Nina's friend Miriam breezed into the room and took the seat on Nina's other side, chattering non-stop. A short, skinny girl with a long fall of hair that seemed to be blonde one minute and brown the next, her small face was always animated. It was hard to believe that so many words could flow through that tiny mouth. When Miriam was around, no one had to worry about awkward silences. Race often commented that since Miriam talked for two and Nina hardly talked, the two together produced a normal conversation. Nina had countered that if Miriam and Race ever had a conversation, they would need two silent people in the room to average things out. Most of what Miriam said just came out funny, even when she was talking to the teachers.

True to form, she had them in hysterics as she described some of the more humorous moments of summer camp in her own, inimitable style. Miriam was just finishing another anecdote when another student entered the room. She stood in the doorway, uncertain of where to sit.

“Parvin! Hi!” Race called out. “Guess you’re in our class. Why don’t you take this seat?” he asked, pointing at the chair next to Miriam. Relieved, Parvin hesitantly took the proffered seat. “You met Nina already. This is Miriam. Miriam, this is Parvin.”

Introductions over, Miriam launched into another anecdote. The bell rang, warning the students that class would begin in five minutes. Moments later, Mrs. Goodman, the Math teacher, entered the room. Five minutes later, the school year officially began.