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Archie had claimed the Caraways were normal folks, but I still couldn't imagine Stargirl coming from an ordinary home. I think I expected a leftover hippie scene from the 1960s. Make love, not war. Her mother in a long skirt with a flower in her hair. Her father's face framed in muttonchop sideburns, saying "Groovy!" and "Right on!" a lot. Grateful Dead posters. Psychedelic lampshades.

So I was surprised. Her mother wore shorts and a tank top as she worked the pedal of a sewing machine with her bare foot. She was making a Russian peasant costume for a play to be presented in Denver. Mr. Caraway was on a stepladder outside, painting windowsills. No muttonchops; in fact, not much hair at all. The house itself could have been anyone's. Glossy bentwood furniture, throw rugs over hardwood floors, Southwest accents: an Anasazi-style wedding vase here, a Georgia O'Keeffe print there. Nothing to proclaim, "You see? She came from here."

Same with her room. Except for Cinnamon's blue and yellow plywood apartment in one corner, it might have belonged to any high school girl. I stood in the doorway.

"What?" she asked.

"I'm surprised," I said.

"At what?"

"I thought your room would be different."

"How so?"

"I don't know. More...you."

She grinned. "Stacks of fillers? A card-making operation?"

"Something like that."

"That's my office," she said. She let Cinnamon out. He scurried under her bed.

"This is my room."

"You have an office?"

"Yep." She stuck her foot under the bed. When it came out, Cinnamon was aboard. "I wanted to have a place all my own where I could go to work. So I got one."

Cinnamon scampered out of the room.

"Where is it?" I said.

She put her finger to her lips. "Secret."

"Bet I know one person who knows," I said. She raised her eyebrows.

"Archie."

She smiled.

"He was talking about you," I said. "He likes you."

"He means the world to me," she said. "I think of him as my grandfather."

My inspection yielded two curious items. One was a wooden bowl half filled with sand-colored hair.

"Yours?" I said.

She nodded. "For birds looking for nest materials. I put it out in the spring. Been doing it since I was a little girl. I got more business up north than here."

The other item was on a bookshelf. It was a tiny wagon about the size of my fist. It was made of wood and looked like it might have been an antique toy. It was piled high with pebbles. Several other pebbles lay about the wagon wheels. I pointed to it. "You collecting stones, or what?"

"It's my happy wagon," she said. "Actually, it could just as well be called an unhappy wagon, but I prefer happy."

"So what's it all about?"

"It's about how I feel. When something makes me happy, I put a pebble in the wagon. If I'm unhappy, I take a pebble out. There are twenty pebbles in all."

I counted three on the shelf. "So there're seventeen in the wagon now, right?"

"Right."

"So that means, what, you're pretty happy?"

"Right again." "What's the biggest number of pebbles ever in the wagon?"

She gave me a sly smile. "You're looking at it."

It didn't seem like just a pile of pebbles anymore.

"Usually," she said, "it's more balanced. It hangs around ten, a couple to one side or the other. Back and forth, back and forth. Like life."

"How close to empty did the wagon ever get?" I said.

"Oh..." She turned her face to the ceiling, closed her eyes. "Once, down to three."

I was shocked. "Really? You?"

She stared. "Why not me?"

"You don't seem the type."

"What type is that?"

"I don't know..." I groped for the right words.

"The three-pebble type?" she offered.

I shrugged.

She picked up a pebble from the shelf and, with a grin, dropped it into the wagon.

"Well, call me Miss Unpredictable."

I joined the family for dinner. Three of us had meatloaf. The fourth- guess who- was a strict vegetarian. She had tofu loaf.

Her parents called her "Stargirl" and "Star" as casually as if she were a Jennifer.

After dinner we sat on her front step. She had brought her camera out. Three little kids, two girls and a boy, were playing in a driveway across the street. She took several pictures of them.

"Why are you doing that?" I asked her. "See the little boy in the red cap?" she said. "His name is Peter Sinkowitz. He's five years old. I'm doing his biography, sort of."

For the tenth time that day she had caught me off guard. "Biography?" Peter Sinkowitz was coasting down his driveway in a four-wheeled plastic banana; the two little girls were running, screaming after him. "Why would you want to do that?"

