

Erika's LITTLE Secret

by Candida B. Korman

Chapter 6: Wearing Masks

Laura and Linda walked me back to the costume shop. Mom did look a little angry. “Aren’t you supposed to be learning a scene for acting class? Or writing a paper or something?”

“We took a lunch break, and look who we ran into at the pizzeria.”

All was forgiven. I’m still suspicious about how much studying Laura was doing, but...

I spent the rest of the afternoon safely in the stockroom doing inventory on masks. We carry a lot of masks. Monsters, ghouls and zombies are pretty popular. And then there are the former Presidents and famous actors. Some people think it’s fun to pretend to be President Clinton or Richard Nixon. I think it’s boring.

I don’t think much of masks in general. First of all it’s hard to see what you’re doing and it also gets hot and sweaty under them. I’d rather wear theatrical make-up. There’s also something about having something right on your face -- something weird and creepy.

When I was really little, Laura and I dressed up as Dalmatians – yes, as dogs. We drew black spots on white sweat pants and turtlenecks. Grandpa gave us really neat floppy ears on headbands and then we had these black plastic noses on elastic strings. We looked really cool, but that nose drove me crazy. I just couldn’t keep it on. I had to keep taking it off. Laura was furious with me, because the whole idea was that we’d be wearing matching costumes. But I cried and cried and cried.

A few years later, when I got diagnosed with TS, my mother told the doctor about it. He said that some people with TS are very sensitive to the way things feel, and to

sounds too. It's like you feel all icky and twitchy because there's something rubbing you the wrong way. I really do get that way sometimes. I'm just happy I don't need braces. I can't imagine wearing braces – ever. Just the idea of something in my mouth all the time would make me completely batty.

I sorted the masks by style. There are just so many of them! Some of them are really creepy -- scary creepy. If you look at them quickly they look like faces -- faces without heads or bodies – which is, I guess, the idea. There's a werewolf mask that comes with hairy rubber gloves complete with pointy nails. Yeeech! You'll never catch me wearing a mask. But we've got tons of them to sell.

Grandpa doesn't like the rubber ones. We only sell them to adults, actually anyone over eighteen – defining adults any other way is really, really tricky. There are days when I think Grandpa is younger than me, so how would you judge who's the adult? Little kids always want them – the rubber masks, but Grandpa just says it's irresponsible to sell them to someone who might not be careful about basic stuff like seeing and breathing. A really little kid might decide to go to sleep wearing his rubber mask and not be able to breathe.

Sometimes I wonder about things like that, things like people who are foolish enough to give a little kid a dangerous toy or people who smoke, knowing it's bad for them and stuff like that. I get very, very worried. Laura thinks it's the obsessive stuff that comes with TS sometimes. I don't. I think it's just the way I am. It's funny, I don't want everything that I am, everything that I do, or think or feel, to be put in a box marked, “Erika's TS.”

I know that some of the things I do are part of the whole TS package – the need to have everything in my closet just so, folding napkins in absolutely straight lines, but I don't like it when my sister says, "You're doing a TS thing again." There's got to be more to me than my diagnosis.

Sometime between the bumpy-faced ghoulish mask and the black cat with whiskers mask, I started to think about my own Halloween costume. Until that moment I'd pretty much decided to bow out of the big holiday entirely. I mean, I'm too old to trick or treat and I didn't think I'd have a chance at being invited to any party outside of the store, but all of a sudden I realized that Steve and Phil's party was my shot at a social life.

Maybe I really could pull it off? No one at my new school had any idea about my TS. I'd managed to swallow, cover or morph all my tics except the thigh punching and I was kind of hoping that was a fad that had past. I thought about the following week and kind of mapped out a plan of action. I had two big hurdles: one, the audition for Mrs. Martins who really needed an alto in the special chorus; and two, dissecting a frog with Hector. I honestly don't know which is scarier.

So, right there in the stock room, surrounded by bodiless ghouls with empty eye sockets and hairy rubber hands, I promised myself that if I got through the audition and the frog, I'd get Grandpa to pick out the best costume in the store for me. If I was going to go to the Halloween party with all the cool kids, I was going to be the one in the best costume! If I couldn't actually be one of the cool kids, I was going to look like one – and wear a cool kid mask.

