

Erika's LITTLE Secret

by Candida B. Korman

Chapter 1: Mom's Good News

Mom's good news was met with the usual yelling, crying and door slamming. She looked a little hurt. It was, after all, her good news -- HER good news. Sometimes, I think she half expects us to react that way; that she understands yelling, crying and door slamming is our little family's way to "process" big news of any kind. But for this particular piece of big news, I think she expected a different reception, one that was warm and fuzzy and included us all going out for ice cream.

If that's what she wanted, she was disappointed.

Ever since Dad left – and when I say left, I mean LEFT – we've all been a little extra edgy. Dad now lives in California. He's got a new wife and a baby on the way. It's OK now. We visit him and Mom doesn't get weird when we talk about him. Of course that took a while. At first she was the one who was crying and slamming doors all the time. But that was then and this is now. And there's no reason to go over it all again. We made a lot of changes and we all survived. I don't like to talk about it.

It is what it is.

So that brings me back to Mom's good news. The reason that we lived in Des Moines was because Dad had a really good job there. He got it years ago when my brother was little and my sister was a baby. Mom had liked working in her family's business in New Jersey, but Dad's opportunity was just too good to pass up, so the four of them packed up and moved to Iowa. I was born there. We all grew up there and I guess we never thought that Mom would want to leave. When I look at it from her point of view, it makes sense, but...

Mom's big news was that we were moving to New Jersey. For her it was moving home. For us, it was moving away from home. That's the big problem right there. Mom couldn't wait to start working with her brother in the costume rental business that grandpa started. She was bored working at the car dealership where she's been the office manager for years, and now that Dad was off in California, staying in Iowa didn't make much sense to her.

Of course that's not how we saw it.

My brother Jeremy is nineteen. When Mom made her announcement last August, he was already packing to go back to the University of Pennsylvania where he's studying math. He's a brain, but he's sort of OK most of the time. He wasn't OK about the move and really hurt Mom's feelings when he said, "Since I'm not going to see my old friends over Thanksgiving I might as well go visit Dad in San Diego."

That stung. We've always spent Thanksgiving in New Jersey with my mother's parents. It's our tradition. Grandma makes a huge turkey and grandpa dresses up like a Pilgrim. One year he dressed like a turkey and we told him we'd rather eat with a Pilgrim than with a big, ugly bird.

I thought Jeremy was being unnecessarily mean to Mom. But I'm the youngest. No one really listens to me. I told him to shut up and Laura told me to shut up and then Mom got all upset because we were yelling at each other. She prefers it when we yell at her. I know that sounds silly, but she really hates to see us fight. But I really had to stand up for her. The move wasn't going to make that much of a difference in his life. I didn't like him making it even tougher on Mom.

Laura had a more legitimate beef with the move. She was about to start her senior year in high school. She said she'd already paid her dues as a sophomore and junior – working back stage in the theater club, making costumes and playing minor roles. She was sure that she'd get the lead in the spring musical her senior year and the move would ruin all that for her. "I'll have to start all over again. Making new friends is one thing -- starting over in a theater club is another. I'll never get the lead now!"

She can be very dramatic.

That night I started to hatch my own little plot. Maybe, just maybe, I thought to myself, this move could be good for me. Life is all about what you make of it, isn't it? Grandpa always talks about playing the cards you've been dealt. And he knows what he's talking about. Grandpa and I are the only ones in the family with TS. We've got to play the hand we've got – tics and all.

TS is always with you – like a shadow sometimes, and then there are other times. When I have a bad time with my tics it's like I'm fighting to be heard above the noise. Tic, tic, tic – I really want to do something else, be someone else, be anywhere else, but once I start ticcing that's it. I just tic away until it's done. Right now my TS is not so bad. I take a medication that seems to control most of the tics and I've learned to breathe and calm myself down.

But it's always there. It lurks.

Exactly half my life, since I was seven, I've been the "TS girl" at school. Everybody knows me, knows about me and about my TS. I'm never just Erika. I'm always Erika with TS. I'd like to be Erika who made the brownies for the chorus bake

sale, but I'm not. I'm always Erika, the girl with TS, who made the brownies for the bake sale. Everybody knows about my TS.

We've had school assemblies. My mother has met with my teachers every year since second grade. My third grade class even raised money for TS research – which was pretty cool, except that everybody knew they were raising money because of me. When things got bad in fifth grade I had to take my math tests in a separate room. But even now that I'm not so ticcy, I'm still 'the TS girl.' I can't escape it. 'The girl with TS' is like my middle name.

