

The twelve o'clock bell signaled the beginning of lunch period. Race and Nina didn't jump up to join the crowd of students pushing their way out the door. They preferred to wait a while and avoid the mob. Race used the time to explain a math concept to Nina.

"Hey, Geek Twins," Sam called out. "Class is over. It's time to get a life."

"Oh, Sam, isn't that cute?" Nancy chimed in. "Race is giving his hermanodike a lesson."

"What?" both Sam and Race asked at the same time.

"You know," Nancy explained, "hermanodike. Someone who's not a man or a woman."

Race laughed. "Nancy, you ignorant slut," he said, imitating the Saturday Night Live routine made famous by Jane Curtain and Dan Akroyd. "The word you're looking for is hermaphrodite. It means a creature that is *both* male and female. Androgynous on the other hand, means a creature that is neither male or female. And you're right, ever since it became acceptable for both males and females to dress in t-shirts and jeans, a lot of them appear to be androgynous. You know what they say: Genes determine sex and jeans conceal it."

"Whatever you say," Nancy muttered.

"Poor Nancy," Race went on. "If you paid attention during biology class instead of just looking at the photos of reproductive organs, you would know that isn't accurate. It's chromosomes, not genes, which determine sex."

"What?"

Nina and Sam couldn't help laughing at Race's rejoinder and the look of confusion that passed across Nancy's face.

"Sam," Race went on, "please explain to the pulchritudinous Nancy what I just said."

"Hey, what did you just call me? What does that mean?"

"I would tell you to look it up," Race responded, "but you would have to know how to spell it first."

"Well, I'm gonna find out what you said and if it's as nasty as I think it is, you're in big trouble!"

"Nancy, please try not to think. You might burst a brain cell and that won't leave you two to rub together."

"Well, let me tell you.."

"I would tell you to be adult," Race cut in, "but you already are a dolt. Come on, Nina, let's go."

"You really told her off," Nina remarked.

"I'm just hoping that after a few more like that, she'll leave us alone."

"What was that you called her? Pulchritudinous?"

“You got it.”

“Sounds nasty.”

“I hope not. I find *you* very pulchritudinous.”

“Now you have to tell me what it means.”

“It means beautiful.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.”

“It’s sweet of you to say that but you’re not fooling anyone.”

“*I’m* not fooling anyone, *you* are. I keep telling you that if you made any effort to improve your appearance, you’d be gorgeous.”

“Come on, Race, cut it out.”

“I’m not kidding. Hey, you want to make a bet?”

“What kind of bet?”

“I bet you fifty dollars that you could be gorgeous, even prettier than Nancy.”

“You’ve been staring at your computer too long. The radiation has gone to your brain.”

“If you think I’m wrong, then take the bet,” Race challenged.

“I don’t take advantage of my friends.”

“You’re not taking advantage. I want you to take the bet.”

“Sorry, Race, but no.”

“Then you forced me into it.” He opened his wallet and took out a fifty dollar bill. “I got paid last night for fixing a computer,” he explained. “I was going to use the money to take you to the Video Arcade but now that you’ve turned down my bet, the money is meaningless.”

With a dramatic flourish, he tore the bill in half. Nina gasped. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to tear up this fifty dollar bill,” he explained, “so you’ll understand I really want you to take the bet.”

“But why do you want to throw away fifty dollars?”

“I don’t want to throw it away. I want to bet it. But if you won’t bet, I *will* throw it away. Understand?”

“Okay, fine, I’ll take your silly bet.”

“Great!”

“You’re still throwing your money away,” Nina said. “There’s no way you can win. I do have a mirror.”

“And you see only what you want to see,” Race said. He unfolded the bill and Nina saw that it was whole.

“How did you do that?”

“The mind plays tricks on people. Sometimes they see fifty dollar bills torn in half that are really whole. Sometimes they see plain girls that are really pretty.”

“You’re not going to fool anyone into thinking I’m pretty.”

“You’re absolutely right. I’m not going to fool anyone. Because it will be for real.”