Chapter 7: The Best of Gilbert & Sullivan, According to Miss Piggy,

AKA Mrs. Martins

At least I'm not a sweaty palms person. A lot of people are. They get nervous, and the next thing you know they have wet hands. It's gross. My big fear was that I'd get all ticky right before the audition. I know that once I start singing, there's no problem. It's the walk into the room, the standing still as Mrs. Martin plays the opening chords and that moment before I open my mouth to sing, that was driving me to distraction. I was so afraid I'd be a mess of tics before I even got to sing.

All through school I thought about it. And the more I thought about it, the more ticky I felt. During Spanish class I felt a stutter coming on when I was conjugating verbs.

Querer to wish or want: quiero, quieres, quiere, queremos, queri es, quieren, quise, quisiste, quiso, quisimos, quisisteis, quisieron...

Of course that was an easy one to cover. I just rrrrrrolled those rrrrrr's a little more than is natural and Senora Vega complimented me on my accent.

During math class I almost lost it again. I had to write the equation on the board – not one of my favorite things. I really don't like having people sitting right behind me, staring at my back. I felt my hand balling up into a fist, bang, bang, bang into my thigh. Of course everyone in the class just thought I was stalling because I couldn't do the problem, and it was an easy one too.

I guess I could have told someone, anyone, that I had TS and that the thigh-banging fist was an overwhelming tic – something harder to control than a gut-wrenching

cough or a neck-snapping sneeze. But I didn't. I actually let them think I was stupid. Well, maybe not stupid, but I let them think I couldn't do a perfectly simple math problem, because it was better to be thought of as bad in math than to reveal that I had TS.

But was it?

What had my plan netted me so far? I was sitting at the nerd table for lunch. Sharing a frog with Hector – the rough equivalent of social suicide. I was rapidly becoming a basket case because of the prospect of violent tics before my singing audition. I was expending a tremendous amount of energy molding my tics into socially acceptable nervous habits. I didn't have any new friends. And now my classmates thought I was bad at math.

On the other hand, I had Steve and Phil's Halloween Party on my otherwise empty calendar. Just remembering how they laughed at my imitation of Mrs. Martins was like a huge billboard on the highway advertising: "Erika Can Be A Normal Girl." I needed to hold on to the promise of that billboard.

I put all those negative things on one side of a piece of paper, and that one positive thing on the other side. The scales were balanced. Full steam ahead, man the barricades, storm the Bastille and all that stuff. My campaign to be accepted as NORMAL was moving along.

I'm glad I'm not squeamish. There are lots of upsides to that. For one thing, I wasn't freaked out about the frog. It's one thing to be considered bad in math, but to be thought of as one of those girls that faint at the sight of wiggly, squiggly things would be

too much. Hector had to practically push me away from our lab station in order to get to do some of the slicing.

The funny thing about the frog was that it took a lot of concentration. And things that take a lot of concentration practically cure my TS. Well, cure is too big a word, because it's temporary. But when I'm really focused on something – like singing, playing the piano, doing a hard math problem (a real hard one) or even dissecting a frog – I lose myself in that task and NO TICS! It's magic.

That's why Laura was so sure I could make the special chorus. She knows that when I'm singing, I'm singing and nothing else. Of course she has no idea how much effort I put into not revealing my tics BEFORE I sing.

Laura says she understands. And, I guess, she has heard all the explanations over and over and over again until she could recite them. But that doesn't mean she really understands. My brother doesn't really get it either. Or even my mother. TS is just so weird from the inside that other people never really understand. They might try to, like my mother, or think they do, like my sister, but there's always a gap between the idea and the reality.

Laura met me outside the music room before the audition.

“I just want to warn you, you're not going to be alone in there.”

“What?”

“There's a special chorus rehearsal today, so some of them are going to be there – just hanging out.”

“What?” I tried to control myself. “You mean they're going to WATCH me audition.”

Laura nodded.