The night that Mom announced we were moving to New Jersey I listened to my brother and sister complain. It was very hard on Mom. Instead of celebrating her good news, she had keep assuring Jeremy and Laura that everything would be OK. OK, just OK not good or great or fun or wonderful – plain vanilla OK. Mom knows enough not to over promise. So she told them everything would be OK.

That's when it occurred to me that it might be better than OK. It might be really, really, really cool – French vanilla with chocolate mint chips cool. A new school, in a new place, meant new kids and new teachers. New kids and teachers who didn't know me as the 'TS girl.' I could finally, finally, finally be Erika – just Erika. I could be Erika in the chorus, Erika on the swim team, even Erika in the advanced math class – everything except Erika the girl with TS.

Chapter 2: Erika the New Girl

We moved to New Jersey the last week of August. Jeremy had already left for school so it was just the three of us packing up the car. Actually it was just the two of us, because Laura was useless. She was busy crying and running to the phone to say final farewells to her friends. It was a nightmare. She complained all the way and it took us two days to drive to Grandma and Grandpa's. Two days of Alex, our cat, yowling and Laura weeping were two days too much.

The only thing that could have made it worse, would have been me ticcing – fortunately I wasn't! (At least not too much.) It's funny but I think I've got my Mom fooled into thinking that I'm not ticcing at all. I've just gotten better at turning my tics into other things. It's like those videos where the computer morphs one face into another and then another and another. The tics that the medication doesn't eliminate, I "morph" into something else, something that doesn't look like a tic.

The ride was long and tense. Instead of ticcing like a clock, I yawned, hummed, tapped my toes and braided my hair. You get the picture. Someone who didn't know me would have said – she's kind of "energetic" or "nervous." I don't really care if people think I'm fidgety, just as long as they don't think I'm ticcy or twitchy.

Grandma had found us a house. It was near the high school and just a bike ride away from Grandma and Grandpa's. She's also found a good dance school for Laura, who has taken ballet, tap, jazz and modern dance for years. And she promised to take Laura into New York City if the local teachers weren't good enough. She also lined up a few piano teachers for me to check out. They all came "highly-recommended" by the grandchildren of Grandma's friends.

School started right after Labor Day. Laura was all ready for a disaster. Knowing her, she'd rehearsed her heartfelt appeal to Mom to move back to Des Moines for one more year. She does that sometimes. She'll write a script when she has to say something big and important, and she'll practice it until it sounds really, really good. That's how she got Dad to send her to drama camp last summer. The trick is that even though she knows her lines cold, she sounds like she's thinking them up just as she's saying them. Laura is a good actress.

The first day was a surprise. It turned out OK – better than OK for both of us. Laura is very pretty. I'm not saying that because she's my sister. She really is pretty, well, more than pretty. Laura is beautiful, not skinny fashion model beautiful, with bony ribs sticking out, but Hollywood actress beautiful. She's got long, thick, straight, dark brown hair, big brown, almond-shaped eyes and a perfect heart-shaped face. She's also got a great body -- from all that dancing. We took a yoga class together in Iowa and Grandma said she'd find us a new one.

Laura sailed through the first day. She signed up for a drama class taught by the teacher who is the theater club's director, met all the "actors" in her first period, read the part of Juliet out loud and was a hit. Laura will have a part in the school play and a boyfriend in no time at all. I guess she can scrap that speech she was ready to make and go back to practicing the one where she thanks everyone for helping her get the Oscar.

As for me, my ambitions were a little smaller. I just wanted to be Erika the new kid, not Erika the new kid with TS. I wanted to stay below the radar range. I wanted to be just like everyone else.

I went from class to class, raised my hand when I was supposed to raise my hand, took notes when I was supposed to take notes and followed the little map they gave me in the administration office when I got lost on my way to geometry.

There were only a few bad moments.

The first came when I had to convince my mother NOT to explain TS to the principal and my teachers. She just didn't get it.

"But Erika, they won't understand unless we tell them about it!"

"I know, I know, but... can't we try it this way, just for now?"

She finally agreed, but let me know that she was just a phone call away.

"You know, your grandfather and I would be more than happy to explain TS... blah, blah, blah..."

