

Erika's LITTLE Secret

by Candida B. Korman

Chapter 11: Jeremy Puts His Two Cents into the Mix

When I was little, I don't remember talking to Jeremy all that much. I guess he's just so much older than me and we always seem to be in different places. The conversation after Jake's birthday party changed that. I think we really are in the same boat – well, my boat has TS and OCD and his boat just has a healthy dose of OCD, but we're both coping with things that make us feel alone and different.

I got up early so I could have breakfast with Jeremy before he left to go back to school. It was really, really early. Even earlier than Laura gets up when she wants to blow dry her hair to perfection before a special day. I found him in the kitchen making tea.

“No coffee? I thought all college kids drink coffee.”

“Not me, yet another thing that makes me different. The last time I drank coffee I could hear my heart thumping. Want some toast?”

“No, I'm on yogurt in the mornings now. Seems to go better with all my medications.”

“Funny, that's why I always eat toast. I can't stand anything else when I'm taking pills. You know, we never really talked about it.” Jeremy sighed as he spoke.

“Talked about what?”

“The elephant in the living room. What do you think I mean?”

“Oh, the TS/OCD, thing.”

“Yes, the family thing. The family thing that I got one serving of and you got two.”

“And Laura got none,” I finished Jeremy's thought.

We sat at the table, took our pills and looked at one another.

“Do you ever feel jealous of her?” Jeremy asked.

“Sometimes,” I admitted. “But not all the time. I used to feel that way all the time. But it takes so much energy, too much energy.”

“Me too. Hating her is a waste of time, but sometimes I feel angry anyway. She got to be as pretty as Mom, but didn't get the genes for the neurological stuff. I got Dad's dorky look AND Mom's OCD.”

“Dad's not that dorky looking.”

“Oh yes he is! I'm nineteen and I still can't grow a decent beard! Now, that's just like Dad.”

“What do you think about Dad? I mean right now, with his new wife and all...”

“He's happy. I spoke to him the day before yesterday. It's nice that he's happy, but I wish he didn't have to hurt Mom and us in order to find out what he wanted to do with his life.”

I nodded.

“You know I don't hate Laura, but sometimes I hate Dad. Sometimes I think that he left because of me,” I said.

“Because of you? Why?” Jeremy asked.

“The elephant in the living room, why else?”

“Erika, he didn't leave because you have TS, or because I have OCD, or even because Laura is so perfectly perfect. He left because he had a mid-life crisis. It's right out of bad made-for-TV movie. He didn't want to be a middle-aged man, married to a middle-aged woman, with three teenaged kids in a house in Iowa. Now he can pretend

he's young. He's got a young wife with a baby due in a couple of months." Jeremy shrugged. "Of course it's not going to last."

"No?" I asked. Was Jeremy saying that Dad would leave his new family and come back to us? "I thought you said he was happy out in California."

"He is happy. He's pretending he's young and that's what's not going to last. Life catches up with you. In a couple of years his new kid will make him feel old all over again. You know he wasn't all that good at playing football with me and he's a whole lot older now. He's going to feel a hundred and ten this time around." Jeremy laughed before he continued.

"Erika, there are always consequences. Whatever you do, whatever choices you make, things happen. Some of the consequences are planned, some are good, but there are always unintended consequences. Stuff happens, things that you didn't intend, but that are the logical outcome of what you've done. That's the real elephant in the living room. Stuff happens."

Jeremy looked at his watch.

"Wow, it's almost seven. I'd better go upstairs and say goodbye to Mom. I've got a train to catch."

After Jeremy left, I started to really think, and I mean really THINK, about what he'd said. It felt good to hear him be so sure that Dad didn't leave us because of me. No matter how many times Mom has told me it wasn't my fault I still felt like it was, at least a little. Jeremy was just so certain, that it made me feel much, much better.

Dad calls Laura and me about once a week and I get e-mail from him all the time, but it's weird. He talks about us visiting, but he knows it's hard – what with school and

everything. It's not like we can just drop everything and fly there. If he lived an hour or two away we could take a bus or a train, but he's clear across the country. It's just not fair. It's where his new job is and his new wife likes it there, but is being so very far away from us the unintended consequence of his new life?