She snapped a picture. "Don't you wish somebody came up to you today and gave you a scrapbook called 'The Life of Leo Borlock'? And it's a record, like a journal, of what you did on such-and-such a date when you were little. From the days you can't remember anymore. And there's pictures, and even stuff that you dropped or threw away, like a candy wrapper. And it was all done by some

neighbor across the street, and you didn't even know she was doing it. Don't you think when you're fifty or sixty you'd give a fortune to have such a thing?"

I thought about it. It was ten years since I had been six. It seemed like a century. She was right about one thing: I didn't remember much about those days. But I didn't really care either.

"No," I said, "I don't think so. And anyway, don't you think his parents are doing that? Family albums and all?"

One of the little girls managed to wrest the banana roadster away from Peter Sinkowitz. Peter started howling.

"I'm sure they are," she said, snapping another picture. "But those pictures and those moments are posed and smiling. They're not as real as this. Someday he's going to love this picture of himself bawling while a little girl rides off on his toy. I don't follow him around like we did Clarissa. I just keep an eye out for him, and a couple of times a week I jot down what I saw him doing that day. I'll do it for a few more years, then I'll give it to his parents to give to him when he's older and ready to appreciate it." A puzzled look came over her face. She poked me with her elbow. "What?"

"Huh?" I said.

"You're staring at me really funny. What is it?"

I blurted, "Are you running for saint?" I regretted the words as soon as they left my lips. She just looked at me, hurt in her eyes.

"Sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to sound nasty."

"How did you mean to sound?"

"Amazed, I guess."

"At what?"

I laughed. "What do you think? You." I laughed again. I stood before the steps, facing her. "Look at you. It's Saturday. I've been with you all day, and you've spent the whole day doing stuff for other people. Or paying attention to other people. Or following other people. Or taking pictures of other people."

She looked up at me. The hurt was gone from her eyes, but not the puzzlement. She blinked. "So?"

"So...I don't know what I'm saying."

"Sounds like you're saying I'm obsessed with other people. Is that it?"

Maybe it was the angle, but her fawn's eyes, looking up at me, seemed larger than ever. I had to make an effort to keep my balance lest I fall into them. "You're different," I said, "that's for sure."

She batted her eyelids and gave me a flirty grin. "Don't you like different?"

"Sure I do," I said, maybe a little too quickly.

A look of sudden discovery brightened her face. She reached out with her foot and tapped my sneaker. "I know what your problem is."

"Really?" I said. "What?"

"You're jealous. You're upset because I'm paying all this attention to other people and not enough to you."

"Right," I sniffed. "I'm jealous of Peter Sinkowitz." She stood. "You just want me all to yourself, don't you?" She stepped into my space. The tips of our noses were touching. "Don't you, Mr. Leo?" Her arms were around my neck.

We were on the sidewalk in front of her house, in full view. "What are you doing?" I said.

"I'm giving you some attention," she cooed. "Don't you want some attention?"

I was losing my battle for balance.

"I don't know," I heard myself say.

"You're really dumb," she whispered in my ear.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Why do you think there're eighteen pebbles in my wagon?" And then the last remaining space between our lips was gone and I was falling headlong into her eyes, right there on Palo Verde after dinner. And I can tell you, that was no saint kissing me.

23

Those were the best times, when we were alone, together, out of school. We took long walks around town and into the desert, to her enchanted place. We sat on park benches and people-watched. I introduced her to strawberry-banana smoothies. I borrowed the pickup and drove us to Red Rock and Glendale. On weekends we went to Archie's. On his back porch, we talked of a thousand things and laughed and swooned in pipesmoke and ate pizza. She presented her oratorical contest speech to Se&#241;or Saguaro. We never spoke of the shunning. I loved weekends.

But Mondays always followed Sundays.

And the shunning-it was clear now-had come to me. It was less absolute for me than for her, but it was there. I saw it in the eyes that shifted away from mine, the shoulders that turned, the chatter that seemed less loud around me now than before. I fought it. I tested its limits. In the courtyard, between classes, in the lunchroom, I called out to others just to see if they would respond. When someone turned and nodded, I felt grateful. If someone spoke to me, especially if I had not spoken first, I wanted to cry. I had never realized how much I needed the attention of others to confirm my own presence.