I really didn't want to go down that road again. For once I wanted to be NORMAL, just normal, not someone that had to be explained.

The other bad moments were pretty predictable. It's hard to be the new kid in school – with or without TS. My backpack wasn't the "right" size, shape or color. That was easy to fix. There was also another Erika in my homeroom class, so I said "here" when I shouldn't have. That little goof sort of started a tic, but I stifled it in a little sneeze. It was a close call, but it worked. I took a deep yoga breath and went on with the day. Morphing is hard under pressure.

The second big awkward moment was in biology. We were supposed to choose lab partners and, being the new kid, no one turned to me. I kind of wound up with this guy named Hector. He's a little weird, with spiky red hair and long, skinny arms. But

since I'm the new kid, I don't think anyone will hold Hector's nerdiness against me. Hector might even turn out to be a good lab partner – or at least a smart one.

The last bad moment was at lunch. The school has three lunch times, early, middle and late. You get assigned to one on the basis of the classes you're taking. I was stuck with the last lunch period. I think it was a schedule thing. I'm taking both chorus and Spanish II and I recognized a lot of faces from those two classes in the late lunch period. Of course, those faces all knew one another really, really well and they were too busy catching up with old friends to bother with the new kid.

Laura is in chorus too, but she's in Spanish IV so she had lunch in the middle period. I saw her leaving the cafeteria. She was in the middle of a group of girls. I guess they were the girls from her drama class. She waved at me and I heard her say that I was her younger sister. That was all. I was her younger sister, not her younger sister with TS.

Lunch alone wasn't so high a price to pay for my new anonymity. I was finally plain, old Erika!

Chapter 3: Nerds 'R Us

I was really starting to miss my old friends from home. Laura was too, but she was so high on her new triumphs – a solo in the first concert of the year, auditions for the fall semester play, a cute guy asking her out – that she stopped talking Iowa. I know I was doing fine, but I felt lonely and it was a hard feeling to shake.

Hector is some kind of super nerd and he hangs with a whole group of really nerdy guys. Back in Iowa I would have kept my distance, but now that I'm the new kid and no one knows me, I don't have a lot of choices in lunch companions. I wound up sitting with Hector and his friends all week. It was weird.

There was this skinny kid named Frank who is some kind of child genius. He's only fourteen, but he's reading college physics books and talking about going to MIT next year. And there was this other boy who's really tall – play basketball tall – but he's not into sports at all. He's into computer programming and likes to talk about it until any sane person's eyes glaze over. I kept thinking that I really didn't belong with them. That there must be some other table that would have me. I looked around the cafeteria but there was no one looking back.

There was only one other girl at the table. Her name is Rosie and she just lives to place chess. She's in the chorus with me and in my Spanish class too, so in the long run it's good that I met her. I don't think we'll ever be “best buds” but she's basically OK. Sitting there at this table of future science geeks, I was really missing my friends from home. I ate lunch every day last year with Fran and Cindy. Sometimes we'd speak Spanish just to practice, but most of the time we would just hang out and talk about boys. We would also rank on the nerds who always sat at the table nearest the door.

Now I'm sitting at the nerd table. What a world!

The truth is that I'd really like to be a scientist – not one of those icky people who works in a lab and never sees sunlight – but one of those really cool scientists who work on crime scenes. You know, they're all over TV cop shows, the ones who collect tiny pieces of evidence and catch the bad guys because of DNA. I'd really like go to court and say, "There were Persian cat hairs on his cashmere jacket. And those cat hairs are an exact match for the victim's pet, putting him at the crime scene, blah, blah, blah..."

I think that would be very cool.

I know my grandmother would like me to take music more seriously. She loves it when I play Beethoven on her baby grand. We had to leave our big piano in Iowa and so I go to her house to practice most days. We have an upright in our new house, but it's not the same. Don't get me wrong, I like music, I just don't think it'll be my life's work. I'm keeping up with it. I want it to be a part of my life, because I never want to be one of those weird nerds who only think about one thing.

My new piano teacher, Mr. Lee, said I had "real talent." I don't have to hide my tics from him, because Grandma had told him all about me before I even got to New Jersey. It's kind of relief not to hide it from him, but while I'm playing I don't tic anyway. Same thing for singing, it just stops them.

