

Erika's LITTLE Secret

by Candida B. Korman

Chapter 16: The Merry Quartette

I kept my head down, literally and figuratively, all weekend. I was already in trouble with my mother – that F was hanging in the air. I couldn't afford another goof. One false move and I was sure she'd go back to Dr. Goodman and insist that the entire school would benefit from a presentation on TS, OCD and the rest of the alphabet soup which makes me, and other kids, ticcy and twitchy. Fortunately, the beer incident stayed between Uncle Jake and me. It had to stay that way – a secret. So now I had two secrets, one at school and one at home. Keeping secrets is hard work.

I went to the store first thing on Saturday morning and Grandpa put me to work at the cash register. We were busy. I think a lot of little kids start thinking about Halloween during the summer, but their parents don't want to deal with it until the beginning of October. It was the first Saturday in October and so we were mobbed. Grandma showed up at noon with lunch for Grandpa.

"He pretends that he's going to the diner for a salad," she whispered to me. "But I know he eats pizza with sausages every chance he gets. At least today I know he'll get a good lunch."

Since Laura was rehearsing – yes, she got a part in the fall play – none of us could take our lunch breaks together. It was another lonely lunch for Erika. I took a walk, just to get a little fresh air, and picked up a calzone at the pizza place. Tons of kids from school were there. A few of them even said hello to me, but it still doesn't feel like I belong here.

I ate my lunch reading magazines in the stockroom. Laura showed up at about three, but she was so pumped up about the play that she's in, that she was practically

useless. Uncle Jake wound up asking her to walk around in a witch costume offering people candy corn from a plastic pumpkin. She really got into the part and everybody loved it, of course. Next Saturday she's going to dress as a gypsy and "tell fortunes" while I keep going with the grunt work – stocking shelves and making change. If she ever thinks I'm getting a break when she's working her tail off, I'm going to remind her about our job assignments.

We didn't get home until eight. Mom was beat, so we sent out for Chinese food.

"I promise some home cooking right after Halloween," Mom put her feet up and listened to the phone messages. "Lisa called you," Mom told Laura. "And some boy named Rick wants you to call him back as soon as possible. He's going to be at the pie place in town with a group of kids celebrating somebody's birthday. You're invited to show up at nine. And Erika got a call too."

"Really?"

"Yes, a polite young man named Hector."

I groaned.

"He wants you to call him back. Here's the number."

"It's probably about our science fair project," I told Mom.

"On a Saturday, why would he be calling you about the science fair on a Saturday?"

I rolled my eyes. Mom just didn't get it. Of course Hector was calling me about science on a Saturday. He was a science on Saturday kind of guy.

“You’ll call him back when Laura’s done with the phone. His message was so polite, so grown up...” Blah, blah, blah, if Mom said one more word about Hector, it went in one ear and out the other.

After Laura finished with the phone, it was my turn. But I got lucky. The food came and Mom forgot to make me call Hector back. I wasn’t blowing him off entirely – just holding off until Sunday to call him back. There was no need to totally confirm my status as a nerd who was home eating Chinese food with her mother on a Saturday night. I could become a nerd on Sunday.

Laura ate an egg roll while she was getting dressed to go out and then grabbed the car keys and headed out to meet her new friends. Mom, as I said before, was beat. I thought she was going to fall asleep in her chow fun, but she managed to keep her eyes open long enough to eat. I found a mystery movie on TV and watched it by myself. It was a very stupid movie. Or, at least the detective was awfully stupid. I figured out who the killer was long before he did.

I was still watching TV when Laura came home at mid-night. That’s her curfew as a senior. I’ve got to be home by ten during the week and eleven on the weekends, but here I am an entire month into PROJECT NORMAL ERIKA and I have nothing better to do than sit at home watching bad detective movies on TV.

Laura said the birthday party at the pie shop was, “OK” which is Laura speak for dull.

“Who’s birthday was it?”