I told myself that the shunning was more painful for me than for Stargirl. I told myself that she was too busy being herself to notice that she was being ignored-and in fact, she continued to give birthday people a ukulele serenade and to decorate her desk and to distribute assorted kindnesses. I told myself that even if she did notice, she wouldn't care.

I understood why this was happening to me. In the eyes of the student body, she was part of my identity. I was "her boyfriend." I was Mr. Stargirl.

Students said things. Not to me, not directly, but tuned for me to overhear even as they pretended I was nowhere near. They said she was a self-centered spotlight hogger. They said she thought she was some kind of saint-I cringed at that-and that she was better than the rest of us. They said she wanted everyone else to feel guilty for not being as nice and wonderful as she was. They said she was a phony.

Most of all, they said she was the reason why the Mica Electrons were not soon to become Arizona state basketball champions. Kevin had been right: when she started cheering for other teams, she did something bad to her own team. To see one of their own priming the opposition did something to the team's morale that

hours of practice could not overcome. And the last straw-everyone seemed to agree-was the Sun Valley game, when Stargirl rushed across the court to aid Kovac, the Sun Valley star. All of this was affirmed by our own star, Ardsley himself, who said that when he saw a Mica cheerleader giving comfort to the enemy, the heart went out of him. She was why they lost the next game so miserably to Red Rock. They hated her for it, and they would never forgive. Unlike Stargirl, I was aware of the constant anger of our schoolmates, seething like snakes under a porch. In fact, I was not only aware of it, but at times I also understood their point of view. There were even moments when something small and huddled within me agreed with it. But then I would see her smile and take a swan dive into her eyes, and the bad moment would be gone. I saw. I heard. I understood. I suffered. But whose sake was I suffering for? I kept thinking of Se&#241;or Saguaro's question: Whose affection do you value more, hers or the others'?

I became angry. I resented having to choose. I refused to choose. I imagined my life without her and without them, and I didn't like it either way. I pretended it would not always be like this. In the magical moonlight of my bed at night, I pretended she would become more like them and they would become more like her, and in the end I would have it all.

Then she did something that made pretending impossible.

24

"Roadrunner."

No one said the word to me directly, but I kept hearing it since I arrived at school one day, several days after the kiss on the sidewalk. It seemed more dropped behind than spoken, so that I kept walking into it:

"Roadrunner."

Was there something on the plywood roadrunner that I should read?

I had study hall coming up third period; I'd look into it then. In the meantime, I had second-period Spanish. As I headed for my seat, I looked out the window, which faced the courtyard. There was something written on the roadrunner, all right, but I wouldn't have to go outside to read it. I could read it from here. I could have read it from a low-flying airplane. White paper-no, it was a bedsheet-covered the whole bird. Painted on the sheet in broad red brush strokes was a Valentine heart enclosing the words:

STARGIRL

LOVES

LEO My first impulse was to drag the Spanish teacher to the window and say, "Look! She loves me!" My second impulse was to run outside and rip the sign away.

Until now, I had never been the target of her public extravagance. I felt a sudden, strange kinship with Hillari Kimble: I understood why she had commanded Stargirl not to sing to her. I felt spotlighted on a bare stage.

I couldn't concentrate on my schoolwork or anything else. I was a mess.

At lunch that day, I was afraid to look at her. I counted one blessing: I had not yet worked up the nerve to sit with her each day. I kept stoking my conversation with Kevin. I felt her presence, her eyes, three tables to my left. I knew she was sitting

there with Dori Dilson, the only friend who had not deserted her. I felt the faint tug of her gaze on the back of my neck. Ignoring my wishes, my head turned on its own and there she was: smiling to beat the band, waving grandly, and-horrors!-blowing me a kiss. I snapped my head back and dragged Kevin out of the lunchroom.

When I finally dared to look again at the courtyard, I found that someone had torn the sign away. Thumbtacks at the corners pinned four white scraps of bedsheet to the plywood.

