

During lunch, Race led them to Tori's table and took a seat as if they were expected.

"How goes it?" he asked her.

The look she gave him today was more of puzzlement than anger or suspicion.

"Okay, I guess."

"I was wondering if you agree with Nina. Do you also think the Academy is overhyped?"

"What?"

"You both went to the Academy. You both ended up here. Nina said she actually prefers Dixon. I was wondering if you felt the same way."

"Yeah, I guess." Tori turned to Nina. "So why'd they axe you? Couldn't handle the curriculum?"

"Actually, Nina chose to leave."

"Come on! No one *chooses* to leave."

"Hear that, Nina? You're the first."

"So why'd you *choose* to leave?" Tori asked, mockingly accenting the word. "Couldn't handle the curriculum?"

"Actually, I couldn't handle the students," Nina answered. "They were a bunch of rich, stuck-up, self-centered brats."

"I know what you mean," Tori commiserated. "Though I didn't really have that problem myself. My sister is one of those stuck-up, self-centered brats you mentioned. You probably ran into her. Shannon Sloan."

"Oh, sure. Pretty, cheerleader type. We had a couple of run-ins in the hall. Fortunately, she wasn't in my classes."

"She's not a cheerleader. She's on their basketball team," Tori said. "Same difference, though. She's part of the in-crowd, which makes her better than everyone else."

"So that's why I left," Nina said. "I thought my Dad did okay financially, but these kids made me feel like Cinderella. If I had known they were going to follow me here, maybe I might have stayed. Actually, no. I'm glad I came here. How about you?"

"I couldn't handle the curriculum," Tori replied. "The Academy doesn't accept dummies, no matter how much money your father has. So I'm stuck here. It's actually not such a bad place. At least here the other kids mostly leave me alone."

"Well, they *are* sort of afraid of you," Nina said.

"Afraid of me? Why? I've never hurt anyone."

"It's more the fear of the unknown," Race explained. "I'm sure you've heard the rumors which follow in your wake."

"Oh, yeah. That I do drugs. That I'm into witchcraft or vampirism or something like

that.”

“Exactly. So kids are afraid that at any moment you might explode and knife someone or something crazy like that.”

“So why aren’t you afraid?”

Nina was tempted to answer that she actually was, but Race responded first.

“Because we know how stupid kids are. Anyone who’s in any way different gets tagged with all sorts of rumors. I know there are some circulating about me, just like there are some circulating about you.”

“And how do you know the ones about me aren’t true?”

“The same way I know that the ones about me aren’t. I’m not psychic. I’m not a mind reader, and I did not plant bugs in every home in the neighborhood, regardless of what Sam Burke and Nancy Davis might think. So now it’s your turn. Do you really fly off on your broomstick and suck the blood out of little children?”

“Hey, I only did that once!”

“See, I knew that. Little kids don’t have enough blood. I bet you go for teenagers.”

Tori laughed. Nina got the impression that under the ghastly makeup and the extra weight, there was a pretty girl struggling to break free. Tori looked like she was about to say something when the bell rang.

“Nice chatting with you,” Race said. “We’ll have to continue this conversation later.”

“Uh...later,” Tori muttered uncertainly.

“That was amazing!” Nina exclaimed when they were out in the hall. “I think you really got through to her.”

“And she’s not as weird as you thought, right?” Nina nodded. “I think there’s a real girl in there. A girl who’s maybe a little angry, a little scared, and feeling very much alone. But under that disguise, she’s not much different than you. You’re both hiding and it’s time you came out.”

The rest of the day was uneventful until Mr. Whitaker’s class. The students were restless, not just because it was Friday afternoon and the weekend was imminent, but also because they were anticipating this particular session.

“TGIF,” Mr. Whitaker announced. “And we all know what that means. The first entry in our assignment has been turned in and surprisingly, it’s from Race.” After some laughter, he continued, “Race, I want you to read it aloud to the class.”

Race rose and began, “This is based on an old legend. I rewrote it slightly, expanded on it, but the original story isn’t mine.