“Just one thing, how do we decide if it was successful? It doesn’t count if you or my dad or anyone just being polite says I look pretty. It has to be someone who means it.”

“So who do you want it to be? Sam?” The look in her eyes said it all. “Okay,” Race agreed, “Sam has to say it.”

“There’s no way!”

“I bet that the first time he sees the new you, he’s going to comment on it. Maybe he’ll be so bowled over, he’ll just say ‘Wow!’, but there’ll be no mistaking the reaction.”

“I guess I could always find a use for fifty dollars. Though I hate taking your money.”

“Then cooperate and let me win.”

The lunch room was filled with the chaotic noise of hundreds of high school students. Across the room Race saw that Sam, Nancy, and their crew had chosen another set of victims. Parvin and her siblings were doing their best to ignore them.

“Look at the little piggies,” Nancy was saying as they approached. “I can’t believe anyone would eat this slop, much less pig out on it.”

The children had taken generous helpings of the noodles and cheese that the school was providing. From the way the younger children were attacking their portions, it was obvious that they were very hungry.

“You know, I bet this is the only real meal these kids get all day,” Race said to Nina. Then he called out, “Hey, Nancy. Looks like you’re stuck riding the tiger.”

Nancy gave him a look of confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“You heard the famous story of the lady who decided to ride a tiger, then figured out that she could never get off because she would get eaten. You go around making fun of people all day because you know if you stop, they’ll turn around and make fun of you.”

“No one makes fun of me.”

“That’s only because you do such a good job all by yourself.”

A few students began chuckling at Nancy’s discomfort. “Come on, Sam,” Nancy said, taking his arm. “Let’s blow this place. School lunch is for low class people anyway.”

“Good riddance,” Race muttered, sliding into a seat at the table. “Hard to eat with that kind of ruffraff around. The noodles and cheese sure look good.”

Parvin's youngest sister smiled at him. "Good," she agreed.

"Hey, Parvin, do you like Dunkin Donuts?" Race asked.

"I don't think I've ever had them," Parvin answered.

"Well, they're really good. They have jelly and cream inside and they're so soft and fresh. You see, I have a little problem. I love bargains but I also hate waste. Dunkin Donuts cost fifty cents each. That means a dozen would cost me six dollars. But I have coupons that let me buy a dozen for only three dollars. I can't resist the bargain, but I don't need a dozen. I can't save them for later because by the next day, they're already hard. So I'm not buying another dozen until I find someone to take the extras off my hands. Will you help me out?"

"But I don't have any money," Parvin said quietly.

"No, that's fine. I have three dollars for the donuts. I just need someone to help me finish them so they don't go to waste. I know you get to school early, so we can finish them before everyone shows up. I don't want to start any fights, and I can't exactly buy donuts for the whole school. What do you say?"

"What do you want from me?"

"Just meet us in the yard tomorrow morning and help us finish the box. I'm hoping you can manage six. Will you do us that favor?"

Parvin and her brother began chatting in a foreign language. Her brother seemed excited. Parvin seemed hesitant. Finally, it appeared that he won the argument because she nodded.

"Great! We'll meet you in the yard tomorrow morning. Thanks a lot!"

"That was incredible," Nina said, as she and Race walked to the counter to get their own lunch. "You're giving them donuts and making them think they're doing *you* a favor."

"Hey, everything I said was true," Race protested. "I love a bargain, I hate waste, and I do have a coupon for a dozen donuts for three dollars."

Nina smiled. "Sure and the only reason you haven't bought them is because it was so hard to find someone to eat them for you."

When the bell rang, signaling the end of lunch period, Nina and Race returned to the classroom in a state of eager anticipation. It was time for Mr. Whitaker. The teacher was in his early thirties, lanky, with a strong chin and green eyes that flashed when he became excited by his subject. With his full head of wavy brown hair, he was almost a heartthrob and definitely the most attractive male teacher in the school. Nina knew that some of the female students had a crush on him. His classes were the most fun because he didn't teach by pontificating or forcing his students to read and memorize. He handed out liberal assignments which gave the students a great deal of leeway. Most of his classes were spent in dialogue and exchange of ideas. Often,

his students became so caught up in the debate, they forgot they were learning.