“Rita from the chorus.”

I gulped. Uncle Jake was the only one in the family who knew about me drinking beer with Rita and Leo. Now I'd have to tell Laura the entire story -- that is if she didn't already know about it.

"Oh, Rita from the chorus. I'm kind of surprised the party was at the pie shop and not someplace where she could drink beer." I said, trying to be cool.

"You got that one right. Leo said they were partying with you just yesterday."

"I wouldn't put it that way. I drank one beer with them and that's it, no more for me."

"No more ever or no more until the next time you see them?"

"No more until I'm twenty-one -- that's somewhere between never and next week when I run into them in school."

"It's closer to forever," Laura laughed. "I take it Mom doesn't know."

"But Uncle Jake does."

The next morning Mom asked me if I'd called Hector back. I finally called him and he said that Mitchell wanted the four of us to meet about the project. I agreed, but had a lot of trouble pretending to be enthusiastic about spending my one day off from school and work with some science geeks.

"I wish you'd called me back last night," Hector said. "I saw the coolest movie at the planetarium. You could have come along."

MOVIE AT A PLANETARIUM!

Hector really is a super science nerd -- spending Saturday night at the planetarium. Of course I might have liked the movie too, so what does that make me?

We met at Mitchell's house – a “merry” little quartette, not at all like the one I'd be singing in the fall concert. All three of them had very boring ideas for our science fair project. It was as if they'd typed “science fair projects” into an internet search engine and came armed with prepared lists. We decided to continue thinking about it and have another meeting. The topic wasn't due for another week, so we had time anyway.

This particular Science Fair was just for our school, but Mitchell, Tom and Hector were all interested in the real science fairs – the countywide, statewide and the big national competitions. I haven't been in one since elementary school when my bean plants exposed to extra light won first place in the fifth grade competition. I was sure we could do better than that lame idea.

I got home just in time for dinner. Mom's friends, Alan and Jessie were there, setting up the grill for an autumn BBQ – cook outside, eat inside. They kept asking me about school, but I really didn't want to talk about it. I think I'm just feeling worn out. Keeping secrets is exhausting!

Chapter 17: The Great Debate

After we handed in our lab reports, Ms. Johnson asked if any of the teams had come up with ideas for the Science Fair. Rosie raised her hand. Her team, (Jean, Pete and Tony) wanted to do something about nutrition and rats.

“We’re still working out the details, but we want to look at how the health of the animals is effected by a high sugar diet, versus one that has the same number of calories, but more vitamins, minerals and protein.”

“Very interesting,” Ms. Johnson commented. “I wonder how that’ll go over at Halloween when all of you have eaten nothing but sugar for days!”

Vickie raised her hand. “Ms. Johnson, I don’t think that any of us should use animals in our experiments.”

“Why?”

“It’s cruel and no one needs to harm or kill any animals to learn about things we can learn about in other ways. Animals have rights – or they should have rights. It’s too easy for people to kill them for silly experiments. I think we could all just take a pledge to be scientists who don’t harm animals and find other ways to learn about biology.”

There was silence in the room.

“How do the rest of you feel about that?” Ms. Johnson asked.

My hand shot up.

“Yes, Erika?”

“I disagree, completely.”

“You think it’s right for animals to be killed or tortured in the name of science?”

Vickie didn’t raise her hand or wait to be called on.

“No, that’s not what I said. I said I disagreed with the idea that all experiments on animals are wrong. There are some things that can’t be learned any other way so…”

“That’s not true!” Vickie interrupted me. “You can just make computer models and stuff like that – animals aren’t necessary, ever!”

“Now that’s not true,” I interrupted Vickie. I know that medicines have to be tried on animals before they’re tried on people. I know that animal brains have to be studied so doctors can find a cure for TS and other things. I know for sure a lot of things that the other kids in the class don’t know or even think about. “Computers can’t help doctors find out if a medicine works – or if it’ll hurt the people it’s meant to help. Computers can’t show researchers what happens inside our brains when…”

I almost said “when we tic” but Vickie jumped in.