Of course it's not like I live in some kind of old Hollywood musical where everyone breaks into song all the time. It would be convenient – TS-wise – but strange. Imagine this: the teacher calls on you in social studies and asks you to describe the branches of the U.S. government and you launch into a verse or two about the congress,

the courts and the executive branch. Then everybody in the room joins in on the chorus, singing about how senators are elected every six years and presidents every four.

Laura would like that. I think she'd love it if she woke up in the morning and sang into her mirror while she got dressed. And I'm sure she'd love it if we broke into three part harmony while loading the dishwasher after dinner. Me? I'm too normal for that. I want a nice dry world where people talk to one another (and don't tic).

But no one really seems to be talking to me, nerds yes, but no one else.

Grandma listened to my lesson and then Laura came over. She had stayed late after school to work on her solo for the fall concert. She told us that the a capella chorus was soprano heavy and they were in big need of a girl who could sing the alto part and read music well. You have to audition for this chorus and I didn't even try for it. Laura, who is a soprano, was already selected and she said that since I can sight read better than most, I'd be a sure thing.

"I told Mrs. Martins that you'd be up for it."

I rolled my eyes. The last thing I needed was an audition. I might not tic while I sing, but I imagined a frenzy of tics and twitches just walking into the room. Stress is a BIG tic-maker for me.

"Go for it," Grandma said. "It would be so nice to see both of you up there on the stage."

She handed me some carrots to peel and asked Laura to set the table for dinner. Grandma doesn't like to waste time. It was the first Friday of September and to you and me Halloween is almost two months away, but to people who have a costume store it's like the day before Christmas from Labor Day until the post-holiday sale on November 1.

My semi-retired Grandfather would be helping my Mom and Uncle out every day. And Laura and I were pretty sure that we'd be pulled in for weekends – which was something I was not looking forward to.

Working at the store is another invitation to STRESS. I was starting to think that the only time I wasn't stressed was with Hector and the nerds at lunch. They expected so little of me – and I expected less of them. It was the perfect recipe for a placid, tic-free lunch. Of course it was terribly, terribly dull and I was starting to feel like a member of the nerd committee.

Chapter 4: There's No Business Like the Costume Business

Grandpa arrived home a few minutes before my mother. She was staying late with my uncle, straightening out the window display that had been raided by a group of kids who were having a classic horror movie theme party. They bought everything, even the "steaming" caldron. Mom had to set up a replacement window display in a hurry.

It was the kind of job that Grandpa loved, but he's supposed to take it easy and work only half days. He told us that she'd replaced his -haunted castle with a bunch of vampires at a cocktail party, drinking martini glasses of "blood." It sounded pretty cool and I have to admit that I'm kind of proud to have a mom who would come up with something like that.

Grandpa dropped into his easy chair and looked a little pale. Grandma went bonkers. "You're not supposed to work so hard. You've got to take better care of yourself." She went on and on. I don't know if she realizes how nerve-racking she can be when she gets started.

Grandpa had a minor stroke last year and that's what got my uncle started on bringing my mom back to New Jersey. Everyone keeps assuring Laura and me that grandpa is really OK and that his minor stroke -- which is called a TIA -- is just a warning, like an alarm clock reminding my grandfather to watch what he eats, exercise and make sure he gets enough sleep. Grandpa makes a point of calling it a TIA and not a stroke because he thinks it sounds a whole lot less serious, but when grandma goes on a tirade about the way he stresses himself out, it seems pretty serious to me.

Grandpa was just a little tired, at least that's what he said, from arguing on the phone with one of his suppliers. You see, other grandpas -- yours included -- probably

don't know much about the hottest comic books and the latest science fiction movies, but mine has to know all about them -- and months in advance of Halloween so he can predict how many costumes to stock.

The store rents really fancy costumes to amateur theatrical groups and sometimes professionals too. But for Halloween we sell a lot of the less expensive costumes that kids wear for one Halloween – or possibly two. Everybody knows which movies were big in the summer, but my grandfather has to predict which of the early fall movies will also bring the kids in. Sometimes it's a really cool superhero movie, sometimes it's just the cutest cartoon character.

That's why grandpa was exhausted. There's a movie opening next week and grandpa thinks it's going to be big. So does everybody else, but most people aren't fighting to make sure they'll get four dozen costumes like the hero's! If kids show up at the store looking for that costume and we don't have it, they'll head over to the mall and put us out of business – at least that's how grandpa sees it. You've got to make the customers happy. This particular supplier kept trying to sell him some tired old cartoon character that nobody over the age of seven cares about.