I can't help it, but I wonder if he couldn't have figured out a better plan. If he'd stayed in Iowa we probably wouldn't have moved. But he did, so we did. Getting divorced was his idea. Moving to California was his idea. None of this was my idea, but I'm living with all the consequences.

Since I was already dressed and I had plenty of time before school, I checked my e-mail. There was a message from Dad. Maybe it was because of what Jeremy had said? Or maybe I was just reading between the lines, but I thought he sounded just a little bit sad. Like maybe, just maybe, he was dealing with the downside of his decisions and not just enjoying the good times.

I know it sounds kind of silly, but I didn't think about the unintended consequences of my own plan (Project Normal Erika) until I was sitting in homeroom and feeling an enormous tic welling up inside. No one in the room knew I had TS – which was the victory – but no one knew what I was going through either and that felt very, very lonely.

Maybe I should call Jeremy and find out what he thinks?

Chapter 12: Buttercup

Mrs. Martins announced that day that she'd be holding auditions for the solos in the winter concert. She took me aside and told me that I should think seriously about trying out.

"There are a lot of senior and junior girls who'll want the solos, but you have a lovely voice and I think that you should give it a try." She smiled as she spoke.

When I told Laura she just flipped.

"She's the one who does the picking. She just out and told you that you've got a solo. You know how unfair that is! Can you imagine how..."

"Wait a minute, she just said I should audition. She didn't say she'd give me a solo. Maybe she just wants some freshman to audition so we get used to it, and get solos next year? And who are you to talk about fair? You've got everything and you've always had everything."

Then I really went off on her. I guess I'm really more than a little angry and jealous. Most of the time it's in check, but just the idea of Laura thinking that life had stacked the odds in MY favor was just too much. She's got everything going for her – looks, talent and, most of all, NO TS. How could she think that it's unfair for ME to get the advantage JUST THIS ONCE?

"For someone who gets everything she wants, you have a lot of nerve telling me that it's unfair that Mrs. Martins wants me to audition for a little solo in the school concert! It's not like I can walk into a new school and all of sudden make a million new friends, meet all the cute boys and have everyone adore me in fifteen minutes. You want

to know what unfair is, look at that! Think about spending most of your life being THE TS GIRL – now that's unfair. Don't tell me you know what unfair is – ever!"

After school, I went to Grandma's to practice the piano. But I couldn't concentrate. I was just so angry. Laura had no right to say anything about me having an advantage. I asked Grandma if I could use the phone and call Jeremy.

"Of course dear, of course."

Jeremy's roommate answered the phone. For a minute there I could hardly speak. A ticcy stutter took over my mouth.

"Thi-thi-this is Erika, ca-ca-ca-ca-can I speak to Jeremy?"

"Sure kid. You're his little sister right?"

"Yeah."

I told Jeremy what happened with Mrs. Martins and Laura. He laughed! I couldn't believe it. The one person in the entire world that I was most sure would understand LAUGHED!

"You've got to admit it. This is a good one Erika."

"What?"

"Oh, come on now. This is something we should really laugh about. I mean, she has no idea how often the odds are stacked in her favor. She has no idea what it's really like to have to work twice as hard just to be OK. You've got to laugh at her when she thinks life is throwing her a curve ball."

When he put it like that, it was pretty funny.

Grandma was kind of listening to me talk to Jeremy. That's one of those things about my family. Nobody lets anybody keep a secret and NO conversations are private

unless you take the phone into the closet. She sighed at the story, made me a cup of tea and asked me what I planned to sing at the audition for the solos.

“Well, I really didn’t get a chance to think about it. The concert is all Gilbert & Sullivan, so I guess I should pick one of their songs.”

“You’re doing Gilbert & Sullivan! Which show?”

“No, not one play. We’re doing songs from different ones, a little *Mikado*, a little *Pirates of Penzance*, *The Gondoliers*...”

“I guess that’s just as well. The plots are very silly with mistaken identities and all sorts of nonsense, but the songs are beautiful.”