“There was a wealthy Englishman who traveled around the world. He visited many

foreign shores and was amused by their ceremonies and beliefs. Not being a particularly religious fellow, he found their customs merely entertaining. Wealthy and handsome, he had no shortage of lovely young women who wished to become his wife. But he had already found his love in a foreign land and promised her he would cease his adventuring upon his thirtieth birthday, settle down, and marry her.

“He knew his family would not be pleased at his choice. Indira was not only a foreigner, she came from a simple, religious family. But during his travels he had discovered there was often more love and more happiness among the common folk than among the elite. His own parents had been preoccupied with their business and social activities to pay him much mind, and his upbringing had been left to a succession of nannies and tutors. At ten he had been sent to boarding school, which was why it was a simple matter for him to leave home for months at a time. He had often spent a weekend at the home of one of his boarding school chums and could not recall any family which, even in the face of their affluence, had been truly happy. But Indira and her family had demonstrated a devotion to each other and a joy for life which astounded him. What little they had they freely shared. He had witnessed such self-sacrifice and concern for each other and for their neighbors, that he longed to join their peaceful existence.

“His birthday arrived and after a lavish celebration at home, he announced that he was off to that foreign shore to marry the woman he loved. His family was distraught but he could not be dissuaded. He set off on his journey and reached Indira’s land. With her family’s help, he built a house near theirs. In the meantime, he lived with her family, shared their meals, and worshiped in their church. Now all that remained was the wedding day. Shortly before they were to become man and wife, she succumbed to a fatal illness.

“Heartbroken, he announced he had reached the conclusion that fate was just a random series of events. There could be no guiding hand and no miracles. He would go back to his travels. Indira’s family begged him to remain, for they had grown to love him, but he refused. Soon he was back on board a ship, sailing to exotic lands. He offered a fortune to anyone who could bring him proof of a genuine miracle. Many tried and he managed to debunk them all. He was told of mystics in foreign lands, so he sailed onward, seeking proof of a genuine miracle. Always he was disappointed.

“One day he heard about a mountain in Tibet, guarded by an order of holy men. It was said that anyone who ascended its peak would witness a miracle. A few had tried but all had abandoned the attempt. The adventurer decided he would make the effort.

“Upon his arrival, he entered the temple at the foot of the mountain and informed the order of what he intended to accomplish. They insisted he meet their leader, the Wise One. He was ushered into the Wise One’s presence. A tiny, bald child with a serene countenance sat on a

carpet in lotus position. His skin was like flawless parchment and so thin as to be nearly transparent. His calm smile never dimmed.

“So you wish to climb our mountain?” the Wise One asked.

“Yes,” answered the Englishman, ‘I have heard that at its peak I may witness a miracle.’

“I too have heard the legend,’ the child said. ‘But it can not be confirmed. No one has completed the attempt.’

“Then perhaps I will be the first.’

“Why do you risk your life over a triviality? Surely your efforts could be better spent.’

“It is not a triviality to me. I have lost faith. My life has no meaning. If I die in the attempt, it will end a life wasted in the pursuit of something which never existed. However, if I succeed, my faith may be restored and it will have been worth the effort.’

“Then I hope you find what you seek.’

“Immediately, the Englishman set out to conquer the peak. He had scaled mountains before, but this was the most treacherous. It was as if God himself or perhaps Satan was determined to see him fail. His party was bombarded by fierce, bitter winds and pelted with hail. The rocky crags were covered with ice and there were hardly any ledges to stand on. When one of his guides fell to his death, the remaining guides urged him to give up but he refused. They abandoned him and left him to continue on his own. A week later, injured and exhausted, he reached the peak.

“The top of the mountain was a flat plateau in an almost perfect circle about thirty feet in diameter. For about twenty feet from the outer edge, the mountain was rimmed in snow and the air was bitterly cold. The snow lay in an unbroken sheet on the ground, undisturbed by a single footprint. In the center of the circle was a clearing where grass sprouted and a flowering fruit tree, surrounded by buzzing bees, stood tall in the sunlight. Beneath the tree, seated on a the grass in lotus position, was the Wise One.