“Just remember she really needs an alto who can sight read. You’re in, really.”

But I thought Laura sounded like she was trying to convince herself along with me.

Mrs. Martins seemed genuinely happy to see me. She already knew me as one of the many, many, many faces in the regular chorus. Some people take chorus as an easy A, but some of us take music seriously. I think she can tell who’s who, but right now nothing mattered except suppressing the tic that was itching at the back of my throat. It wanted to jump out, like a frog -- a live one mocking me after I’d dissected its cousin.

“Hi-uppp,” I croaked. It sounded like something between a hic up and a sneeze.

“Oh, poor dear,” Mrs. Martins got up from the piano. “Let me get you a little water.

“Hi-uppp,” it happened again.

OK, now I was the new girl who sat at the nerd table, was bad in math, had no new friends and made funny noises before her audition.

“Hi-uppp, hi-uppp, hi-uppp.”

Laura stood by me, but I could tell she wanted to be anywhere else. Well, not exactly anywhere. She wanted to be with the other members of the special chorus who were sitting together talking by the window of the music room. I just hoped they thought I was suffering from nervous hiccups.

“Hi-uppp, hi-uppp...”

I gulped the water and managed to say, “Let’s start,” to Mrs. Martins.

She played a few scales and I sang, higher and higher, lower and lower, as she checked my range – which is pretty good. “La, la, la, la, la...”

“Now could you sight read this phrase?”

She handed me a page of music. I realized it was a famous song from an opera – O “Mio Bambino Caro.” I sang it pretty well. The high notes are a bit of a stretch.

“I know that one,” I admitted. It wasn’t really a good test of my sight-reading.

“How about this?” Mrs. Martins handed me a page of music, gave me the initial note and let me try. It was a tough piece with all sorts of time changes. I guess I did it pretty well because she really, really smiled.

She looked at the other kids and they seemed happy too.

One more score for NORMAL Erika!

“Steve, Phil would you two join us?” Mrs. Martins looked up from the piano as she spoke. The brothers broke away from the other kids at the window and came over to the piano. “Erika, we’re planning a Gilbert & Sullivan Highlights Program for the December concert. Your sister has such a lovely soprano, she’s sure to do one of the solos. But right now I’d like to try an experiment with the two brothers and two sisters.”

She gave us each a copy of a song from *The Mikado*. It was a quartet, “Brightly Dawns Our Wedding Day.” She played the introduction and we went for it! It worked. Steve is a tenor and Phil is a baritone who can hit the really low notes too. With Laura as the soprano and me as the alto, we were an interesting quartet. The harmonies really worked!

*Joyous hour we give thee greeting, whither/ whither art thou fleeting/ fickle
moment pray thee stay/ fickle moment pray thee stay. / Sing a merry madrigal/ sing a
merry madrigal/ sing a merry madrigal/ fa, la, fa, la, fa, la, la, la, la...*

“Family members blend with such lovely harmonies,” Mrs. Martins commented.
I was in the special chorus! Another score for NORMAL Erika.

Chapter 8: The Lights of Broadway

It's funny but when you're concentrating on things as they happen – moment by moment – you can lose sight of the big picture. Sometimes it's good. By concentrating on the task in front of me I can get absorbed and kind of forget my troubles, and my TS, for a few minutes.

But that kind of concentration can also distract you from the big picture. I've been concentrating so hard on getting through my days without being pegged as “the TS girl” that I haven't really had a chance to miss my old friends from home. Of course that sense of everything being OK ended with e-mail from Beth. She was one of my best friends in Iowa and she sent me this long e-mail message with all sorts of fun stuff about everyone and everything back home. I had missed a major “First Day of School” party at Ben's; all the gossip about Cindy's new nose; a scandal involving a web site that trashes everybody, but doesn't use their real names; and the new, totally hot, coach for the girl's basketball team.

Beth also said that she was auditioning for the school play – *Kismet*, and that she didn't think she'd get a part, being a freshman, but that she was sure she would be in the chorus and dressed like a harem girl. Beth also said that this boy I had a crush on last year is going out with a girl I never liked at all, and that over the summer he got very, very tall and very, very cute.