“So you think we should kill puppies and monkeys just to test the safety of hair dye and make-up!” She was very loud and angry. I was getting just as angry, but I made my voice very low and calm.

“I don’t think anyone thinks it’s right to torture puppies just to test mascara, but people are dying of cancer and AIDS. Kids like you and me have all sorts of diseases – bad hearts and mysterious neurological disorders, all sorts of things that doctors don’t know how to cure. I don’t think it’s as simple as you do. I think there are times when scientists must use animals in their experiments.”

“It’s not like we don’t eat hamburgers,” Rosie pointed out. “And we wear leather shoes too.”

“Speak for yourself,” Vickie shouted. “I’m a vegetarian and my shoes are canvas. No animal had to die for me to get dressed this morning.”

“What about people volunteering to test medicines?” Annie jumped in.

“That’s part of it – part of how science works,” I answered her. “But sometimes you just have to use rats or other animals. I might volunteer if I thought it was important enough, and if I thought there was a real chance to do some good, but I don’t think I’d be convinced to volunteer by a scientist who used a computer model alone. They have to test the drug on animals first. There’s a lot of risk when you volunteer to try a vaccine or be the first one to try a new drug. I might do it, if I thought there was a real possibility of helping people. Would you?”

No one answered me.

“Does anyone else have an opinion?” Ms. Johnson asked.

The class stayed very, very quiet until Hector raised his hand.

“There’s a big difference.” Hector was very nervous. He shook a little as he spoke. “There’s a big, big difference between torturing an animal to test make-up and dissecting animals to learn about cancer, or testing drugs on animals before people use them. My sister had cancer. She’s OK now, but she had Leukemia when she was eight. I was just a little kid but I remember what it was like. I’m really grateful to the scientists that learned about chemotherapy using animals. I’m really grateful to those lab rats too. My sister is alive because of them.”

Tears welled up in Hector’s eyes. Olivia wasn’t in our school. She looked a little older than Laura so maybe she was already in college. The silence in the room was almost unbearable. It was like we were all waiting for the bell to ring so we could run out of the room.

“This has been very interesting.” Ms. Johnson said. “We have a great deal to think about – as scientists and as people. I’d like to continue this discussion at another time. Right now, start working on those science fair ideas.”

The bell rang and class ended. Vickie shot me a hateful glance as she walked by my desk, but Tony and Rosie came over to talk to me. You lose some potential friends and gain others. Oh well. Vickie is a bit extreme, but Annie is one of those super popular girls – sort of like my sister. It would have been fun having her as a friend.

“You should run for class president,” Tony said. “You whooped Vickie good!”

“You know for a second there I thought you were going to say that you’d been sick or something. It was really cool that you’d volunteer if you thought there was a...”

Ms. Johnson came over so I never heard what Rosie was going to say.

“Erika, that was a very articulate and passionate speech. I’d like to talk to you for a couple of minutes. Could you stop by after school?”

“I have chorus rehearsal.”

“It’ll only take a couple of minutes.”

“OK, I’ll see you then.”

I knew what Ms. Johnson wanted to talk about. She’d heard all about me from Dr. Goodman and she’d want to ask me about accommodations. I really didn’t want to have that conversation, but at least she didn’t say anything in front of the other kids. As long as they didn’t listen in, I’d survive.

Chapter 18: People Talk

I slipped into the room just before the rehearsal started. We were going through the big group numbers for the winter concert “Hail Poetry” from *Pirates*, “Eagle High” from *Utopia* and “Now to the Banquet We Press” – which sounds like a menu and makes me hungry.

Every now and then I noticed that people were glancing over at me. I’m not saying that I was suddenly popular; it was more that I was suddenly **SOMEBODY** that everyone knew.