Grandma is always surprising me. She knows about all sorts of things.

“I’ve got a book, someplace. Let me find it for you. It’s songs from all of them. We’ll pick one out for you to practice.”

Grandma’s book was very old. The cover was about to fall off and some of the pages were a little crumbly, but it did have the best songs from all the Gilbert & Sullivan operettas.

“Why don’t you try this one? It was always my favorite.” Grandma turned the page to Buttercup’s song in *H.M.S. Pinafore*. I’m hummed along to myself, reading the music. It was a nice song, not particularly hard or easy.

“Why do you like this one so much?” I asked.

“Oh, I guess it’s because I was Buttercup in a production many, many years ago.”

“You were?”

“Oh, yes. That’s how I met your Grandfather. He was working backstage. It was a little touring company, a summer touring company. I had been studying singing. My

mother wanted me to be an opera singer. I just didn't have the voice for it – not big enough. But I did have the range. I was in the chorus of all the other shows, but I had Buttercup in *Pinafore*. Your Grandfather was running the lights on that show, trying to learn the business and figure out if he could really make a living in the theater. That summer he met Mr. Souza, who owned the costume store then. Your Grandfather went to work for him and bought the store about ten years later, when Mr. Souza retired.”

“You and Grandpa wanted to be actors?”

“Well, I wanted to be a singer and an actor. I loved the idea of being a torch singer, playing jazz clubs in New York, traveling around to L.A. and Chicago. But I also wanted to do Broadway. I had very big dreams – as big as Laura's, but after a while I realized that I didn't have what it takes. My voice was nice and I could dance a little, but your sister has much more talent than I ever did.

“Now, your Grandfather never tried to be an actor. He was always a great clown – really funny, he could make anyone laugh. I guess if he didn't have TS, things might have been different. When I met him he really wanted to be a set designer. It was hard for him. Nobody understood his TS, then. He just thought he had these weird tics. They made it difficult for him to find a job. Mr. Souza gave him a big break. The costume store was the best thing that ever happened to him. It enabled us to get married and raise a family, and Grandpa always enjoyed his work.”

“When did Grandpa learn he had TS?”

“Oh, not for many, many years. I'd already gotten so used to his tics that I hardly noticed them. But when people met him... well, let's just say that I was the only one who didn't notice them. Your mother was in high school and we went to a party given

by the parents of one of her friends. There was a doctor at the party, a neurologist. He spent a couple of minutes with your father by the buffet table and suggested that Grandpa come to his office for a consultation. Grandpa thought he was crazy, but he was just a very good doctor and a very nice man.”

“Dr. Warwick?” I remembered Grandpa always said he was the best doctor he’d ever met.

“Yes, Dr. Fred Warwick.”

“Grandpa says that nobody’s like him.”

“Dr. Warwick retired a few years ago. He lives down in Florida, but your Grandfather still sends him holiday cards. And he always remembers to send us a card for Halloween.”

“Halloween?”

“Because he knows it’s your grandfather’s favorite. Dr. Warwick gave your Grandfather his first medications for TS. Dr. Warwick changed his life.”

By the time I started to tic, lots of people knew about TS. My pediatrician mentioned the possibility to my parents and my mother took me to see a neurologist in Iowa. It was a lot harder for Grandpa. He’d lived for years and years not knowing that there was a reason for his tics and twitches. By comparison, I had it easy.

Grandma and I sat down on the piano bench together. I played Buttercup’s song and the two of us sang our hearts out until it was time for me to go home.

I'm called little Buttercup/ dear little Buttercup/ though I can never tell why...

I found myself thinking about Gilbert & Sullivan songs all evening. Grandma was right about the plays – they are very silly. Everyone is always pretending to be someone they're not – the Emperor's son pretends to be a wandering minstrel, that sort of thing. And if they're not pretending, there's some kind of crazy mix up so no one is really who they're supposed to be anyway. I know what you're thinking right now – that I'm playing out my own little operetta, pretending to be someone that I'm not. You're right, in a way, but didn't Shakespeare say something about life being a stage?