All of a sudden I felt very, very lonely.

No one really knows me here.

I mean nobody outside my family and that's pretty sad. I'm used to everybody knowing my name. Back in Des Moines everyone said “Hi” to me when they saw me in

school. Everybody recognized me when they ran into me at the mall. Everybody knew that I spell Erika with a “K” and not a “C”. Everybody knew that I was good in math and can sing and play the piano. And yeah, they knew about my TS too, but they KNEW me. Here I’m not even sure that my presence registers. I’m almost invisible.

I don’t think that anyone’s saying: “Is the new girl in class today?” “Is the new girl going to audition for the school play?” or “Do you think the new girl will want to come to the movie this weekend?”

NO.

Nobody is saying that. It’s like I’m not really here. But back in Iowa it would be different. I’d be making my famous brownies for the chorus bake sale and have plans every weekend with friends. Here I’m no one – not even the TS girl!

One day of school is pretty much like the next, when you’re the invisible new girl. You just slog through the days, jumping hurdles – like auditions and frogs – but nothing really happens. It’s boring as well as lonely.

On Friday there was some kind of teacher’s conference day. Grandpa and Uncle Jake said that they really didn’t need us in the store so mom said we could take the train to New York and go to a show. Laura was really, really excited about it. Now that she has friends and is totally accepted in the theater club at school, she’s feeling really good about living in New Jersey. Being so close to New York – with theaters and tons of movies and TV shows – she’s starting to see spending her senior year here as a good thing for her career as an actress.

“I’ll get to see Broadway plays all the time!” She told our grandmother the other day. What she didn’t say was that she also wants to start going to auditions for

professional work. She wants to get an agent and she's thinking about skipping college and going right into "show business."

According to my mother THIS WILL NEVER HAPPEN. Mom is dead set on Laura going to college BEFORE she starts "fooling around with being an actress."

When it comes to being stubborn my mother and my sister are both champs. I really don't know who to bet on. If Laura gets into Yale Drama School or the acting program at New York University, then Mom will win. Laura knows that there are certain schools that can really launch an acting career. But if she doesn't, there is going to be a war in the house.

Laura says she won't go to a regular college. "I don't want to be the star of the school play at a school where everyone else is studying to be an accountant!" That's a direct quote. She says that all the time. And now that she's a senior and applying to colleges, I hear it all the time.

Mom wants Laura to "... have something to fall back on." And Laura says that "falling back is the same as falling down."

They go around and around like that all the time.

Laura's friend Linda has already decided that her acting career is limited to school. She may look like a pretty ditz, but she has BIG ambitions. She wants to go to Columbia or Harvard, then on to law school, and from there she will run for Congress. I don't know if she wants to be the first woman President – or if she'll be satisfied being an ordinary Governor, but she is planning to be a very important person.

I heard all about this on the train into New York, on our way to see a show. The train ride is not that long, but it is long enough for Linda and Laura to talk, talk, talk.

The plan was to go into the city, buy tickets at the half price booth in Times Square (a really cool place when you can't afford full price and really want to see a show that night) do a little shopping, have dinner, see the show and then take the train home. Linda does this kind of thing all the time, so Mom said that as long as we called her before and after the show – and to let her know which train we were taking – everything would be cool.

This kind of surprised me. Mom was never big on Laura and me wandering off on our own back home in Des Moines, but Mom grew up going into Manhattan to shop, go to museums or shows. I know that some people back in Iowa think New York is really, really dangerous. Mom doesn't think so. She always told them New York was noisy, dirty and crowded – but basically safe. This was the first time she'd demonstrated that she really felt that way. I was starting to realize how much mom gave up to move to Iowa with Dad.

She has a lot more in common with Laura than either of them think. Now that's something to contemplate. Mom and Laura actually having things in common! Neither of them would believe me. Maybe I'll talk to Grandma about it.

It's funny, but I really don't know much about my mother's life before she got married and had us. I know she had some kind of life – everybody's Mom has a life before they're your Mom, but I don't know what it was like. I know that she lived in New Jersey with her parents. I know that she met my dad when they were both students at Rutgers. I know that she was an English major and that she dropped out of college when she got married.