“I have seen a miracle’, the Englishman gasped. ‘For here you are. I began my climb only shortly after speaking with you. How did you reach the peak ahead of me?’

“I too have seen a miracle’, the Wise One said. ‘Never before has anyone climbed.’

Race stopped reading and for several moments the classroom was silent.

“I don’t get it,” Sam blurted out. “Was there a miracle or wasn’t there?”

“That isn’t the point of the story,” Race said. “There had to be a miracle because the child was waiting at the top of the mountain. How do you think he got there?”

“Maybe by helicopter,” Nancy suggested, which caused the students to giggle.

“This is an old legend. There weren’t any helicopters then.”

“Then how did he get to the top?” Nancy demanded to know. “Did he fly like Superman?”

Did he beam in like Star Trek?"

"It doesn't make a difference how he got there. Whatever method it was, it could not be explained by science. Maybe he wasn't really there at all. Ever hear of Astral Projection?"

"What's that?"

"There are people who believe your spirit can leave your body and go somewhere else. You can be in two places at the same time.

"Like a ghost?" Nancy asked.

"Sort of, except that you're still alive."

"Then it was a miracle," Sam said. "But of course the story's not true."

"You're still missing the point. The Wise One could project to the top of the mountain and never considered it a miracle. But when the Englishman climbed it, he considered *that* a miracle. The Englishman didn't think the climb was a miracle but he thought the child being there was. Miracles are only real for the believer."

"I still don't get it," Nancy whined.

"Let me finish the story. The Englishman sank to the ground and asked the child how he reached the mountain. The child said it was unimportant. His being there was no great feat. It did not change a thing. It did not make the world any different. The only great accomplishment was the Englishman's perseverance and risk to achieve the peak and restore his faith. The Englishman protested that he still had nothing. If he descended and told others of what he had seen, most would not believe him.

"Why is it important that others believe you?" the child asked. "Isn't the most important thing what *you* know to be true?"

"But I climbed this peak at great risk in order to get proof of a miracle. What I have now is something that may only be my own delusion. Perhaps in my exhaustion, I am hallucinating."

"Since you climbed the peak, you have earned the right to learn the truth," the Wise One said. "But it is knowledge you already had. You don't have to travel the world and climb mountains to find miracles. Miracles only exist for believers. Those with faith will find them. Those without faith will never see them at all."

"How do I acquire faith?"

"You must open your heart and mind. There is a miracle in every blade of grass and every leaf of a tree. What makes the flower form which attracts the bee, which distributes the pollen, which fertilizes the flower, which grows the green apple, which turns to red, which attracts the man to eat the apple? Does the tree then know about the bee and the man? Why do those with much hoard more than they need, why those with little share freely? There is a miracle in the heart of every man who shares with another, in joy and in grief. Why does joy

shared become joy doubled but grief shared becomes grief halved? There is a miracle in something which costs nothing, which makes friends of strangers, which is worthless when kept and priceless when given. The biggest miracle is love and a miracle is found in every smile."

"Understanding flashed upon the Englishman's mind like lightning. He had learned this during his travels, when he had chosen Indira because of the love and joy he had seen in her family. And yet when she died, he had abandoned them, despite their entreaties. Surely they were as heartbroken as he was. Surely just as they had taken him into their home and their family to share in their joy, he should have been there with them to share their grief. Grief shared is grief halved.

"The Englishman looked in astonishment at the child, who seemed to know his heart even better than he did himself. The Wise One flashed a magnificent smile and the Englishman smiled back. His fatigue was gone. His spirit soared. He rose to his feet and found himself standing in the temple at the foot of the mountain, at the feet of the child who sat on the rug. His clothes were dry, his injuries gone, as if they had never existed.

"‘You have found what you seek,’ the child said. ‘Use the knowledge wisely.’

"Outside he found his guides waiting for him to begin the ascent. He paid them off and told them he had decided to abandon the attempt. He returned to Indira's family, who were overjoyed to see him. In the time he was gone, her mother and sister had never stopped grieving. Now in his presence, their hearts began to heal. He came to love her family even more than his own. He married her sister and became a part of them. He lived a simple life, like all the rest of the villagers, and he used his fortune for one thing, to make his own miracles, by helping others and making them smile."