Chapter 13: Two Kinds of Tests

There are two kinds of tests – the kind you can study for and the kind that spring out of nowhere. You might think that a pop quiz in a math class would fall into the second group, but I don't think so. If you've been doing your homework all along then you've really been studying for that test, you just didn't know that's what you were doing. The tests you can't prepare for are the ones that ask you to make a quick decision – pick this or that, fast. In a minute, or a second, or less, you have to make a choice and hope that what you choose will be for the best.

As soon as we sat down in our seats Ms. Kotowski announced that we should put our books on the floor and take out a pencil. She passed out copies of the test, face down, and told us to wait until her signal to turn the papers over. The tension in the room was high. Everyone hates pop quizzes in math!

I was already nervous about the auditions for solos in the winter concert, but since I'd done the homework in math I knew I could ace the test – if I could just settle down. I took a couple of deep breaths. I tried to visualize myself sitting alone under a tree in a park. I even tried to close my eyes and count to thirty slowly. But nothing worked. My hand just would not stop tapping my pencil on the desktop.

“Erika, settle down.” Ms. Kotowski, stood next to my chair and whispered.
“You're disturbing everyone.”

Tap, tap, tap, tap... tap, tap, tap...tap, tap, tap...

My pencil would just not stop. I tried. I tried so hard, but it just wouldn't stop.
Back at home in Iowa, where all the teachers knew I had TS, a math teacher would have

just set me up in the office to take the test, or let me take it during a free period in a quiet room. I'm not saying that I have these tic bursts during every test, but sometimes I do. I know it drives the other kids nuts. And I know that sometimes I can suppress the tics well enough to take the test and NOT TIC. This just wasn't one of those times.

"Erika, if you can't settle down now then..."

Tap, tap, tap, tap... tap, tap, tap, tap...tap, tap, tap, tap...

I just couldn't stop.

Tap, tap, tap, tap... tap, tap, tap, tap...tap, tap, tap, tap...

I tried.

Tap, tap, tap, tap... tap, tap, tap, tap...tap, tap, tap, tap...

I even tried to turn the tap into a sideways swishy move with the rubber tip of the eraser on the desktop, but it only made it worse.

Thump, tap, tap, tap... thump, tap, tap, tap...thump, tap, tap, tap...

Thump, tap, tap, tap... thump, tap, tap, tap...thump, tap, tap, tap...

"OK, that's it. Erika. Out. Go to Dr. Goodman's office. You get an automatic F on the quiz."

I knew that if I just explained to her that I had TS I'd be able to make some kind of arrangement to take the test later, but I couldn't do that. If I did my cover would be blown. I wouldn't be NORMAL anymore. I'd be THE TS GIRL all over again.

I walked to the principal's office very, very slowly. I was in BIG trouble now. My mother was going to kill me and I knew it. I was wondering how long I could keep it from them and I really didn't know what the new school did when things like this happened.

Dr. Goodman was out of his office, meeting with the superintendent of schools. I found out later on that he was at a conference on Special Education and making accommodations in regular classes for kids like me – ironic, don't you think?

The secretary took down my name and told me to sit still until the end of the period. You would think that I'd have trouble sitting still, but just then – like TS magic – I could. I sat and thought about all the tests we take – the ones you can study for and the ones you can't.

The auditions were after school. I didn't really feel like singing but I went anyway. Laura was there, surrounded by her new friends. I felt very lonely, walking in alone when back in Iowa I would have had at least one friend rooting for me.

Everyone who was auditioning got to sing one G & S song and then we were asked to sing duets, trios and quartets in different combinations. Mrs. Martins was trying to find the best possible blending of voices and, I think, trying to distribute the prize solos among a large group of students.

I know I did well with Buttercup's song. After the math test disaster, I'd kind of "run out of tics" for the day. Laura sounded unbelievably beautiful when she sang "The Sun Whose Rays" from the *Mikado*.