There's no business like the costume business. It may look like capes, masks and funny noses, but it's a tough business. And grandpa really knows his customers. Little kids like face paint and floppy ears on fake fur headbands. And their parents want them to have costumes that fit over their heavy jackets. Grown ups like really fancy costumes so they can act like little kids at dress-up parties. And kids my age are "fickle." Grandpa says we're the hardest to predict, changing what's cool from year to year.

Every year there are people who want to wear classics – vampires, ghosts, ballerinas and firemen – but grandpa also likes to help creative types who want to piece things together so they can be wizards, ninja warriors, knights in shining aluminum foil and creatures from outer space. Grandpa just loves Halloween.

Of course he'd like it even better if people dressed up all the time. He's got a little actor in him. I guess that's where Laura gets it. He's been the Easter Bunny, Santa's Little Helper, Uncle Sam and that ugly turkey that made Thanksgiving a trial. Oh, I didn't mention the sombrero he wore on Cinco de Mayo or the leprechaun costume that he wore on St. Patrick's Day. Boy am I glad I was living in Des Moines at the time – I've only seen the photos. Very embarrassing.

Sometime during dinner mom announced that Laura and I would have to start weekend and after-school hours at the store immediately. Laura was on the verge of a real fit, but grandma shot her one of those looks that says, "don't you dare upset your grandfather!" I guess the advantage of having absolutely no social life is that I was more than happy to work in the store. Stress and all, it was better than admitting I had no plans at all for the weekend.

The next day was Saturday so I got up early and went to the store with mom. Laura had managed to figure a way out of it – at least for the next couple of weeks, I was on my own. No excuse in the world would keep Laura out of the store during the two weeks leading up to Halloween.

My first assignment was to inventory the tights and learn how to keep the hosiery racks in order. This may sound pretty simple, but it's not. We sell all sorts of tights:

white for angels, red for devils, blue for super heroes, pink for ballerinas, green for monsters and more. If we don't keep an eye on the racks, they get all mixed up.

Let's say a customer comes in looking for pink tights for a six-year-old girl who says she wants to be a ballerina, and then little Suzy decides she'd rather be a cat and wear black tights. Very few customers will manage to return the little pink tights to the correct rack. They'll probably just put them with the extra large red tights, not thinking much about it. Then a big teenaged boy comes in and he wants to be a devil for a party. He needs the extra large red tights to fit under his costume and he doesn't find them because the little pink ones are in his way.

You get the picture. In no time at all, the racks are a big mess and no one can find anything! I'm kind of good at this sort of thing. I like order. I like all the tights to be in the right racks. Laura says I'm obsessive, but her closet is a disaster area and mine is not. Of course sometimes I get a little too obsessive and it makes me nuts if things aren't lined up just right. I don't really understand it but the doctors say my "obsessive behaviors" are related to my TS and that a lot of people with TS have OCD too. Sometimes I get really pissed that Laura and Jeremy don't have to deal with any of this.

It's not fair. But, as I've been told many times, life is not fair.

I arranged all the tights perfectly, and made sure that we had an accurate count of each kind in the computer. Then I went to ask Uncle Jake what I should do next. He was with a customer, a really cute guy who looked familiar from school. Of course he wasn't anybody I'd ever meet – not if I continued to sit at the nerd table. He was tall, but not a giant, with curly brown hair and dark brown eyes. He was wearing a letter jacket but he didn't look like a football player, so maybe he played basketball or baseball.

Standing there, waiting for Jake to finish his conversation, I felt myself getting ticcy and twitchy. It's like a wave passing over me, through me, around me. My hand tapped my thigh, once, twice, three times. And then it started again: tap, tap, tap. It was hopeless. My hand banged hard against my leg. Instead of tap, tap, tap it was punch, punch, punch. I swallowed a yelp. It hurt.

It had been a long time since I'd developed a new tic and I really, really didn't like this one. For one thing, I was going to get a big, purple bruise on my leg if I kept hitting myself, and worse, the cute guy was going to think I was some kind of crazy person who stands around punching herself in the leg. I turned around fast and ran toward the stock room. I was out of there fast, but not fast enough. I heard Uncle Jake calling out.

"Erika, why don't you help this young man find..."

I didn't hear the rest. I hid behind the stock room curtain. "Breathe," I told myself. "Breathe in and breathe out and calm down. You can do it, you can breathe and everything will be OK."