Last year he had entranced them with selections from Shakespeare. He had first read soliloquies aloud and demonstrated how the meaning could be changed by accenting different words in the sentences. Then he had the students choose their own selections and practice the same skill. Some of the students now fancied themselves budding actors. He had promised them this year the class would attempt to put on a play as if it were a professional production.

There were all sorts of rumors about him. He had been a rising star and had punched out a producer. The fight had been over a movie starlet he had been dating whom the producer considered his girlfriend. The name of the starlet varied.

On his first day, the teacher had announced he was aware of the rumors and they were all untrue. He had gone to Los Angeles hoping to become an actor, while supporting himself as a substitute teacher. He had gotten a small part in a TV series about a violent school in East L.A., overrun by gangs. His character, an idealistic teacher, had been killed off on the second episode. He had gone back to teaching full time. After almost ten years on the West Coast, he had returned to New Jersey to help his father sell his auto repair shop so that he could retire a warmer climate.

“Isn’t that sad?” Nina had commented. “He had to give up his dream.”

“Maybe he’s happier teaching,” Race had said. “After his part ended, he could have tried to get another one.”

“I wonder why he didn’t.”

“Maybe he felt it was fate. You see, he left something out. I found more information on the Internet. His character was stabbed in the second episode and lingered in the hospital. The producer wanted to get a feel for the audience response. Viewers wrote in asking that the character be brought back. But genuine gang violence, protesting the portrayal of blacks in the show, forced the company to stop the production. While other actors from the show went on to bigger parts, Mr. Whitaker chose to go into teaching.”

“Anybody famous?”

Race named a few well-known television stars. “But that show launched the career of Desmond Brander.”

“So Mr. Whitaker knows Desmond Brander?” Brander was currently one of the hottest black action stars, with at least one hit movie coming out every year.

“They starred together in an episode of cancelled TV show ten years ago,” Race had reminded her. “Brander was a teenager from East L.A. Mr. Whitaker was in his early twenties; a white boy from New Jersey. Just how friendly do you think they became?”

Last year, Mr. Whitaker had them practice delivering speeches to the class. Some students, Nina among them, had difficulty speaking in public. The teacher had tried different approaches to overcome this fear. First, he had all but a handful of students leave the classroom. He then placed Nina in middle of the room and the few remaining students in the rear, and had instructed her to deliver her speech to the small group. Unbeknownst to Nina, as she spoke Mr. Whitaker had the other students quietly file into the classroom and stand behind her. When the speech was over, Nina turned to find that the entire class had heard her speak.

“You see,” Mr. Whitaker said, “it really doesn’t matter how many people are in the room. If you can speak to ten, you can speak to a hundred.”

The next time, he had Nina address the entire class at once. She had no trouble delivering the speech, but couldn’t bring herself to speak loudly enough to be heard in the back of the room. After class, Mr. Whitaker brought her to the school’s auditorium and had her deliver the speech from the stage, without a microphone. Nina had to shout to be heard, and the teacher’s point had been made.

“So we know you can talk to the entire class,” he pointed out, “and we know you can speak loudly. Now you just have to learn to do both at the same time.”

By the end of that year, Nina was able to give a speech to the entire class that could be heard by everyone. Though she was proud of this achievement, she hoped this year Mr. Whitaker would not force her to act in the play. She wanted to limit her participation to working on the scenery or the lighting.

“Good afternoon, class,” Mr. Whitaker greeted them. “It’s nice to see so many familiar faces. I guess this means I did my job and most of you were not left back. Unless I’m in the wrong room and *all* of you were left back. This is the sophomore class, isn’t it?” He scanned the room. “I see at least one new face. Would you like to introduce yourself?”

Parvin shrank into her seat, a look of panic on her face.