The sun whose rays are all ablaze/ with ever living glory/ does not deny his majesty/ he scorns to tell a story./ He won't explain/ I blush for shame/ so kindly be indulgent/ but fierce and bold in fiery gold/ he glories all effulgent. / I mean to rule the earth as he the sky/ we really know our worth, the sun and I. / I mean to rule the earth as he the sky/ we really know our worth the sun and I.

I may have been angry with her, and even jealous, but I was also very proud to have her for a sister. Nobody else was even close to her and all the sopranos conceded that she'd get the best songs in the concert program.

Mrs. Martins had us sing a verse from "Brightly Dawns Our Wedding Day" with Steve and Phil. The song is really very funny. If you just hear it once it sounds like a happy tribute to a coming marriage, but it's not. The characters are going to be executed right after the ceremony and they are singing fa, la, la, about the fleeting nature of love and life – the fickle moment.

Laura surprised me by coming over to me when the auditions ended and making a point of walking home with me. She said that there was only one alto who could really give me some competition. Her name is Alma and she's a junior. Laura's friends don't really like Alma very much. I don't know why. I guess you never really know why people don't like one another. Sometimes there are real reasons and sometimes there aren't. Laura said her friends thought I was much better than Alma. I wasn't, not much better, maybe just a little. Alma is really good and Mrs. Martins could easily choose her over me. I was hoping there'd be more than one alto solo.

I told Laura about the math quiz while we were walking home.

"Mom is going to kill you."

"I know. Can you think of anything that I could..."

"You're kidding right?" Laura didn't even let me finish my question. "Mom is not going to give you a choice. She's going to make you tell the school about your TS. She's going to march into Principal Goodman's office with a copy of your doctor's diagnosis. The secret is as good as out."

“I know.”

As soon as we got home Mom called from the store and told us she'd be working late. I felt like the death row prisoner in a movie who gets a last minute reprieve from the governor, but I knew it wasn't a pardon – just a postponement. Laura made a big salad and peeled some carrots while I put together a meatloaf. Mom would have baked potatoes too, but we forgot about them until it was too late to put them in the oven. I don't like potatoes in the microwave so we scrounged around in the refrigerator until we found a bag of frozen French fries.

Maybe a good dinner would help Mom digest my news?

Mom got home after eight. We'd already eaten and we were doing our homework. She was exhausted. I didn't want to tell her what happened, but I had to. I asked Laura what to do and she had a plan to soften the news. We joined Mom at the kitchen table, while she was finishing up her dinner and told her first about the auditions.

“It looks like there'll be three soprano solos and at least one for an alto, maybe two. If there are two, then Erika will definitely get one.” Laura stated this like she was on the evening news.

“How do you know that?” I asked.

“I have my sources.”

“Sources?” Mom asked.

“Mrs. Martins hasn't done her Gilbert & Sullivan tribute in about five years, but Abbie Becker's older sister was in it that time and I saw the list of songs. Last time there were three soprano solos, two tenor, two baritone and two alto. There were three duets, the Mikado trio with the three little school girls.”

“And you’re sure she’ll do the same program?” I asked.

“No, I’m not sure, but she’s likely to do something similar if not exactly the same.”

“Three little girls from school are we,” Mom began singing.

“Pert as a schoolgirl well can be,” Laura responded.

“Filled to the brim with girlish glee – ee,” I finished the phrase.

“Three little girls from school...” We sang together but started laughing when none of us remembered the lyrics for the rest of the song.

That’s when Laura shot me a look. It was time to tell Mom about the math quiz. She was really, really, really upset.

“I’m making an appointment with the school. This nonsense is over.”

There are really three kinds of tests: the kind you can study for, the kind you can’t and the kind that test how well you negotiate.

“Mom, I’ve got this idea...”

“Your last idea wasn’t exactly a winner,” Mom replied.

“I know. It’s just... except for the math quiz I was doing really, really well. I’m starting to make friends and feel OK about the move and... Well, could we tell the principal and my teachers, but NOT the other kids?”

“Let me think about it.”

That was as good as it was going to get that night.