I managed to avoid her by taking different routes between classes, but she found me after school, came shouting after me as I tried to slink away: "Leo! Leo!" She ran up to me, breathless, bursting, her eyes sparkling in the sun. "Did you see it?"

I nodded. I kept walking.

"Well?" She was hopping beside me, punching my shoulder. "Wha'd you think?" What could I say? I didn't want to hurt her feelings. I just shrugged.

"Wow. That impressed, huh?" She was mocking me. She reached into her bag and pulled out her rat. "Maybe he's shy, Cinnamon. Maybe he'll tell you how thrilled he was to see the sign." She set him on my shoulder.

I yelped. I swept the rat off and sent him flying to the ground.

She scooped him up and stroked him, all the while staring at me dumbstruck. I could not face her. I turned and walked on alone.

She called, "I guess you don't want to hear me practice my speech, huh?"

I did not answer. I did not look back.

The next day I faced the full impact of the sign. I thought I had truly suffered from the spillover of Stargirl's shunning, but that was nothing now that the full torrent was turned on me.

Of course Kevin-thankfully-talked to me; so did a few other friends. But the rest was silence, a second desert imposed upon the one I already lived in, where "Hi" was as rare as rain. I came to the courtyard in the morning before opening bell, and all I saw were backs of heads. People shouldered past me, calling others. Doors closed in my face. There was laughter, there was fun, but it skipped over me like a flat stone on water.

One morning as I was running a teacher's errand, I saw someone named Renshaw walking across the courtyard. I barely knew the kid, but we were the only two in the courtyard at that moment, and I had to, so to speak, touch the stove that I knew was hot. "Renshaw!" I called. There was no other voice but mine. "Renshaw!" He never turned, never wavered, never slowed down. He kept walking away from me, opened a door, and was gone.

So what? I kept telling myself. What do you care? You never speak to each other. What's Renshaw to you?

But I did care. I couldn't help myself from caring. At that moment, there was nothing more I wanted in the world than a nod from Renshaw. I prayed that the door would burst open and he would be there saying, "Sorry, Borlock, I wasn't listening. What did you want?" But the door stayed closed, and I knew what it felt like to be invisible. "I'm invisible," I said to Kevin at lunch. "Nobody hears me. Nobody sees me. I'm the friggin' invisible man."

Kevin just looked at his lunch and wagged his head.

"How long's it going to go on?" I demanded.

He shrugged.

"What did I do?" My voice was louder than I intended.

He chewed. He stared. At last he said, "You know what you did."

I stared at him like he was crazy. I badgered him some more. But of course he was perfectly right. I knew exactly what I had done. I had linked myself to an unpopular person. That was my crime.

25

Days passed. I continued to avoid Stargirl. I wanted her. I wanted them. It seemed I could not have both, so I did nothing. I ran and hid.

But she did not give up on me. She hunted me down. She found me in the TV studio after school one day. I felt fingers slipping down the back of my neck, grabbing my collar, pulling me backward. The crew was staring. "Mr. Borlock," I heard her say, "we need to talk." Her voice told me she was not smiling. She released my collar. I followed her out of the room.

In the courtyard a couple cooing on the bench beneath the palmetto saw us coming and bolted, so that's where we sat.

"So," she said, "are we breaking up already?"

"I don't want to," I said.

"So why are you hiding from me?"

Forced to face her, forced to talk, I felt my gumption rising. "Something's gotta change," I said. "That's all I know."

"You mean like change clothes? Or change a tire? Should I change a tire on my bike? Would that do it?" "You're not funny. You know what I mean."

She saw I was upset. Her face got serious.

"People aren't talking to me," I said. I stared at her. I wanted it to sink in. "People I've known ever since we moved here. They don't talk to me. They don't see me." She reached out and lightly rubbed the back of my hand with her fingertip. Her eyes were sad. "I'm sorry people don't see you. It's no fun not being seen, is it?" I pulled my hand away. "Well, you tell me what it's like. Doesn't it bother you that nobody talks to you?" It was the first time I had openly mentioned the shunning to her.