“That’s Parvin Patel,” Race announced. “She’s new not only to this school but to the country.”

“I would prefer that Parvin speak for herself,” the teacher said. “Sorry to put you on the spot, Parvin, but this class is about drama, speech and debate. You must participate to pass.”

“Just give her a few days to acclimate,” Race suggested.

“Very well,” Mr. Whitaker agreed. “A week from now, Parvin will tell the class about herself, her family, native country, and her introduction to our community. Okay, Parvin?”

Parvin sat frozen, like a deer caught in headlights, her large eyes open wide. She managed to nod.

“Last year we practiced reciting Shakespeare and public speaking,” the teacher reminded them. “I promised you that this year we would work on debate and drama. Now debate is more than just people arguing. For a real debate, the speakers have to be knowledgeable about their subject. This means doing research and gathering facts. It doesn’t mean just quoting other people who agree with you. Remember that a debate has two sides. For every point on your side, your opponent will have a point on their side. A good debater studies both sides. He must know how to present his own case, and he must know how to counter his opponent’s arguments.

“Most people believe that debating means arguing the position you believe. That is not quite true. The best debaters are people who can argue either side of an issue. I will be the judge of your debates, and I will not favor either side. If I see that a debater is not presenting a proper argument, or that his opponent is not properly prepared, I will step in and argue the other side. But that won’t prevent me from stepping in a minute later and defending the opinion I just attacked. The purpose of this class is not to come to any conclusions about the subjects of our debates. The purpose of this class is to learn how to debate properly.

“Now for today’s practice session, does anyone have a subject they’d like to discuss?” With a twinkle in his eye he added, “Anyone besides Race,” which caused the class to laugh.

Last year, Race had turned almost every discussion to his favorite topic, miracles. Race believed that miracles still occurred, and he had put forth some convincing arguments. Sam had been his biggest opponent in these debates. Nancy raised her hand.

“I see that Nancy has an idea. What do you propose?”

“You know how people cheat in order to win competitions,” Nancy began. “Like guys who use steroids and girls who get boob jobs. Shouldn’t that disqualify them?”

Some of the class groaned and others chuckled. It was typical Nancy to suggest such a topic.

“That subject wasn’t quite what I had in mind,” Mr. Whitaker said, rolling his eyes. “Anyone else? I see Sam has his hand up.”

“I don’t see why we can’t continue what we started,” Sam said. “I mean Race and I were at it the whole year but we never had a real debate and we never came to any conclusion.”

“As I said, the point isn’t to reach a conclusion.”

“You said the point is for us to learn how to debate and that what we were doing last year wasn’t the right way, correct? So let’s take up where we left off last year, and you can show us how to do it right.”

Some of the students applauded. Last year’s discussions had been riveting, and they were looking forward to a rematch.

“Very well, Sam. I see you learned something. That was a convincing argument. So let’s return to where we left off last year. Race maintains that miracles actually happen and Sam insists they’re just myths. Unless of course, you’d like to debate the opposite views.”

The class laughed again. The idea of Sam and Race switching sides was ludicrous.

“Just show me a miracle that happened recently,” Sam challenged. “One that was seen by reliable witnesses.”

“You’re missing the whole point of a miracle,” Race countered. “Everything that happens is a miracle. That the sun rises, that trees grow. But because these happen all the time, we take them for granted. Scientists study these phenomena and then say a tree grows because the seed blossoms and cells divide. But no scientist has ever created a tree, much less a seed. Still, the more science provides explanations, the more people start questioning their faith. They start thinking that maybe there’s a scientific explanation for everything. Of course, every now and then something happens that has no scientific explanation. Scientists dismiss these things as some sort of anomaly, but believers proclaim it a miracle.”

“Just as I’ve been saying,” Sam responded. “You can’t prove that miracles happen.”