Chapter 14: Dealing with the Consequences

Mom went to school with us the next morning and she camped out in the waiting room outside Dr. Goodman's office until he could see her. I got pulled out of biology about half way through class. Hector looked at me in dismay. He didn't want to lose his lab partner while we were supposed to be planning our presentation for the science fair. I just shrugged my shoulders and went to the office. I knew what was coming – the end of my personal experiment.

Dr. Goodman was really nice about the whole thing – nicer than my Mom.

“Your mother has explained to me that you have Tourette Syndrome and that it causes you to have tics that sometimes interfere with normal school activities, like taking tests.”

I nodded. I hated the fact that he used the word NORMAL.

“Up until now you've done exceptionally well for a new student. You're in the special chorus, your teachers have said that you've shown great promise...” Dr. Goodman looked down at my file as he spoke. “I'm kind of surprised to find that you have Tourette Syndrome at all.”

“But I do have it, and OCD too.”

“Yes, your mother told me and she also told me that you want to hide your condition from your teachers and the other students.”

I nodded. I didn't like the sound of the word “condition” but I wasn't in a position to correct him. A “condition” sounded so old fashioned. Like I was a house that needed fixing up or I was so delicate I was likely to faint.

“Up until yesterday, when you were sent out of your math class in the middle of a quiz, your plan seems to have been going well.”

I nodded again. I couldn't really believe what he was saying.

“I'm impressed that you were willing to suffer the consequences of your choice and take an F on the quiz, rather than make excuses.”

I thought my mother was about to jump out of her seat.

“I'm impressed, but I disapprove,” Dr. Goodman continued. “This school always makes the necessary accommodations that allow our students with special needs to be integrated into regular classes. If we had known that you had Tourette Syndrome, we could have accommodated you with a separate room for testing.”

“I don't need that,” I replied. “At least not all the time. In the last couple of years I only took a couple of tests in separate rooms. Most of the time I was fine.”

“Maybe that's because you weren't adding to your already heavy load of stress by pretending not to have any tics?” Dr. Goodman asked.

“I guess so,” I conceded. “It's just that I've had TS most of my life. I've known about it and I've done whatever I had to do – take medications, explain my symptoms to strangers, everything. So much of my life was about having TS. I want to be something more than my TS.”

Dr. Goodman nodded, so I went on.

“At my old school in Iowa, I was ‘the TS girl.’ Everyone knew who I was, not because I was a good singer, or a smart student, but because I was the girl with TS.”

“Your felt like your TS defined you?”

“Yes. I was just the girl with TS. I wanted to try being normal, getting treated like I was normal.”

“Part of me would like to allow you to continue your charade. I think it’s gutsy and you’ll learn a lot from it, but it’s against the policy of the school. We’d be failing you as educators if we let you continue to fail tests because of a medical condition. I’d like to offer you a compromise.”

My ears perked up and Mom nodded at me. She’d obviously done a little negotiating on my behalf.

“Why don’t we try telling your teachers – just your teachers, not the entire faculty, about your Tourette Syndrome. Your mother tells me that your grandfather is a first hand expert on the subject and would be more than willing to give them his personal insight. We could arrange for him to come in and discuss it with them. We could also keep it relatively quiet and you could continue to keep your Tourette Syndrome out of your social interactions with other students. Is this compromise acceptable to you?”

“Yes, yes of course.” I agreed very quickly.

“But Erika, that F on the math quiz – that stays. Maybe you can do some extra credit work to make it up, but the F stays in the grade book. I don’t believe in kids using a disability to skip out on the consequences of their choices. You choose to withhold vital information from your teacher. You have to suffer the consequences of that choice.”

“OK!”

I’d gotten off easy – relatively easy. That F was going to make it very, very hard to keep my A in math. I’d have to ace every test the rest of the semester. Mom and I

thanked Dr. Goodman and she walked me back to biology just in time for the end of class.

“Why?” I asked her. “Why did you get Dr. Goodman to help me this way?”

“Because it’s that important to you. I still don’t like it, but if you’re willing to accept that F, you’re very determined to continue your little plan.”