Race paused and almost immediately Sam jumped to his feet.

"So did he climb the mountain or didn't he?"

"What do you think?"

"If he didn't climb the mountain, then there was no miracle. If he did, then the story isn't true."

"Why isn't it true?" Race demanded.

"Because no one can really fly or project or whatever."

"Then that's exactly the point. If the child hadn't been on the top of the mountain, the story wouldn't have had a miracle. But since it did have a miracle, you decided it's automatically not true. That's why for you there will never be any miracles."

"And I suppose you've had some?"

"Yes, constantly. Did you even listen to the story? Just take a close look at an apple tree. It's this big, twisted brown thing. Then pretty little pink flowers come out. Then bees are

attracted to the flowers. They come and cause the pollen to fertilize the flower. Once fertilized, the flowers are no longer needed, so they fall off. Then little green buds sprout. Then the green buds become these bigger green balls. Then one day magic happens. The green balls turn red and you know they're ready to eat. But what happens to the ones growing so high that you just can't reach them? Why they get soft and rotten and fall off. Then they fertilize the ground and the seeds create another tree. Do you think this all happens by accident? How does the tree know that it needs flowers to attract the bees and create fruit? How does it know that there would be people around to eat its fruit? How does it know to turn the apples from green to red to signal when they're ready? If you think about it, it's like the apple tree knows about pollen, about bees, about people. But we all know that can't be true. Trees can't think. But we also know that somehow they do. So a tree is a miracle. The fact the we breathe in oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide, while many plants breathe in carbon dioxide and breathe out oxygen, isn't that a miracle?

"I've heard people who climb mountains say that the view was spectacular and proved the existence of God. But you don't have to climb a mountain to see a miracle. They're all around us. We take one of the biggest miracles for granted because we see it so often, but perhaps not often enough. Ever sit on a stalled bus or train, panicking that you're going to be late for something important and then a total stranger gives you this weary smile, like 'we're all in this together' and you sort of smile back and suddenly it's not that bad? Ever see someone frowning or upset and they look sort of plain and then they smile and suddenly they're beautiful? A smile may be the biggest miracle in creation. And even more amazing, we can make it happen and it costs us nothing. When you make someone smile, you're creating a miracle."

"Okay, Race," Mr. Whitaker cut in. "You've made some excellent points but save something for your debate next month. And remember, that I'm not taking any position here, but the school frowns on any religious promotion, so you'll have to walk a fine line. Concentrate on debating the existence of miracles but let's not debate the existence of God. Understood?"

"Yes, Mr. Whitaker."

"I recall hearing that legend years ago, only it was much shorter and ended when the wise man said, 'You climbed?' Where did the rest of it come from?"

"Well, I did expand on it a bit," Race confessed. "I thought the original would be too subtle for some of the class. I didn't realize that there are some people here so obtuse, they wouldn't recognize a miracle if it hit them on the head. Maybe the miracle is that they have a head, even though it serves no purpose."

Most of the class laughed.

"Hey, are you calling us stupid?" Nancy asked.

“Did I say I was talking about you? And I didn’t call you stupid, just obtuse.”

“Oh, well that’s different,” Nancy commented, to the amusement of most of the class.

“This is going to be an interesting debate,” Mr. Whitaker intruded, before Nancy realized she had been mocked again. “On the one hand, Race has chosen a difficult topic, proving the existence of something intangible. I think just from the position alone, Sam should have a clear advantage. On the other hand, Race has the advantage of being very passionate about his subject. He brings a lot of research into it, and Sam only has a month to catch up. I think we’re all in for a thought-provoking session. Race, what is it that got you involved in all this?”

Race hesitated. Finally he said, “Because I saw a miracle myself.”

Mr. Whitaker asked, “Would you like to tell us about it?”