Since it was getting closer and closer to Halloween, and Mom would be working late. Laura and I headed toward Grandma’s after the rehearsal. While we walked, Laura asked me about “the incident” in my biology class.

“So what really happened? Everybody was talking about you.”

I told her what I’d said and what Hector had said too. We walked for a while in silence. It wasn’t that hard, mean silence when you’re nervous about what you should say next. It was that soft, friendly silence when you know it’s OK to say nothing at all.

“You want to stop and buy a soda or a candy bar?” She asked as we went by the deli where some of the kids from school hang out. I was kind of nervous about running into people, but Laura said it would be OK. “I’ll buy you one of those weird lemon drinks with all the vitamins, if you want.”

“If you make it an iced tea, it’s a deal.”

I try not to drink a lot of caffeine, but sometimes an iced tea is just what I’d like best. I’ve heard that there are some good things about caffeine too – that it can help treat

headaches and stuff like that – but I once drank a lot of cola and felt all jumpy. It's one thing to be ticcy and twitchy. It's another to be ticcy, twitchy and jumpy!

Leo and some of his football teammates were outside the store. They smiled and said hello to us, but that was it. They either hadn't heard about my "great debate" or, more likely, they just didn't care about things like that. I followed Laura inside the store. A few of her theater club friends were hanging around, talking about the rehearsal schedule and about a girl in the senior class who was auditioning for a Broadway show.

"You think she's got a chance?" Laura asked, as she picked out two iced teas, and a pack of chewing gum. Laura likes to have minty-fresh breath.

"Hundreds of girls are auditioning for that same role," Gladys said. "She's good, but some of them are bound to be better."

"Well, I think it's pretty cool that she's even trying," Laura said. "As soon as I can, I'm going to try to get an agent."

"Everybody's talking about you," Gladys changed the subject when she saw me standing behind Laura. "You going out for student government?"

"I think she should," Laura said. "And maybe even the debate team too."

"My friend is in that class and she said you were very cool. You didn't get all fazed and stuff when Vickie started yelling at you. Way cool!" Gladys said. "Vickie can be a bit much, if you know what I mean, real loud and stuff."

"I tried," I replied. The attention was starting to get to me. I was feeling a ticcy thing growing in my throat. I managed to croak out that I'd be outside. I heard Laura tell Gladys that I could be a little shy sometimes.

“Well, she’s gonna get a lot of attention after that speech in biology class,” I heard Gladys say as I walked out of the store.

It’s funny. I want attention – some attention, but I’m really afraid of everyone looking at me too carefully. I don’t want to feel like I’m under a microscope or something. My great debate might have inspired a little more attention than I’m ready to handle.

Grandma listened to me practice the piano while Laura helped her make dinner. Then we did our homework while the roast cooked. Grandpa came home at seven and the four of us had dinner. Mom would be at the store until 10. It was crunch time – the last two weeks before Halloween.

I asked Grandpa what I should be at the big Halloween party. He had all sorts of suggestions, but none of them seemed perfect until he said the ancient Egyptian Queen Nefertiti. “I have this great tower of a gold headdress in the back. We could spiff it up with a fake gold necklace with a big cat medallion.”

“Isn’t there a lovely white robe in the store room?” Grandma asked.

“With a gold rope belt it’ll be perfect.” Grandpa smiled.

“You’ll look beautiful!” Grandma laughed. “Now what will my other beautiful girl wear to the party?”

Laura had already decided that she was going to look through the storage space with the theatrical costumes and find a polka dotted, ruffled skirt.

“I’m going to wear my old tap dancing shoes and be a Flamenco dancer,” she announced. “I just need a fancy fan and something to put in my hair.”

“I have something you’ll love,” Grandma got up from the table. “Laura, make your Grandfather some decaf coffee. This could take me a while to find.”

Grandpa decided that his coffee wouldn’t be any good without a few cookies so he rummaged around to find where Grandma had hid the sweets, while we cleared the table.