When the bell rang Hector told me that we had been assigned to join Mitchell and Tom in a Science Fair Team. The four of us were supposed to come up with a presentation on photosynthesis. I was not looking forward to being part of the nerd squad, but at least we weren’t assigned to Frank and Rosie’s team. They were doing something about gravity and Hector said that no one wants to work with them.

“Complete science geeks.”

It was funny hearing Hector describe someone else as a geek, but I managed not to laugh.

“Why was your mother here?” He asked me.

“Family business, nothing important.”

“Oh, I thought it was because you got tossed out in the middle of a math quiz.”

“You heard about that?”

“Small school, everybody talks. Cindy is telling everyone you’re on drugs and that’s why you kept tapping your pencil.”

“She thinks I’m a druggie?”

“It could be worse. She could think you’re a nerd.” Hector laughed at his own joke. “Half the kids probably think you’re cool because of it...”

Hector continued to talk, but I'd stopped listening. I'd almost told him I was just having a bad TS day. Lying, even if it's just leaving out the truth, is very difficult. I wanted to tell him the truth – to tell all of them the truth, but I also wanted to keep my NORMAL Erika experience alive. You can't have it both ways. There are always consequences.

Chapter 15: Some Friends are Like Beer

Laura found me right after last period and we went together to find out who got which solo. Mrs. Martins had said she'd post the list at the end of the day. We did great!

I was going to sing Buttercup's song and Laura was going to sing "The Sun Whose Rays" from *The Mikado*. It's just too PERFECT – Laura singing about ruling the earth! The real surprise was that Mrs. Martins had assigned us to sing "Brightly Dawns Our Wedding Day" with Phil and Steve. I wasn't expecting that at all. I didn't think the song would be in the program. It wasn't on the list that Laura had seen from the last Gilbert & Sullivan concert.

Alma got the only other alto solo "Cheerily Carols the Lark," Mad Margaret's song from *Rudigore* and one of Laura's new friends, Marina, got the other soprano solo "Poor Wandering One" from *The Pirates of Penzance*. Some of the other sopranos were singing duets and trios, but Laura's solo was a BIG deal and she knew it. It's a great song – a real showstopper! I didn't bother looking at the tenor, bass and baritone solos. I know so few kids in the school that it's still hard to remember names.

The whole chorus had a bunch of songs to learn and Mrs. Martins had posted a very heavy rehearsal schedule. Laura and I went straight to Grandma's and started practicing our new songs. We'd know them cold before our first rehearsal with the teacher.

Laura was also getting ready for the fall play auditions. She is really best in musicals where her singing and dancing are needed, but she was excited about the play that was coming up. I don't know how she does it all – and keep her grades up. I sometimes wonder if I'd be able to handle more at once if I didn't have TS.

The first big rehearsal was the following day, and my status as a soloist was now public. It was funny. I was the same person I'd been the day before (twitchy tics and all) but all of sudden I was someone that everyone in the chorus knew. A few of them congratulated me, others looked at me with envy. I've been jealous, but I've never had someone look at me with jealousy. It's not comfortable. It makes you feel like a big dish of ice cream – everyone wants a piece of you.

After the rehearsal, Laura told me that she was having dinner at Lisa's house and then they were going to a movie with some boys. It was a Friday so she's allowed, but I still felt a little weird heading home alone. In the parking lot outside the school Rita and Leo, two seniors, offered me a lift home. Rita is a soprano and she said that my voice was even better than my sister's. Leo isn't in the chorus; he's a jock. I didn't know until I got into the car, but he's on the football team and he's a very popular guy. He'd led the team in touchdowns last year and he's kind of a celebrity in town.

They were being very nice to me. I started to feel a little like I did back in Iowa, where everyone knew me and I wasn't treated like some kind of visitor from outer space. Rita said they wanted to stop on the way, at a deli to buy cigarettes.

“You mind? It'll only be a couple of minutes.”

“No, of course not.”

I thought she was terribly stupid about smoking. Anyone who sings, or takes singing seriously at all, should stay away from smoking. But Rita's seventeen. I guess she's old enough to make up her own mind about these things.