“What difference would it make if miracles happened openly and constantly?” Race asked. “If tomorrow everyone was able to fly, scientists would simply say that gravity is weakening. Anything that happens openly and regularly becomes just another scientific finding. A miracle has to be something that happens rarely and can’t be explained scientifically. The whole point of a miracle is to strengthen the faith of believers at a time when their faith may be growing weak. But only the believers will understand it.”

Sam scoffed. “The Jews believe that God performed miracles for them. The Christians believe he did it for Christians. The Arabs believe he did it for Arabs They can’t all be right.”

“Of course they can,” Race insisted. “God didn’t create any specific religion. Man created religion in order to find God. Different people discovered God in different ways. The method of worship may vary but the principle is the same. If people believe in God and do good deeds, then sometimes they are worthy of a miracle. I get a newsletter from a website that contains lots stories. The webmaster, who happens to be Jewish, collects stories from all over the world. The events described in these stories happened to people from many different backgrounds. Almost all of them follow some particular good deed that the recipient performed.”

“So you believe a bunch of fairy tales?” Sam sneered.

“Well, I had a chat session with Izzy, the webmaster, and he said something profound. He said there’s a Jewish tradition that if you believe all these stories, you’re a fool.”

“Ha! I told you!”

“But if you believe none of them, you’re a bigger fool.”

“Okay, that’s enough for now,” Mr. Whitaker interrupted, as the class broke into laughter. “Another rule of debate is that you don’t personally attack your opponent. This is not a political debate. Now let’s move on to our creative writing lesson. I have an interesting assignment for those who wish to partake. Have you ever read a book like *Chicken Soup for the Soul*? If not, I suggest that you do. Then hand in a story in that style. Something about a person overcoming an obstacle or doing a good deed for another and having it repaid in a unique way, something that the class can learn from. I will choose the better stories to be read aloud, followed by a debate on the topic. You will be graded on the quality of the writing and the quality of your class involvement. Race, I’m sure, will have a story for us every day.” The class laughed. “But since there are other subjects to cover, I’ll give Race the floor every Friday afternoon. Now for our drama. Has anyone given any thought to what we want to do?”

Nancy’s hand shot up.

“Let me guess,” Race whispered to Nina, “she wants to do a drama on the horrors of a bad perm.”

Nina giggled quietly, muffling it with her hand, but Miriam laughed aloud. Nancy shot them a dark look, realizing the laughter was at her expense.

“Yes, Nancy?” Mr. Whitaker called on her with a tinge of exasperation in his voice.

“I think we should do a musical,” Nancy said.

“That’s not a bad idea,” the teacher said in surprise. The class giggled as they realized Mr. Whitaker had been astonished at the idea of Nancy coming up with a sensible suggestion. “You do realize that a musical presents another level of difficulty.”

“Not for people who can sing,” Nancy said proudly.

“She’s not that dumb after all,” Race whispered. “She came up with an idea which guarantees her a major roll.”

“Since you seem to have given it some thought, Nancy,” Mr. Whitaker continued, “do you have any suggestion as to which musical we should perform?”

“How about *The Judy Garland Story*? I can play Judy.”

Race groaned. The movie had aired on television, and if he remembered correctly, the main character had the only singing part.

“Nancy, last year we concentrated on soliloquies and monologues,” Mr. Whitaker said, “but this will be a class play, and there should be parts for the rest of the class.”

“I think whatever we put on should be fun and entertaining,” Race ventured. “Something

like *Little Shop of Horrors*.”

“Yes!” Sam called out. “That’s perfect!”

“Since it’s so rare to see Sam and Race in agreement, I think we have a winner,” Mr. Whitaker announced. “Can I see a show of hands?”

With the exception of Nancy and her sycophants, every hand in the class went up.

“Then I believe we have chosen our production,” Mr. Whitaker announced. “I suggest that everyone in the class watch the movie. Next week we’ll hold tryouts for the parts. Class dismissed.”

“Why did you agree to that play?” Nancy hissed at Sam.

“What’s the problem with it?” Sam asked. “I think it’s perfect. There are only two main characters. I’ll play Seymour and you’ll play Audrey. Who else in the class can do it?”