“Most of you know that when I was eight, I was in a serious accident. I actually died in the hospital. Then the doctors brought me back, though it wasn’t really the doctors, it was my grandparents. They died before I was born, so I never met them. But when I was floating toward this bright light, I saw them and recognized them immediately. They told me it wasn’t my time. The next thing I knew, I was waking up in the hospital .”

“I won’t say the experience is common,” Mr Whitaker told the class. “It’s not like thousands of people are dying and coming back. But a number of people have faced clinical death, and many of them have reported similar experiences.”

“Then doesn’t this prove life after death?” Nina asked.

“No, because the people weren’t really dead. It proves people like to believe in life after death, heaven, the bright light, and all that. The belief can cause them to dream about it. But no one has ever proved it really happened. Now remember, I’m not saying it did or it didn’t, only that it hasn’t been proven. Race may have actually caught a glimpse of heaven. Then again, he may have just dreamed it.”

“What if I have a witness?” Race asked.

“How could you have a witness to a dream?” Sam sneered.

“That’s just the point. If it was a dream, I couldn’t have a witness. But if it wasn’t a dream, then maybe I could.”

“What do you mean, Race?,” the teacher asked.

“When I was floating toward the light,” Race explained, “I met another kid. He had just died, too. We floated toward the light together and toward relatives who had died. But then we were told it wasn’t our time. Still we couldn’t get back down. We held on to each other and pushed. I saw him float back down just before I woke up. What if he woke up, too? What if somewhere out there is another kid who met me on our way to the bright light. If he had a miraculous recovery the same time I did, and he remembers the same experience, wouldn’t that

prove it really happened?”

“It would certainly be compelling evidence,” Mr. Whitaker agreed. “But how would you go about finding him, even if he exists?”

“I know we were in the same hospital at the same time,” Race answered. “There must be some records.”

“Then I guess you can start by visiting the hospital,” Mr. Whitaker suggested. “If you can locate him and get verification of your story, I think Sam will have a tough time winning the debate. But it’s been what, seven years? Finding this kid won’t be so easy.”

“I’ll bet you fifty bucks he doesn’t exist,” Sam announced.

“He does exist,” Race insisted. “But I might not be able to find him.”

“Then let’s do this,” Sam challenged, “I bet he doesn’t even exist. You bet he does. If you can find the other kid, you win. If records show there was no other kid resuscitated that night, I win. If you can’t find any proof either way, it’s a draw.”

“I’ll take that bet,” Race said. “There was another kid and I’m going to find him.”

“This concludes another episode of ‘As the Class Learns,’” Mr. Whitaker announced. “Remember next week we’re having our first round of play tryouts. Parvin, prepare a little bio of yourself to present to the class, which will be followed by an interview. Everybody, have a great weekend.”

“Good story,” some of the students told Race, as they left the classroom.

“Stupid story,” Nancy said.

“If you don’t understand it, maybe it’s not the story that’s stupid,” Race said.

Nancy pouted and flounced angrily out of the room.

“Where to now?” Nina asked, after they had walked to Race’s house to retrieve their bicycles, “and don’t you dare say Victoria’s Secret.”

“No, I was thinking the hospital.”

“Right. Maybe plastic surgery will do the trick.”

“Who do you think you are, Nancy Davis?” Race asked with a smirk. “Not everything is about you. No, I’m going to the hospital to see if I can find out anything about that other kid.”

“I’m coming with you.”

“Are you sure you want to? Don’t you have a soccer game?”

“Race, this is very important to you and that makes it important to me. I’m not letting you do this alone.”

The hospital was just past the mall. Chaining their bikes to the wrought iron fence outside, they entered the building and approached the receptionist.

“Who are you here to see?” she asked.

“I’m really not sure,” Race answered. “I was a patient here seven years ago.”

“And you enjoyed the care so much, you came back for a visit?”

“Actually, I died here.”

The receptionist’s face clouded. “We don’t make jokes like that.”

“It wasn’t a joke. I was pronounced dead. But they brought me back.”

“So how can I help you?”

“I was wondering if there was anyone on the staff who might have been here seven years ago and could remember it.”

“Well, I wouldn’t know. I’m not here that long.”

“Is there someone I could ask?”