She smiled. "Dori talks to me. You talk to me. Archie talks to me. My family talks to me. Cinnamon talks to me. Se&#241;or Saguaro talks to me. I talk to me." She cocked her head and stared at me, waiting for a responding smile. I didn't give it.

"Are you going to stop talking to me?"

"That's not the question," I said.

"What is the question?"

"The question is"-I tried to read her face but I could not-"what makes you tick?"

"Now I'm a clock!"

I turned away. "See, I can't talk to you. It's all just a big joke."

She put my face between her hands and turned me to her. I hoped people were not watching from the windows. "Okay, serious now. Go ahead, ask me the tick question again. Or any other, any question at all."

I shook my head. "You just don't care, do you?"

That stumped her. "Care? Leo, how can you say I don't care? You've gone with me to places. We've delivered cards and flowers. How can you say-" "That's not what I mean. I mean you don't care what people think."

"I care what you think. I care-"

"I know-you care what Cinnamon and Se&#241;or Saguaro think. I'm talking about the school, the town. I'm talking about everybody."

She sniffed around the word. "Everybody?"

"Right. You don't seem to care what everybody thinks. You don't seem to know what everybody thinks. You-"

She broke in: "Do you?"

I thought for a moment. I nodded sharply. "Yeah. Yeah, I think I do know. I'm in touch with everybody. I'm one of them. How could I not know?"

"And it matters?"

"Sure, it matters. Look"-I waved my arm at the school around us-"look what's happening. Nobody talks to us. You can't just not give a crap what anybody thinks. You can't just cheer for the other team and expect your own school to love you for it." Words that I had been thinking for weeks rolled off my tongue now.

"Kovac-Kovac, for God's sake. What was that all about?"

She was baffled. "Who's Kovac?"

"Kovac. The guy from Sun Valley. The basketball star. The guy who broke his ankle."

She was still baffled. "What about him?"

"What about him? What about you? What were you doing out there on the floor with him with his head in your lap?"

"He was in pain."

"He was the enemy, Stargirl! Susan. Whatever. The enemy!" She stared dumbly back at me. She had blinked at "Susan." "There were a thousand Sun Valley people there. He had his own people to take care of him, his own coaches, his own teammates, his own cheerleaders' laps. And you had your own team to worry about." I was screeching. I got up and walked away. I came back, leaned into her. "Why?" I said. "Why didn't you just let him be taken care of by his own people?"

She looked at me for a long time, as if in my face she could find herself explained. "I don't know," she said dimly at last. "I didn't think. I just did."

I pulled back. I was tempted to say, Well, I hope you're satisfied, because they hate you for what you did, but I didn't have the heart.

Now I was feeling sorry for her. I sat back down beside her. I took her hand. I smiled. I spoke as gently as I could. "Stargirl, you just can't do things the way you do. If you weren't stuck in a homeschool all your life, you'd understand. You can't just wake up in the morning and say you don't care what the rest of the world thinks."

Her eyes were wide, her voice peepy like a little girl's. "You can't?"

"Not unless you want to be a hermit."

She flicked the hem of her skirt at my sneaker, dusting it. "But how do you keep track of the rest of the world? Sometimes I can hardly keep track of myself."

"It's not something you even have to think about," I said. "You just know."

Because you're connected."

On the ground her bag shifted slightly: Cinnamon was stirring. Stargirl's face went through a series of expressions, ending with a pout and a sudden sobby outburst: "I'm not connected!" She reached out to me and we hugged on the bench in the courtyard and walked home together.

We continued this conversation for the next couple of days. I explained the ways of people to her. I said you can't cheer for everybody. She said why not? I said a person belongs to a group, you can't belong to everyone. She said why not? I said you can't just barge into the funeral of a perfect stranger. She said why not? I said you just can't. She said why? I said because. I said you have to respect other people's privacy, there's such a thing as not being welcome. I said not everybody likes having somebody with a ukulele sing "Happy Birthday" to them. They don't? she said.

This group thing, I said, it's very strong. It's probably an instinct. You find it everywhere, from little groups like families to big ones like a town or school, to really big ones like a whole country. How about really, really big ones, she said, like a planet? Whatever, I said. The point is, in a group everybody acts pretty much the same, that's kind of how the group holds itself together. Everybody? she said. Well, mostly, I said. That's what jails and mental hospitals are for, to keep it that way. You think I should be in jail? she said. I think you should try to be more like the rest of us, I said.