Nancy thought for a moment and then smiled. “You’re absolutely right!”

The two of them walked out of the room arm in arm.

“I didn’t think Sam could be so clever,” Nina remarked. “He picked a play which showcases him and Nancy. I can’t believe you didn’t see it coming.”

“Maybe I saw something beyond what Sam saw,” Race said.

“Like what?”

“Like while it’s true that Seymour and Audrey are the main characters of the play, it’s the narrators who get to sing the most songs. So Nancy and Sam can believe they’re the stars of the show, but others in class will get the chance to strut their stuff without being upstaged.”

“Race, you’re brilliant.” Then turning to Miriam, she said, “Miriam, you’ve got a good voice and you can dance. Don’t waste your time learning Audrey’s part. You know there’s no competing with Nancy. Start learning the narrator songs.”

“Will do,” Miriam promised. “Thanks. See you tomorrow.”

“Now we go to my house and get our bikes, then it’s off to the mall,” Race announced.

“Why the mall?”

“Did you forget we have a bet going? Today I start proving to you you’re prettier than Nancy Davis.”

David was sitting in front of the house when they arrived, and to Nina it seemed as if he hadn’t moved all day. When he saw her, he waved, and a smile flickered on his lips before his face relaxed again into its customary expressionless gaze.

“Hi, David,” Race greeted him. “How was school?”

“Good,” David answered in a monotone.

“We’re going to the mall, David. Would you like to join us?”

David shook his head. Anything which interrupted his standard routine disturbed him. It was difficult for him to get used to strangers, and the crowds at the mall bothered him. Outside of his family, the people in his special school, and Nina, he rarely spoke.

“Let me tell my mom where we’re going, so she can call your mom, and then we’re off,” Race said, going inside.

Nina sat down on the stoop next to David. “Did you do anything fun in school today, David?” she asked, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“I drew a picture,” David answered. “Want to see it?”

“Of course.”

David pulled a paper out of his shirt pocket and unfolded it. Nina gasped as she saw an amazingly good pencil drawing of a bespectacled teenage girl in jeans and a t-shirt. It was incredibly detailed and precise. David had even captured the freckles on her nose and the strands of hair which stuck out from under the cap.

“David, this is unbelievable!”

“Is that good?” he asked.

“Of course it’s good! It’s amazing!”

“I told my class this is my friend Nina. You *are* my friend, aren’t you?”

“Of course I’m your friend, David. This is so sweet.”

“You can keep it.”

“Thank you, David,” she said, giving his shoulder a squeeze. “Race, take a look at this!”

Race looked at the drawing. “That’s beautiful, David,” he said, “but you had a beautiful subject to draw.”

“You’re not gonna win the bet *that* way,” Nina said. “Sam has to say it, remember?”

“Bye, David, see you later.”

They carefully strapped on their helmets before mounting their bikes. Race and Nina needed no reminders, having learned firsthand the dangers of neglecting safety. Not long ago, Race could outride every kid in the neighborhood, which was why Nina had nicknamed him Racin’ Jason, later shortened to Race. Then an accident left him with the limp which had ended any participation in physical sports. Though hardly noticeable when walking, but it became more pronounced when running or in cold weather. His only physical activity, other than walking, was bike riding, and he always wore a helmet. Attaching sunglass clips to their glasses, the pair rode off to the mall.

“David’s drawing is incredible,” Nina said.

“Yes, he seems to have certain skills, as if in compensation for what he lost,” Race

explained. “It’s sort of like he’s a savant. But a savant has a single incredible talent. David seems to be gifted in many ways. He once saw a street artist doing sketches. When he came home, he pulled out a pad and pencil and started drawing like a professional. Not long ago he watched me play the piano, then sat down and played the same song with no lessons or practice. And you should hear him imitate voices. It’s uncanny. You know, people think that David is retarded but he’s not. He’s actually very smart, possibly even brilliant.”

“Is he getting any better?” Nina asked.