I also know that she worked in the costume store when she was a teenager and again when she left college. But I don't know why she dropped out of college. Oh, I know she says she dropped out because my dad needed to finish his MBA and she was the one who was going to support them, but I don't know WHY. In the sense of why she was willing to make that kind of sacrifice. I also don't know why she didn't go back to school when he finished his degree. She says it was because she was pregnant with my brother, but she could have gone to school while she was pregnant. She didn't. She worked in the family business and had my brother and then my sister.

But what did Mom want to be when she grew up? I really don't know.

The line for tickets wasn't huge. Linda said that sometimes it was incredibly long. When we got to the front of the line there were tickets available for a whole lot of shows. Of course Linda had seen them all before. She goes to the theater all the time. We got tickets to *The Producers* – which was fun. I really liked it.

The not so fun part was being very, very aware of being the little sister tagging along. Every now and then – especially when we were shopping at Macy's and when we had dinner before the show – I would catch Laura looking at Linda and sort of saying, "If she weren't here we could talk, but..." It's not fun being the reason your sister and her friend can't talk freely. It's not like I'd know the people they were gossiping about. And it's not like I'd go and tell some guy that Linda liked him or that Laura said he was cute, but there I was – a human conversation stopper.

On the way home on the train I pretended to fall asleep. I know it was a sneaky thing to do but sitting there listening to them ALMOST talk was too miserable. Besides,

little sisters have to be sneaky to learn anything at all. I just picked up my book and then closed my eyes. I guess Laura isn't the only actress in the family!

The funny thing is that after I pretended to fall asleep, I really did fall asleep so I only heard a little bit of their "private" conversation. They whispered about boys – of course. I caught little bits and pieces. They are really pumped about Steve's party. There was something about Phil that Linda said and Laura laughed about, but I couldn't catch what it was. And then they went on to talk about how Linda wasn't so happy with Chuck. It seemed he was one of those guys that has to have his own way all the time.

I kind of thought he was obnoxious when I met him, but nobody asks my opinion. Maybe they should?

Chapter 9: Back at Work

I was back at the store first thing Saturday morning. This time Uncle Jake showed me how to use the cash register and how to track inventory on the computer. It was pretty cool. Mom was really having fun. The costume director for a small theater group was in talking to her about their upcoming production. Mom was showing them all sorts of costumes they could rent and she even pulled out the catalogs of “special order” costumes. With Mom dealing with the theater people, that left Uncle Jake, Grandpa and me to deal with the pre-Halloween shoppers.

Grandpa, like I said before, is supposed to take it easy. But he really likes talking to customers. Uncle Jake put a big chair next to the display case full of swords, pitch forks, hook hands and other creepy props. Grandpa was dressed as a pirate – complete with a peg leg and an eye patch. He put on a phony pirate-ish English accent and grrrrred and growled his comments at the customers. It was a hoot! A little kid asked him if he was Pirate Santa and wanted him to come to his birthday party. Grandpa loved it. Maybe he’s got a second career entertaining at kids’ parties?

I had to talk him into getting out of costume when we went to lunch together. It’s one thing for him to be in costume at the store – it’s another, entirely embarrassing thing, for him to be in costume out in public. We went to the pizza place, of course, and I found myself looking around for Phil. There were kids from school there, but he wasn’t one of them.

Hector was there with a girl who had to be his older sister. She looked just like him, a girl version of him. He came over to our table to say “hello” and I just wanted to crawl under the table. It’s one thing to dissect frogs with a nerd, it’s another thing to eat

lunch in public with one. Grandpa invited them to join us, but Hector's sister – Olivia – said that they had to run. That was a close call. My social standing is zero. I'm not ready to risk it being even less than that.

After lunch we got really crowded so I worked the register. It's a big responsibility. You've got to give people the right change – which doesn't seem like it would be hard, but with lots of people around distracting you it can be very stressful. And it's important not to make mistakes. People also use credit cards a lot so I had to learn how to run them through the machine and stuff. Mom was really happy with the job I was doing.