We stopped at the deli and the three of us walked in together. I figured I'd buy a soda or maybe a juice. She might not take singing seriously, but I'm going to take care

of my voice. While I was deciding between cranberry/apple and one of those flavored water drinks with extra vitamin C, I saw Leo grabbing two six-packs of beer.

I know that a lot of kids drink beer. I remember kids back in Iowa getting drunk at parties. It wasn't a BIG deal until their parents found out and then it became really HUGE. There was even a school assembly about it. I paid for my vitamin enhanced, lemon-flavored water and went outside the store where Rita was smoking. I didn't say anything to her. I just drank my water.

When Leo came out he pulled off a couple of beers and handed one to Rita. She popped the top like it was something she did all the time.

"T.G.I.F." she sighed and downed a big gulp. "I just love the start of the weekend. Don't you?"

"I've been working at my grandfather's store on Saturdays so..."

"Not much time for partying," Leo said.

"Yeah, not much at all."

"Want one?" He offered me a beer.

"Come on, celebrate your solo." Rita jumped in. "You're the best voice this school has had in years. Leo's brother has a band and they're looking for a singer. I think they should check you out. If I didn't have such a squeaky, high voice I'd go for it myself."

ROCK BAND!!!

Oh, I know I spend a lot of time learning classical piano and working on my Gilbert & Sullivan diction, but I don't know anyone who wouldn't trade that all in to be

the singer in a rock band. And Rita was saying that they were looking for an alto like me!

“Singing with a band, cool.” That was all I could say.

Leo popped the top and handed me a beer.

“To solos for great altos!” Rita raised her can in celebration.

“To singers in rock bands!” I replied and took a chug. It was awful. I mean, really, really, really awful. It was sour and bitter and tasted a lot like soap. Why do people like this stuff? I thought coffee was hard to take. This was worse. You couldn't dump tons of milk and sugar into beer and turn it into warm coffee ice cream.

Leo talked about the football team and Rita talked about people I didn't know. I tried to keep up with them, but I didn't know who was who, so it was tough. I realized that it didn't matter much what I said. They were more interested in getting drunk than anything else. Rita said her post-chorus beer was the start of her weekend-long party. I managed to finish the first can. It was hard to convince Leo and Rita that one was more than enough, but I was already feeling a little light-headed and more than a little ticcy.

That's when I looked up and saw my grandfather's van fly by. He was headed home.

“Ooops, I'd better get going.” I said. “That's my grandfather going home and that means my Mom will be going home soon too.”

“We'll drive you, no problem.” Leo said. But I noticed that he'd already had three cans of beer and I wasn't foolish, or drunk, enough to get into a car with him driving.

“No, don’t want to spoil your party. I’ll catch a lift with my Mom. She’ll be at the costume store. It’s right over there, down the road.”

It was more than a couple of blocks, but it was straight down the road and I honestly believe I better off walking it than waiting for them to drive me home. The cigarette and beer free air would do me good.

I was lucky. When I got to the store Mom was with a customer. Uncle Jake took one look at me and took me into the backroom. I must have looked green or as sick as I felt. He knew what I’d done without me saying a word.

“Two stunts in one week! Are you trying to make your mother crazy?”

He told me to go to the bathroom and wash my face, drink some water and stay out of the way until it was time to go home.

“I know you want to fit in, but getting drunk at fourteen doesn’t help you fit into anything at all. Now, take care of yourself, keep drinking water and don’t let your mother see you until you stop looking sick.”

It didn’t take long. I pulled myself together and managed to seem “normal” or at least normal for me, when Mom and I went home. I told her I’d gotten a lift to the store with some kids from school and that Laura was at a friend’s house. I think she knew something was wrong, but I didn’t want to talk about it and she probably thought it had something to do with my new arrangement with Dr. Goodman.

Grandpa doesn’t drink beer very often, usually just at ballgames and at picnics. He always makes the same joke about it – you don’t buy beer, you rent it – because beer sends everyone right to the bathroom. Well, some friends are like beer. They aren’t

really friends. They don't stick around for long, and they send you right to the bathroom.

I decided that I didn't want to hang out with Rita and Leo anymore.