“Sometimes I think so,” Race answered. “He hasn’t had a fit in years, and he seems more aware of his surroundings. He’s been carrying on short conversations.”

“Is there hope for a complete recovery?”

“There’s always hope, but it’s doubtful that he’ll be able to lead a completely normal life, like college, dating, or marriage. We once believed he would recover eventually, but the doctors say if he hasn’t recovered by now, there’s not much chance it will happen.”

“Do they even know what’s wrong with him?”

“That’s the problem. He doesn’t have any standard condition they can put a label on. It’s sort of like autism, because he spends a lot of time in his own little world, but he wasn’t born that way. He retreated into it, and we keep hoping he’ll come back out. Sometimes it seems like he’s getting there but he never comes out all the way.”

“That’s sad,” Nina said. “I guess your family knows what real tragedy is. It makes my family’s problems seem minor by comparison.”

Nina remembered the story her mother had told her. Gloria Ketton was an only child whose parents were killed in an accident when she was nine. She had been raised by a grandmother who died when she was eighteen. Gloria had been friends with Renee Saltis, a popular cheerleader. She often joked that she had spent so many hours in the Saltis house, they could have claimed her as a dependent. The girls had both gone away to the same college. In typical fashion, Renee had fallen for Ben Williams, the handsome football player with a promising professional career. A hasty marriage preceded the birth of a child, and they were on their way to the American Dream.

Then an injury ended Ben’s professional career, and the former football hero found that a C average in college didn’t lend itself to meaningful employment. The pressures of providing for a family on minimum wage led to drink. The drinking led to abusive behavior. His young wife left him and then returned a dozen times until her family decided that they had enough. They gave Renee an ultimatum: she should either leave Ben for good or stop coming around.

For too long, Renee tried to make a go of it. She explained away her bruises by claiming

she had fallen down stairs or been hit by a door. Gloria begged her to leave, if not for herself, then for her son. Renee vacillated. Then Ben had started beating his child.

Ben was arrested but it seemed that he couldn't be kept in jail long enough to do any good. He kept showing up at his apartment, terrorizing his wife and child, getting re-arrested and then being released again. Gloria had since married Howard and the couple realized that there was only one way they could help. Though young parents with a child of their own, they opened their home to a friend in need. Renee moved in with them. With their help, she made the decision to regain control of her own life. While Gloria watched both boys, Renee filed for divorce, secured a job, and found an apartment.

Then came the phone call that had changed their lives forever. Renee's husband had found them. He had come to the apartment with a gun. He shot his wife in front of her son, shot his son in the chest, and discharged the weapon into his own mouth. He and his wife had died instantly. The boy was clinically dead when he arrived at the hospital. A valiant medical team had labored to save his life. It took hours of surgery and many units of blood before he was out of danger.

Gloria and Howard were besides themselves with grief at the loss of Renee, yet grateful the boy had survived. Then the doctors discovered that the horrifying experience had left the boy severely emotionally disturbed. It was possible that with love and a stable home, he would recover, but it was also possible he would require special care for the rest of his life. No one on either side of his family would accept the responsibility. Gloria Jason looked at her husband with a plea in her eyes.

"We're all he has," Mr. Jason said, and David became their son.

Nina's eyes welled with tears every time she thought of the story. She thought it was terribly sad, and that what the Jasons had done took incredible courage and compassion.

"Let's lock up here," Race said, pulling up to a bike station.

As they chained their bikes, Nina said, "You still haven't told me why we're here."

"The first step in your transformation is to do something about those glasses, so that folks can see your beautiful blue eyes," Race answered, "and contact lenses are on sale."

"Contact lenses are so expensive!" Nina exclaimed. "These glasses are only fifty dollars."

"And don't they sometimes break when you play soccer? And don't the lenses get scratched and have to be replaced?"

"Well, sure."

"So over the course of a year, they probably cost you at least a hundred bucks with

repairs and all.”

“I guess so.”