“You can’t exactly march around the hospital bothering the staff. I’ll tell you what, leave me your name and number and I’ll send out an email asking anyone with information to get in touch with you.”

“That would be great. Thank you.”

“At least it’s a start,” Nina remarked. “Now what do we do with the rest of the day?”

“Hey, look at that,” Race said, pointing to the supermarket across the street.

Nina turned to see what had caught his interest. “So they’re having a buy one get one free sale on vitamins. Do you really need vitamins?”

“No, but it gives me an idea. Come on.”

Half an hour later, they emerged from the store carrying bags of groceries.

“I hope we can get these all home without dropping them,” Nina said. “I don’t see why you had to buy this stuff right here and now.”

“The prices here are much better than at the local convenience stores,” Race pointed out.

“But do you really need this stuff? Two jars of peanut butter, two boxes of cereal, three loaves of bread.”

“I don’t need it,” Race said. “That’s the whole point of buying it.”

Nina shook her head in confusion. “Sometimes David is easier to understand.”

“There’s a method to my madness,” Race said mysteriously. “You’ll understand pretty soon. Now let’s go to your place. We have to help Parvin prepare for her class presentation.”

Minutes later, they were knocking at the door to the Patel apartment. A woman who resembled an older version of Parvin opened the door and looked at them suspiciously.

“Hi,” Race said. “You must be Parvin’s sister. But I thought she was the oldest girl in the family.”

The woman smiled. “I am Parvin’s mother.”

“Really? You look so young. I’m Race and this is Nina. She lives on your block.”

Parvin and her siblings appeared in the narrow hallway. Parvin was holding an infant. He gave the visitors a toothless grin.

“Hi,” Parvin’s little sister greeted them. To her mother she said, “these are Parvin’s friends from school. They gave us donuts.”

“So you’re the ones we have to thank,” Parvin’s mother said with a smile. “My children have talked of little else. Of course now they are asking when we will buy donuts, and that luxury is simply not within our means.”

“Don’t worry, they can have plenty of donuts,” Race assured her. “I buy a dozen every week and I need someone to help me finish them. Otherwise, I’ll eat them myself and get fat and it will all be your fault,” he said to Parvin’s sister, who giggled.

“But why would you buy something just to give it away?” Parvin’s mother asked.

“Because I can’t resist getting something for free, even if I just give it away,” Race explained.

“But why do you get it for free?”

“I see you haven’t been here long enough to learn about American marketing,” Race said. “These donuts only cost the store a nickel to make, but they charge fifty cents for single ones. They really want people to buy many. So instead of charging less on larger orders, they offer six free if you buy six. I just give away the ones I get for free.”

“That is very kind of you.”

“It makes more sense than throwing them away. Speaking of free things, can you use cereal, peanut butter or bread? Why am I asking? Of course you can, everybody needs some.” He put the items on the table.

“What is the purpose of these items?”

“To be eaten.”

“I understand that, but why did you bring them here?”

“Because Nina’s mother doesn’t need them. We were at the big supermarket today and they were having a buy one get one free sale. I can’t resist free items but I really don’t need two jars of peanut butter and two boxes of cereal. The bread was buy two get one free but I don’t need three loaves of bread. I don’t know what else to do with them.”

“I do not understand this concept of free food.”

“You don’t have to understand it. Just help me out here and take it off my hands.”

“The store where we shop doesn’t offer free items,” she said uncertainly.

“That’s because the little stores can’t match the supermarket.”

“I wish we had a car so I can find all these wonderful bargains for myself.”

“Why don’t you just have Parvin tell us what you need?” Race suggested. “Nina’s mother and mine usually shop together. They would be happy to pick them up for you. You’ll save some money. Everyone needs to save their money these days.”

“Your mothers will not mind?”

“Not at all. That’s what neighbors are for.”

“Perhaps I will do that. Thank you.”

“Why did you come?” Parvin asked.

“You have a presentation to do in class Monday,” Nina reminded her. “Race thought it might be a good idea to help you prepare.”