“What is she looking for?” I asked him.

“You’ll see. You’re sister will love it.”

We could hear banging around from above, Grandma had obviously lowered the attic ladder.

“You’d better help her with that,” Grandpa told Laura. “She should have told us she was going all the way up there. Be careful on the ladder,” he called out as Laura went upstairs.

That’s when I told Grandpa about my “debate” in biology class.

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about your little secret,” Grandpa looked very serious. “Your mother told me what happened with your math test.”

“It was just a little quiz, Grandpa.”

“Quiz, test, it doesn’t really matter. What matters is that you have to learn that hiding your TS is not a good strategy.”

“But I want to be normal.”

“That’s what everyone wants – except maybe your sister. She wants to be a star.”

Laura came downstairs in a long red skirt with ruffles. When she walked the black and white polka dotted lining of the skirt peeked out. She wore a little black vest that laced up the front over a white blouse with poofy sleeves. She looked great.

“With this in your hair,” Grandma handed Laura a big, ornate silver comb, “and these castanets, you’ll be perfect.”

“When did you get that outfit?” I asked Grandma.

“About a million years ago, when we went to Spain.”

Grandma told us all about their trip which wasn’t a million years ago – just ten or so. She told us about visiting the Prado museum and eating dinner at eleven at night in Madrid.

“They have the best hot chocolate in Spain.”

“Really?” Laura asked.

“Like melted chocolate bars. It was wonderful.”

But Grandpa wasn’t finished talking to me about my TS secret. Not even Laura prancing around the living room dressed as a Flamenco dancer could distract him. When Mom came to pick us up, he brought the subject up again.

“There are so many times I’d wished I’d known that I had TS, that there was a simple, logical explanation...”

“But Grandpa, you just don’t understand. Maybe I had it easier than you because I knew what caused me to have tics, but it’s also been the only thing about me that people knew.”

“That’s not true. Back in Iowa you were in the chorus and you had friends. They knew there was more to you than your TS.”

“Yes, but... It was always there, hanging in the air.”

“Just because you’re not telling people, doesn’t mean it’s not hanging in the air. In some ways it’s hanging in the air even more because you’re hiding it.”

I promised I think about it and we went home.

Chapter 19: The New Normal Erika

The NEW NORMAL ERIKA started her school day as someone everyone had heard about. I got funny, curious looks in the hall and Mr. Lipkin, my English teacher, asked me if I'd considered the debate team as an after school activity.

"I'm in the special chorus," I replied.

"You might want to try it. I heard that you didn't get ruffled when you were under attack. That's a very good quality in a debater. Our team took first place in the county last year. We have too many seniors and we need some new blood."

I promised I'd think about it. That was the second time I'd promised to think about something I really didn't want to think about. The new normal Erika had a lot on her mind. Hector wanted our team to meet right after school but I begged off.

"I'm going to put in a couple of hours at my Grandpa's store," I told Hector.

"Halloween is coming, so they're very busy."

"So when can we all meet?" He pushed. We wound up having a mini meeting at lunch in the cafeteria. Meeting with the NERD SQUAD was a step back from my new, acceptable status, but we were still in need of a science fair project. Mitchell is like some kind of Dr. Frankenstein, who wants to "create life" from dissected earthworms. He can be just plain icky! Tom is just a tiny bit more sensible. Of the three of them, Hector is the only one with his science nerd feet on the ground.

"Let's try to remember that the whole science fair thing is not just the cool experiment, it's the cool presentation." Hector tried to direct the discussion. "We have to find something we can study and then explain."

"Yeah, and we can't gross out the judges!" I reminded the boys.

“But I thought you were OK with using animals,” Mitchell said.

“Yes, but not just to be cruel. Using an animal is something you should take seriously. It’s not for entertainment. You’re starting to sound like one of those kids that kills ants by holding a magnifying glass so that the sun cooks them and...”

Mitchell turned red.