Laura was there for part of the day, moving merchandise out of the stock room. I think she was a little pissed that Uncle Jake trained me to work the register and not her, but she's made it perfectly clear that she'd prefer to be "anywhere but here" and you can't have that kind of attitude at the register. You have to say "Thank You" and "Have a Happy Halloween" and stuff like that.

If you're busy feeling miserable because you're stuck working at your family's store instead of being out with friends, it's hard to be enthusiastic. Of course, she could "act happy" but she didn't. It finally occurred to me that maybe she was "acting" miserable to try to get out of working. She came late and left early. So if she was "acting" miserable, then she got paid well for playing the part.

Laura had plans that night. I didn't. This time she was going to a movie with some of her friends from school. My mother started to suggest that I tag along, again, but Laura shot her a look that could wilt fresh flowers. It's really OK. I stayed home with Mom and we watched videos and ate popcorn. It wasn't the same thing as going out

with friends, but at least I wasn't pretending to be asleep so I wouldn't be in my sister's way.

While we were rewinding the first tape, Mom asked me how things were going at school.

"You know we could still tell them about your TS," she reminded me.

"I know, I know..."

I tried to explain to her AGAIN that I really wanted to try to be NORMAL.

"But normal for you is having TS," she said. "It's not normal to expend so much energy pretending to not have tics. It must be exhausting, like having an extra job and no time off."

I nodded. Covering my TS was tiring, but there was no way I was going to give up now. I told Mom all about my audition. Oh, I'd already told her that I got into the special chorus and that Mrs. Martins had me sing with Laura and two brothers. But I hadn't told her about the froggy tic that got me right before the audition. I was laughing and joking with her when I told her about it. But Mom wasn't laughing along with me.

"You see, right now you're talking about your tic like it's funny. You're talking like your grandfather. But when people don't know about the TS, when they are left to make assumptions about your tics, then you can't laugh and joke about it."

It's true. In that sense it would be easier. If everybody knew about my TS then I'd just say – "Oops, tic time!" -- like I did back in Iowa.

"But Mom, you don't get it. I really think I can do this. I really think that if I can get people to know me, and not know about my TS, then they will really..."

“Your TS is part of you, part of who you are, just like being a good musician is part of you.” Mom didn’t let me finish my idea.

“But, just for once, I want to be known as a good musician – not as a good musician with TS. Just let me try.”

“OK, OK, but I think it’s too much work. It would be like pretending to have an English accent and having to think about it every time you opened your mouth. Your grandfather’s terrible accent came and went in mid-sentence. It was terrible.” Mom laughed.

“Laura could do it. She could pull off an accent all day, for days.”

It was true. When Laura played Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* she had a southern accent for weeks. I felt like I was living at Tara with Scarlett O’Hara.

“I’ll think about that tomorrow.”

“But what you’re doing is much, much harder than sounding like a southern belle.” Mom wouldn’t let it go.

“I just don’t want to be the TS girl.”

That closed it for the evening. But I knew that Mom would be on me about it again.

Chapter 10: Happy Birthday Uncle Jake

My brother arrived early the next morning. Grandma knew he was coming, but she had been sworn to secrecy so it was a surprise for the rest of us. Since we were celebrating Uncle Jake's birthday, it was a pretty cool idea.

Jeremy said he liked the new house, but pointed out that there wasn't a real room for him – just the sofa bed in the den.

“If you want to live here this summer, we'll make it more of a bedroom,” Mom promised. “But if you're just going to drop in for a day or two at a time then...”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it.”

Jeremy knew that Mom was happy to see her son. And since his birthday was only two weeks away, she suggested that we roll both birthdays into one.

“No, I'll come back for my birthday. Let Uncle Jake have the day to himself.”

Jeremy can be very cool sometimes. I think he was being very thoughtful. Uncle Jake works very hard and he deserves a real birthday party. I think everybody does. He's the one in the family that always makes sure there's a big fuss for my birthday.