“Thank you so much!” Parvin exclaimed. “I was growing so nervous about it. I didn’t know what I was expected to say.”

“We all had to do introductions last year,” Race said, “so we know how it works. I suspect yours will be the most interesting.”

“Where shall we sit?” Parvin asked nervously, looking around at the clutter.

“We can go to my house,” Race answered quickly, “or to Nina’s, if it’s okay.”

“My place is closer,” Nina offered.

“Can I meet you in a few minutes?” Parvin asked.

“Sure. We’ll wait for you in front of the building,” Nina said.

“Thank you so much for visiting,” Parvin’s mother said. “I was so worried about coming here. I am glad to see that Parvin has such good friends.”

“I can’t believe you!” Nina exclaimed once they were outside. “How did you become such a good liar?”

“Excuse me? Exactly how did I lie?”

“You said that you got the food for free.”

“No, I did not,” Race pointed out. “I said that the store was having a buy one get one free sale, which they were, and I don’t need two jars of peanut butter, which I don’t, and the bread was buy two loaves get one free, which it was.”

“Okay, you implied it.”

“I can’t help it if other people draw the wrong conclusion.”

“But it was the conclusion you wanted them to draw. You planned it.”

“So what? It’s obvious Parvin’s family can use some help and it’s equally obvious that they’re too proud or too timid to ask for it. So I just offered before they asked.”

“Race, you’re an angel.”

“Maybe I had a good teacher,” Race said, giving her a significant look.

Of course, Nina thought to herself, remembering his parents’ incredible sacrifice in

adopting David.

Minutes later, Parvin joined them and together they went to the Ryans' apartment. Nina's mother was pleasantly surprised to see them.

"Hi, Race," Mrs. Ryan greeted him. "It's been a while since you were here."

"Hi, Mrs. Ryan. Yes, it has, but my house is closer to the school. I'm here today because of Parvin." Race explained.

"Mom, this is Parvin. She's new in school and she lives on our block. She has to do a presentation on Monday for Mr. Whitaker, and we're giving her some pointers."

"Nice to meet you Parvin. I've seen your mother with those adorable children but we haven't been introduced. Make sure you give Nina your phone number so I can call her."

"Mom, Parvin's folks don't have a car yet. I told them things are much cheaper in the supermarket by the mall. Would you mind picking up some things for them?"

"Not at all," Nina's mother answered with a smile. "Race's mother and I go shopping at least once a week. It's no problem."

Before Nina's father had lost his job, Mrs. Ryan and Mrs. Jason had been involved in a number of community charities. The Ryans' current financial situation had curtailed those activities. Nina's mother was happy to have the opportunity to help someone else. Race had no doubt his mother would respond the same way.

"I'll bring you some milk and cookies, then I'll get out of your way."

They sat at the kitchen table, eating their snack, while Parvin talked about her childhood.

"We lived in a small village but it was not far from the city," Parvin related. "By your standards, it would be a poor village, but we were fortunate. My father's parents had owned a business making shawls and scarves that did well enough so that my father could receive computer training. His older brother had no talent for computers, so he chose to take over my grandfather's business. While other villagers did menial work for low pay, my father worked in a company assembling computers for a good living. I don't know how you would compare it here, but if you say that everyone else earned three dollars an hour, my father was earning ten. Comparatively, we were wealthy. People actually envied us. People would come to my father for help all the time."

"And did he help them?" Nina asked.

"We believe in helping family," Parvin answered, "and in a small village, everyone is family. He could not help everyone but some people needed more help than others. There were families so poor, they sold their children to the factories."

"They still have slavery?" Nina asked, shocked.

"It is not exactly the same thing, but it is close," Parvin explained. "If a family could not

pay their rent or buy food, they could sell a child to the factory. In your money, it was not much, maybe a hundred dollars. But to someone earning three dollars with nothing to eat, it made a big difference.”

“What happens to these children?” Nina asked.

“I saw a program about that,” Race said. “They have to work in the factory like fourteen hours a day, six days a week. Some of them are as young as six years old.”

“And can they leave?”

“They can either run away and live in the streets, or their parents have to ransom them back from the factory.”