So Mitchell was one of those weird, creepy kids who enjoys playing icky games with animals. I made a mental note to keep my cat as far away from him as possible if the team ever met at my house. And we went back to work on our idea. I started to think about something completely impossible – something about TS. How could I contribute to the research into TS? Was there a way I could examine what we already know about it? But I had to keep my thoughts to myself. If I told them I wanted to research neurological disorders, I’d have to tell them why.

And that’s the topic that NORMAL Erika does not discuss.

Of course, in a closer to perfect world I’d be able to tell them and they wouldn’t think anything was odd about me having a neurological disorder. They wouldn’t think I had “cooties” or that they could catch TS from sharing a sandwich. They wouldn’t stare at me when I got all ticcy and no one would think twice if I croaked like a frog every now and then. In that world I’d be able to tell them about the experiment I’d really like to do.

My doctor back in Iowa had a science journal with an article on some researchers who were using a special strain of mutant rats who have tics that are very much like the tics people with TS have. I’d do a very humane experiment on them, an experiment about STRESS. Yes, I’d really like to learn how the stress I felt before that math quiz and the stress I felt when Laura told me about the audition effects my tics.

I'd come up with some ratty stress situations. I don't really know what causes rats stress, maybe not being able to find their way out of a maze? And then I'd log how many tics and what kind of tics the rats experienced. I'd then let the same rats have a nice, relaxing day – a day where the cheese is easy to find and no one quizzes you on how to find your way out of a complicated maze – and I'd note the difference in their tics.

But this world isn't even close to perfect. If I told them about my TS, and about the strain of mutant rats, I'd probably be called a MUTANT which is even worse than being known as "The TS Girl" so I'm not saying anything about my idea for an experiment.

I went straight from school to the store. There was no special chorus rehearsal, but Laura had a play rehearsal and Grandma was in the city at a doctor's appointment. I guess I could have gone straight home and gotten started on my math homework – Ms. Kotowski offered me extra credit work to make up for the F – but I decided to put in a couple of hours at the store. Mom was happy to see me. She turned the cash register over to me and scurried around helping customers.

At about four, Phil and Steve came into the store.

"Pretty cool about our quartette," he said when he saw me behind the register.

I was too busy to really talk. I had a line of anxious parents and kids to check out, but I kept an eye on him while he followed his brother over to the decorations. He really is VERY, VERY cute.

They started selecting skeletons and sound effects CDs for their party. Grandpa was helping them. That's why they were the first to notice him get pale. I didn't see it; I

was just too far away. Uncle Jake was in the back and Mom was over at the pizza place. She'd missed lunch and needed to grab something quick. I glanced over and I saw Grandpa sitting down and Steve leaning over him. Phil ran over to the counter, pushed my customers away and told me to call 911.

"I think your Grandpa's having a heart attack."

I did what he told me to do before it really registered. The 911 operator said they'd be there in no time.

"Give him an aspirin."

"I've got to give him an aspirin," I shrieked and ran out from behind the counter. "Where's the aspirin? Do we have aspirin?"

One of the customers had aspirin in her purse and Steve had a bottle of water. The ambulance arrived a minute later and the paramedics started working on him. That's when I really started to panic. Grandpa said one thing before the door of the ambulance closed – "Don't close the store! Stay open!"

Uncle Jake and I didn't listen to him. He ran over to the pizza place to get Mom and Steve and Phil helped me clear the customers. I put the "closed" sign in the window. And the three of us just stood there waiting for my mother and uncle to return, but they didn't.

"They must be on their way to the hospital," Steve said.

"I guess so. I just thought they'd tell me and..." I started to cry.

"Let's go too," Phil said.

So we got into his brother's car and drove over to the hospital. We found my mother in the waiting room.

“They say he’s going to be OK. He’s had a very mild heart attack. I’m trying to track down your grandmother. Do you remember what doctor she was seeing in New York?”

Mom sounded OK, but she looked like she’d been crying.