But it wasn't really all that OK. It was agonizing. I'd managed to stop hitting myself, but now I was trapped in the back room. It was all too embarrassing. Jake pulled the curtain aside.

"You OK, Erika?"

I nodded, mute and red-faced. At least I'd stopped hitting myself.

"You did a really good job with the tights honey. Why don't you take your lunch break and go for a walk?"

Of course Uncle Jake knows a bad TS day when he sees it. I hoped the guy in the letter jacket didn't notice me at all.

Chapter 5: Weird Chemistry Experiments – Inside My Head

I took Uncle Jake's advice and went for a walk. It's a good way to calm all the craziness down. Sometimes I picture my brain like a complicated machine with twisty wires that sometimes mis-fire and send weird signals where they're not supposed to go. But most of the time I think of myself as a chemistry lab – right out of an old movie with tubes of bubbling liquids, Bunsen burners and vials of super powerful powders – if anything goes wrong in the mix – which happens all the time – there are little explosions and puffs of yellow smoke. I was having a yellow smoky day.

There's a pizza place a few blocks away from the store. I've been there lots of times with grandpa during my visits to New Jersey. The pizza is really, really good, much better than anything we ever got at home in Des Moines. I'm still thinking about Iowa being home and I know I have to stop. I have to turn this new place into my home. Mom says that sort of thing happens slowly, naturally, but I want to feel at home RIGHT NOW.

I know that being the "new girl" is a great opportunity to change things, but the downside of all this newness is that I feel lonely. It's Saturday afternoon and I have no one to hang out with, no plans to go to a movie, no sleepover birthday parties in my calendar and no one to eat lunch with.

I walked passed it and then double backed. I really, really wanted a slice, but there were tons of people there and I was sure that most of them were kids from school. I was just feeling too ticcy to just walk in. It was funny, but just that morning I'd been feeling pretty good – like my tics were all under control. I took my medicine, but I'd half convinced myself it wasn't necessary.

It was. In fact, I was starting to think that I needed more. I know the doctors have warned me about this – that TS waxes and wanes, that sometimes you just have to ride out a bad time. One doctor, my favorite one back in Iowa, told me that he thinks TS is a huge mystery. He's fascinated by it, especially how it keeps changing. I didn't have any vocal tics for the longest time and now I think they're coming back. And this thing with my hand banging into my thigh... what am I supposed to make of that one?

I stalled a little, pretending to read the menu in the window, like I would ever order anything other than a slice and a lemonade. That's when I spotted her – my sister! She'd told my mother that she was rehearsing at a friend's house and that it was going to take all day. Yeah, right!

Laura saw me, just when I saw her. She got pale, and then one of the kids she was sitting with pointed to me, and Laura smiled and waved for me to come in – like she wasn't lying to mom and stuff. I stood outside and waved back for her to come to me. I know this game. She wanted to get away with something and she knew that I wouldn't say anything embarrassing in front of her friends. We waved back and forth for a while and then she finally came out to talk to me.

I can really stand my ground. Laura may be a good actress, but I'm the stubborn one.

“Why don't you just come in and have some lunch with my friends?” Laura asked.

Now, no little sister ever hears that from her big sister unless the big sister wants something in return – something like a cover-up. Laura and her friends were probably

spending the entire afternoon hanging out and shopping. This did not smell like a homework break.

“Yeah, sure, so you can make me part of a your lie to mom.”

“It’s not like that, really. We just took a lunch break. The blonde girl is Linda, the one I’m doing the scene with on Monday, and that’s her boyfriend, Chuck. We went for pizza and we ran into him.”

I was sure she was lying, but she was terribly convincing. It’s that actress thing again. Can I ever trust her?

“Look, I’ll buy you lunch and we’ll walk you back to the store on the way over to Linda’s.”

It’s funny, but concentrating on Laura had sort of de-ticked me. That’s one of those mysterious TS things. Sometimes you feel like a tic, and sometimes you don’t. And since I wasn’t going to be coerced into some kind of plot to lie to my mother, I agreed to join Laura and her friends for lunch.

Everything was fine, at first. Fine, that is, if you define it as being ignored because you’re too young and geeky to be of interest to the other people at the table. Laura and her friends talked about auditions for the school play, a party that someone named Steve was having, and about a party that someone else named Cindy had last year.