And my birthday isn't exactly a great one. It's January 2. Yes, I missed being a New Year's baby by one day. It's also a hard time to have a party. It's just too close to New Year's and Christmas and Chanukah too. Everyone is kind of sick of parties or, worse, they want to combine my birthday with the holidays. I've gotten entirely too many “combo” presents. There was the horrible reindeer sweater -- like I would ever wear a reindeer sweater in the first place -- and entirely too many boxes of chocolates.

I love chocolate, but after weeks of parties, giving someone an edible present is just cruel. For once, I'd like to celebrate my birthday in May – far from every festive

occasion except Memorial Day and Cinco de Mayo. I'm sure I'd get flowers and T-shirts and CDs and beach blankets for my birthday -- if it was in May. Maybe I should just change my birthday? People change their names all the time. Why not change a birthday?

Of course I'm in the middle of another "change" project – my transformation into NORMAL – so I guess I'll leave my birthday on January 2 for now.

In honor of Uncle Jake's 40th birthday Grandma had made all his favorite foods. And I mean ALL of them. We had eggplant parmigiana AND roast chicken, string beans with almonds, mashed potatoes, homemade applesauce, cucumber salad and a green salad too. And for dessert there were TWO cakes. Grandma made a small birthday cake, but since Jake likes cheesecake best, she bought one of those too. There was tons of food!

Grandpa joked that Grandma still treats Jake like he's her baby boy.

"He is," she said. "When he's fifty and I'm eight-five, he'll still be my baby and when he's sixty and I'm ninety-five too!"

Uncle Jake brought his new girlfriend to the party so everyone in the family was on their best behavior. Her name is Veronica and she hates being called "Ronnie." I guess she's pretty, but she seemed kind of goofy to me. Which is kind of my way of saying that I thought she wasn't all that smart. Jake is a very good-looking guy and he always has a girlfriend. They are usually beautiful AND smart, so I was a little disappointed in Veronica.

I kept trying not to judge her – I mean, I really don't know her and one Sunday afternoon isn't really much time, but... It's hard not to decide things about people really

quickly. My Mom always tell me that it's important to give people a chance – especially since I've been hurt by people who confuse me and my TS, if you know what I mean. I don't want to be a hypocrite, but it's hard sometimes. I kept thinking that Jake could do better than Veronica.

Grandma is always pushing Jake to get married, but he likes his life the way it is. Before my parents got divorced he would always say that they were the “last great couple on planet earth,” now he's very careful what he says about marriage in front of my mother.

I'm telling you all of this because my family is usually pretty open about everything – TS, OCD, divorce – everything. We dive right into any topic without dancing around. But because Veronica was there we were all a little too polite about things. It didn't seem natural. Grandma rolled her eyes a lot when Grandpa talked about working extra hours at the store before Halloween, but she didn't come right out and say anything. Even Jeremy and Laura were a little too careful. I knew he had something on his mind, but he didn't talk about it, and Laura was very quiet when the subject of college came up.

“Are you thinking about U. of P., like your brother?” Veronica asked Laura. “I went to Rutgers. I had friends at U. of P. and they liked it a lot.”

“Oh, I don't know...” Laura said, instead of launching into her usual speech about starting an acting career as soon as possible, and that the only detour she'd make would be one that took her to NYU or Yale.

It was all a little weird. I kept thinking that I was missing something. I was. Everything came out in the car on the way home.

“Well, that was strange,” Mom said. “I knew she was younger than Jake, but really...”

“I don’t like her,” Laura said. “That nose is fake and the rest of her is full of silicon.”

“MEOW,” Jeremy said. “Listen to the two of you. So she’s a little younger than Uncle Jake. He seems happy and...”

“It’s not just that,” Laura cut him off. “She’s not just younger, she’s so much younger and everything about her is fake – her hair, her nose – she’s filling out that bra with a little help. I bet her lips are pumped up with something and her eyes were just unnaturally blue. You know they have contact lenses that’ll give you that kind of color. I bet her real eyes are...”

“Not everyone looks like you, Laura. Cut her a break.” Jeremy remained calm, but he was getting angry with Laura. “Maybe she had a big honker that made her feel self-conscious? Maybe she was so unhappy with what she saw in the mirror that...”