“She went to the eye doctor,” I said. “I think.”

“Yes, you’re right.”

Mom dashed away to find the pay phone. They don’t let you use cell phones in hospitals. It’s something about the medical machines. I really don’t understand it, but there’s some kind of interference. I was left standing around with Steve and Phil. They’re nice guys, but I really don’t know them.

“Why don’t I go get us something to drink?” Steve said. He looked a bit restless and uncomfortable. Some people are just uncomfortable in hospitals. Phil was the opposite. He looked like he was perfectly fine.

“Sure, we’ll be here.”

He found us a couple of comfortable chairs and we sat down to wait for more news. A very tall man, a doctor, walked by, but stopped when he recognized Phil.

“Phil, what are you doing here?”

“Dr. Warwick, hi. This is Erika.”

Phil explained who I was, and why we were there.

“Is Dr. Warwick your doctor?” I asked when the man left us.

“Yes, my neurologist.”

“Is his name Fred Warwick?”

“Fred Warwick Jr., actually.”

“And you have a neurologist because?”

“I have Tourette Syndrome. It's a...”

I started to laugh. Phil never got to give me the same standard explanation that I'd spent years giving to other people.

Of course, Dr. Warwick turned out to be the son of my Grandfather's favorite doctor. He's a pediatric neurologist and I went to see him. He's a very good doctor. I don't like him as much as my old doctor, but I'm sure I'll get used to him soon.

Chapter 20: So Much for Secrets

Grandpa is really going to be OK. But this time he's going to listen to his doctors – and my grandmother – and take better care of himself. Better care means only a few hours at the store a day, healthy lunches and not getting angry with suppliers who try to send us out of style costumes. He didn't want to sit out the rest of his favorite holiday, but the doctors want him to rest. He'll be back in his big chair, dressed as a pirate on Halloween. But until then, he's at home resting.

Mom and Jake are splitting up the big duties at the store and I've become an official part-time employee. Since I'm only fourteen I can't work that many hours, but I'll fill in on Saturday afternoons. Right now – they're just as crazy/busy as Grandpa usually is this time of year! As soon as they calm down, we're going to interview a few high school kids who want to work after school.

We finally figured out what to do for our science fair project. It's a big model of the human circulatory system. Ms. Johnson looked at our plans and thinks that it might be a winner in the presentation category – as opposed to the experiment category. Hector really is a TREMENDOUS SCIENCE NERD, but having someone like that on your team is a good thing. I think we might even win!

I didn't join the debate team, but Mr. Lipkin convinced me to try writing for the school paper. My first story will be about the school play. It's a story about the production – not a review. It wouldn't be fair for me to be the critic, since my sister is the star.

Laura and I know our songs for the winter concert already. I think it'll be a great show. I even heard that Rita has decided to quit smoking, because she wants to get a solo

in the spring. I used to think that Gilbert and Sullivan were just too silly – all those over-the-top mix ups and cases of mistaken identity, but life, real life, is pretty full of over-the-top mix ups and coincidences too. So maybe I should just learn to enjoy the silliness?

In the end my HUGE fear about being labeled THE TS GIRL at my new school turned out to be a major yawn. There already had a TS BOY – Phil. He'd been going to school with the same kids all his life so they were all used to IT and to him too. Having a girl with TS in school too wasn't exactly big news. This time I didn't have to explain it to anyone. Phil had already done that.

The big Halloween party is next week. I'm all set to be Nefertiti and Laura will make a wonderful Flamenco dancer. I don't know what – or who – Phil is going to be for the party, but I hope an Egyptian Queen will look good dancing with him. He's even cuter now that I know he has TS and he knows that I have it too. He's one boy I'll never have to worry about getting ticcy around.

Laura already knew about Phil – that's what Linda told her on the train home from New York. She was laughing about it, while keeping it secret from me, and Mom and Grandpa too. We all have little secrets.

The End