“Well, today you can get six pairs of contact lenses and a free fitting for fifty dollars. Each pair is good for a month, so that’s half a year right there. That works out to the same cost as your glasses. And you don’t have to worry about contact lenses breaking or getting scratched.”

“But I don’t have fifty dollars.”

“But I do.”

“Race, you can’t spend your money on me.”

“Sure I can. Besides, I’m just trying to win a bet.”

“But you didn’t say anything about buying me contact lenses.”

“Nina, you promised to cooperate. If you don’t go through with it, you forfeit and then you owe me fifty bucks.”

“That’s not fair! Besides, even with contact lenses, I still won’t be prettier than Nancy.”

“If that’s the case, you win the bet and the fifty dollars I spent on lenses are your prize.”

“Race Jason, you’re so infuriating,” Nina said, unable to completely hide the smile forming on her lips.

“I guess that’s why we’re such good enemies,” Race said, with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

An hour later they were done and Nina’s glasses were in her bag.

“See, what did I tell you?” Race asked. “Big improvement. I just love those blue eyes.”

“It is incredible,” Nina agreed. “Everything is so remarkably clear. No spots in front of my eyes from dust on the lenses or scratches. No streaks from the lighting. I can even see out of the sides of my eyes. You ought to try it, Race.”

“And give up my title as Geek? No way.”

“I’m still not comfortable with the idea of you spending money on me.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not doing it for you, I’m doing it for me.”

“For you? How’s that?”

“One, it makes me feel good to see you smile. Two, now I have a prettier girlfriend than I did yesterday.”

“Do you really think of me as your girlfriend?”

“Why not? You’re a girl and you’re my friend.”

“Miriam’s also a girl and your friend,” Nina pointed out.

“She’s more your friend than mine. And I don’t spend hours alone with her.”

“But girlfriend implies so much more.”

“It means you’re a girl, you’re my friend, and we like each other. Isn’t that true?”

“I guess it is,” Nina agreed. “I just never thought of myself as a girlfriend. So, you’re getting a prettier girlfriend. Not *pretty*, just *prettier*. Will you dump her if she prefers glasses?”

“Even pretty girls are entitled to go for the natural look on occasion,” Race said. “But not all the time. If you’ve got it, flaunt it.”

A moment later, they passed a discount store with a rack of sunglasses on display. Race selected a pink pair with mirrored lenses. “Here you go,” he said. “I’m going to turn you into a movie star.” He stuck them on Nina’s face and turned to pay the cashier.

“You don’t have to buy me sunglasses,” Nina protested.

“It’s sunny outside and you can’t wear the sunglass clip without your glasses.”

“I can pay for these myself,” Nina insisted, reaching into her bag for her wallet. “Hey, take a look at this.” She had just spotted a rack of discount CDs. “Emmy Lou Harris. Isn’t she the one you were listening to this summer?”

“Yeah, right,” Race said nervously.

“It’s only two dollars. I think I’ll buy it.”

“You can borrow mine.”

“For two bucks, I’ll buy my own.”

Nina was puzzled by Race’s reaction. She had once walked into his room and found him listening to a female singer with a voice like liquid honey. As soon as he saw her, he had jumped up and guiltily turned off the stereo. Nina had joked that now she knew his big secret. In a shaky voice, he had asked her, “what secret?”

“That you like country music,” she had responded.

“Well, not all country music,” he had said. “Just some of it.”

“And who was that?”

“Emmy Lou Harris.”

“I thought it was pretty,” she had told him. “I particularly like that she’s using only an acoustic guitar and not drowning it out with a whole orchestra of steel banjos and electric guitars. Can I borrow that tape?”

“Sure, you can have it in a few days.”

Strangely enough, Race who never denied her anything, had forgotten to lend it to her.

“Now I’ll finally get to listen to it,” Nina said, as they stepped outside.

“So phase one has been accomplished,” Race announced. “We’ve taken care of the dorky glasses, and you’re no longer one of the geek twins.”

“What’s phase two?”

“Tune in tomorrow,” Race answered mysteriously. “Same time, same channel.”

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