“Yes, it is as Race says,” Parvin agreed. “So when someone was truly in such a terrible situation, my father would help them so they would not have to sell their child.

“As I said, my uncle took over my grandfather’s business. He wanted to expand it and he tried to do so too fast. One day he could no longer meet his bills and found himself in serious trouble. My father came in and assisted. He gave him our savings to pay off his immediate obligations. My uncle was able to sell the business and move his family here, where he now owns a small import-export business.

“For a while, all was well, Then suddenly, all the students in the cities began getting training in programming and the same ten dollars my father was getting for building computers could hire someone with knowledge of networking and programming. The Internet opened a whole new world of opportunities. Companies in India began receiving programming work from American companies. My father’s skills were no longer in great demand and even regular labor was hard to find. No one wanted to hire a computer builder for menial work. They wanted experienced laborers. Suddenly, we were worse off than our neighbors. Now instead of helping others, we were dependent on others for help. We were basically living on the money my uncle was sending in repayment of the loan from my father. When my uncle heard of our situation, he arranged for us to come to America, the land of opportunity. But things here are not so good.”

“Why is that?” Nina asked.

“The little business is not enough to provide for two large families,” Parvin explained. “My uncle doesn’t really need my father working there. He only hired him because that is what we do for family. Both my parents work long hours and earn only seven dollars an hour. Back home this would be a lot. Here it buys almost nothing. And every dollar my uncle pays my father comes out of his own pocket. His wife has just had a baby. When my aunt returns to work, my mother will no longer be needed at the store.”

“That’s so sad,” Nina said. “I wish I could tell you things will get better, but my father lost his job a year ago and now he makes a lot less than he did. We had to sell our house.”

“Gam zeh ya’avor,” Race said.

“That does not sound like English,” Parvin said, with a puzzled look on her face.

“It isn’t,” Race assured her. “It’s Hebrew. It means ‘this too shall pass’.” He proceeded to tell her the legend of King Solomon and the magic ring.

“A lovely story,” Parvin said. “It is too bad in real life, problems are not solved so easily.”

“The story says nothing about solving problems,” Race pointed out. “It simply deals with a method of approaching them. If you view them as insurmountable obstacles, they will always remain that way. If you approach them as a temporary setback, you will overcome them.”

“With no disrespect intended, that is easily said by someone who has never had to overcome such difficulties.”

“Race’s family has had to deal with far more severe problems,” Nina quickly interjected. “They adopted an emotionally disturbed boy. He’s sixteen now. Compared to what they’re going through, our financial hardship are minor by comparison.”

“I am sorry. I did not know.”

“It’s okay,” Race said. “I am not looking for sympathy. But using my family’s setbacks as an example, if we can overcome those difficulties, we can overcome anything else. And financial problems, as serious as they seem at the time, are still far less severe than physical ones.”

“That is certainly correct.”

“Getting back to your presentation, your story is extremely interesting. Tell it to the class the same way you told it to us. I suggest you make a few notes on index cards so that you can refer to them when you speak. Ignore the snickering from Sam, Nancy, and their pack. It isn’t personal. They feel they have to snicker at everyone. After you speak, there will be a question and answer period. Pause a few seconds before answering any question. Sam and Nancy will ask you some very personal or embarrassing questions. You are under no obligation to answer them. Just don’t let them get to you. Consider it an initiation to our class.”

“Thank you for your help.”

“No problem. That’s what friends are for. I’ve got to go. I’ve got a computer to fix. Good night all. Nina, I’ll see you tomorrow. Hey, Parvin, do you sing?”

“No, Race, I don’t.”

“Nina sings like an angel.”

“No, Race, I don’t.”

”Don’t be modest. Tomorrow Nina will be rehearsing for the part of Audrey. You’re invited to come over to my house and listen.”

“If Nina doesn’t mind and I can make it, I will be there. Thank you for the invitation.”

“Race, maybe I don’t want an audience,” Nina protested.

“It’s like when you gave your speech the first time,” Race explained. “You have to increase your audience each time so you can face more people. See you tomorrow.”