I kind of disappeared inside myself. I ate my slice and listened.

“You just wouldn’t believe it,” Linda said. “There were so many people at Cindy’s Halloween party that the neighbors called the cops.”

“You’re kidding,” Laura said.

“Nope, there were cars all over – every spot on the block, jammed in the driveway and some on the lawn too. People were pouring out of the place,” Chuck continued to describe the scene. “I left when I saw the cops arriving, just left out the back with Linda and Rick. There was no way I was going to risk getting arrested because there was beer at the party.”

“It’s not like you’ve never had a beer,” Linda rolled her eyes.

“Not at a party where I could get arrested. I’ve got plans.” Chuck sounded offended. He also sounded like he’d said the following one too many times. “I don’t want anything that will keep me out of Princeton on my transcript. I’m not going to blow my chances now.”

I’d met boys like Chuck back home in Iowa. They have a goal – a big goal, even a good goal – like going to an Ivy League School, becoming a doctor or playing professional football – and that’s all they talk about. They insist that their goal is the biggest, most important thing in the world and everything – and I mean everything – either helps them toward that goal or distracts them away from it.

They usually turn out to be very boring people, and sometimes, very hypocritical people too. Chuck seems to be that way. He’ll drink beer, knows he shouldn’t, knows that no one is making him drink it, but the only problem he sees with it, is that it might get him in trouble and ruin his chances of getting into Princeton if he gets suspended from school or something like that.

Maybe it’s because I have to take medications, or maybe it’s just having TS and knowing that my brain is already a chemistry set that is always doing “weird

experiments” inside my head, but I’m staying away from beer – or anything like it – for a good, long time.

What Laura does, is up to her, but her goals are pretty clear too and she’s very careful about a lot of things. She doesn’t smoke or drink because she wants to keep her perfect body perfect – at least that’s what she’s always said to me. I know that back in Iowa some of her friends smoked. One of them was in the chorus with Laura and they all talked about how she was starting to sound like a raspy old frog. I thought it was pretty stupid and Laura said she agreed with me, but... I’m her sister. I know her really well and sometimes I think she doesn’t tell me everything -- if you know what I mean.

I was thinking about all of this, kind of lost in my own mind, when two boys came over to our table to say “Hi.” One of them was Steve, the boy who was having the big Halloween party that was going to be “bigger and better than the beer party at Cindy’s.” The other was his brother, Phil. I took a big swallow of my lemonade and almost shot it out of my nose. Phil was the cute boy from grandpa’s store, the one who was talking to Uncle Jake just when my tic-o-matic fist starting slamming into my leg.

He is cute, very cute, cute like in a magazine cute.

“Steve, Phil I don’t think you’ve met my sister, Erika. She’s in your grade. Phil...”

So he was my age. He looked older. And his brother Steve must be a senior because he really looked older. He looked twenty!

“I’m trying to get her to try out for the special chorus. We need altos and she can sight read and everything.” Laura continued, as if she didn’t notice that I’d stopped breathing.

“Well, if you’re half as good as your sister, we really need you,” Phil said. “And she says you’re better. Mrs. Martins is dying to audition you.”

The best I could do was smile, a little. I bet it looked more like a grimace. I just hoped there wasn’t any oregano on my teeth. Boy, if there was oregano on my teeth I’d really look like an idiot. It was bad enough that I felt like an idiot.

“Your sister really has been talking you up,” Linda said. “And Miss Piggy needs a good alto right now.”

“Miss Piggy?” I found my voice. It was a miracle! I could speak, which meant I was breathing again.

“Think about it,” Steve said, and smiled at me. He was really cute too. Boy a whole family of cute boys.

Mrs. Martins did have an awful lot of yellow, blonde curls, her face was kind of pink and her nose did turn up a bit. I pinched my face together and in my best Miss Piggy imitation voice I managed to squeak out, “Oh, Kerry!”

Everyone laughed. Boy did that feel good. They liked me. Everything was OK. For the first time since Iowa I didn’t feel like a complete jerk. It was great. The waitress tapped Phil on the shoulder. The pizza they were taking home was ready, so the brothers went to the counter to pick it up. I watched them. They really are very cute.

“So I guess you’re going to the party,” Linda watched me watching them.

“Party?”

“The Halloween party, Steve’s party – which is Phil’s party too.”

I didn’t say anything to Linda, but all of sudden I really did want to go to that party.