“Those cheek bones, I’ll bet they were implants.”

“You know Laura, you really don’t know much about anything,” Jeremy kept his voice quiet, but he was really, really angry. He sounded like my Dad did when I decided to do a mural on the wall of my bedroom when I was eight. “You’re the only one in this car, the only one in this family, practically the only one that I’ve ever met, who was perfect. You have no idea what it’s like. Walk a mile or two in someone else’s shoes, someone who isn’t so perfect.”

No one said anything, so Jeremy continued.

“Mom and I have to deal with being obsessive. You think it’s easy? It took me three roommates before I found one that didn’t think I was completely crazy. The first one told everybody in the dorm that I was a head-case and that I should be put away.

“And let me tell you that dating isn’t so easy if you find yourself obsessing about every little thing. I spent one entire evening making sure that I didn’t have pizza on my front teeth. She didn’t want to see me again. You think you know how hard it is when you really can’t make yourself act like everybody else? No, you don’t. Your biggest problem is that another pretty girl might get the lead in the school play. That’s not a problem, not at all.

“Erika and Grandpa have TS too. I try to imagine what it’s like – sitting on those tics during a test at school. I have a hard enough time focusing when all I really, really want to do is make sure that I’ve touched the desk chair exactly the right number of times and...”

Jeremy ran out of steam. I realized that he’d probably been thinking about things for a long, long time. Laura and Mom ragging on Jake’s new girlfriend was just the last straw.

“You’re right,” Mom slowed the car to a stop and pulled over to the side of the road. She turned around and looked at Jeremy and me in the back seat. “I’m so used to the things I do, the obsessive things, I forget sometimes how hard it was when I was younger, getting so I could manage it, finding a medication that worked for me... I just didn’t see the connection. You’re right, none of us ever know what’s inside someone else. We don’t know their pain, their problems, their perspective and we should be careful about judging without the information we need.”

“But Veronica is a phony and...”

“Maybe she is,” Mom didn’t let Laura finish. “But maybe she’s just trying her best and we should get to know her before we’re so sure that her nips and tucks are simple vanity? Maybe we should just give her a chance?”

“She might turn out to be a shallow idiot,” Jeremy laughed as he spoke. “But maybe she’s not? Maybe Uncle Jake sees something in her that we’re not seeing? Something that has nothing to do with surgery?”

We got home a few minutes later.

As we walked in the door, Mom asked me what I thought of the conversation in the car.

“You were pretty quiet back there,” she pointed out. “Any thoughts on what Jeremy was saying?”

“I guess I agree with him, but I think he was a little hard on Laura.”

“Really? You never cease to amaze me.” Mom gave me a hug.

“He hasn’t walked in Laura’s shoes either and yet he’s so sure that the only tough thing in Laura’s life is a little competition. Everything looks like it comes easy to her, but I kind of think there’s more to it. That maybe she works really hard to make things seem easy.”

“Did anyone ever tell you what a smart girl you were?”

“You mean besides you?”

The four of us sat around the kitchen table drinking tea and catching up. Jeremy was getting good grades, but grades weren’t the only measure of a college experience and he was having a hard time.

“I’ve been thinking about taking a semester off, or something like that,” he announced.

“What exactly is, ‘something like’ a semester off without it being a semester off?” Mom asked. She isn’t nuts about ‘taking time off from school,’ as far as she’s concerned it means ‘dropping out.’

“Well, I read about these trips. You can take a semester someplace else, like Madrid or Paris or Mexico City.”

“How about a semester in New York?” Mom asked.

“I already speak English,” Jeremy pointed out. “I could work on my Spanish, maybe even learn French. I would be a great experience – meet new people, go new places. It doesn’t cost much, or doesn’t cost much more than school. I’d get credits, take classes, live in a dorm or maybe even with a family – depending on the program. I’d really like to do it, either in January or next September.”

“Well, when you come home for your birthday, bring all the brochures and we’ll take a serious look. I’m not saying yes, but I’m not saying no. I want to learn more about it. Have you thought about how this will effect your math major?”

“They study math in Spain, Mom!”