Why? she said.

Because, I said.

Tell me, she said.

It's hard, I said.

Say it, she said.

Because nobody likes you, I said. That's why. Nobody likes you.

Nobody? she said. Her eyes covered me like the sky. Nobody?

I tried to play dumb, but that wasn't working. Hey, I said, don't look at me. We're talking about them. Them. If it was up to me, I wouldn't change a thing. You're fine with me the way you are. But we're not alone, are we? We live in a world of them, like it or not.

That's where I tried to keep it, on them. I didn't mention myself. I didn't say do it for me. I didn't say if you don't change you can forget about me. I never said that.

Two days later Stargirl vanished.

26

Usually I saw her in the courtyard before school, but that day I didn't. Usually I passed her between classes at least once or twice before lunch. Not that day. In fact, when I looked over to her table at lunch, there was Dori Dilson, as usual, but someone else was sitting with her. No Stargirl in sight.

Coming out of the lunchroom, I heard laughter behind me. And then a voice, Stargirl's: "What do you have to do to get somebody's attention around here?"

I turned, but it wasn't her. The girl standing, grinning in front of me wore jeans and sandals, had burnt-red nails and lipstick, painted eyes, finger rings, toe rings, hoop earrings I could put my hand through, hair...

I gawked as students swarmed past. She made a clownish grin. She was

beginning to look vaguely familiar. Tentatively I whispered, "Stargirl?" She batted her chocolaty eyelashes. "Stargirl? What kind of name is that? My name is Susan."

And just like that, Stargirl was gone, replaced by Susan. Susan Julia Caraway. The girl she might have been all along.

I couldn't take my eyes off her. She cradled her books in her arms. The sunflower canvas bag was gone. The rat was gone. The ukulele was gone. She turned around slowly for my open-mouthed, dumbstruck inspection. Nothing goofy, nothing different could I see. She looked magnificently, wonderfully, gloriously ordinary. She looked just like a hundred other girls at Mica High. Stargirl had vanished into a sea of them, and I was thrilled. She slid a stick of chewing gum into her mouth and chewed away noisily. She winked at me. She reached out and tweaked my cheek the way my grandmother would and said, "What's up, cutie?" I grabbed her, right there outside the lunchroom in the swarming mob. I didn't care if others were watching. In fact, I hoped they were. I grabbed her and squeezed her. I had never been so happy and so proud in my life.

We sailed through time. We held hands in the hallways, on the stairs, in the courtyard. In the lunchroom I grabbed her and pulled her over to our table. I looked to invite Dori Dilson, too, but she was gone. I sat there grinning while Kevin and Susan gabbed and gossiped over their sandwiches. They joked about her disastrous appearance on Hot Seat. Susan suggested that I should go on Hot Seat one of these days, and Kevin said no, he's too shy, and I said not anymore, and we all laughed.

And it was true. I didn't walk, I strutted. I was Susan Caraway's boyfriend. I. Me. Really? That Susan Caraway? The one with the tiny barrettes and toe rings? Yep, that's the one, my girlfriend. Call me Mr. Susan.

I started saying "we" instead of "I," as in "We'll meet you there" or "We like fajitas."

Whenever I could, I said her name out loud, like blowing bubbles. The rest of the time I said it to myself.

Susan...Susan...

We did our homework together. We hung out with Kevin. Instead of following strangers around, we went to the movies and plunged our hands together into the six-dollar Super Tub of popcorn. Instead of shopping for African violets, we shopped for Cinnabons and licked icing from each other's fingers.

We went into Pisa Pizza. We walked past the bulletin board inside the door. We shared a pizza: half pepperoni, half anchovies.

"Anchovies, ugh," I said.

"What's wrong with anchovies?" she said.

"How can you eat them? Nobody eats anchovies."

I was sort of kidding, but her face was serious. "Nobody?"

"Nobody I know."

She picked the anchovies from her slices and dumped them into her water glass. I tried to stop her. "Hey-"

She pushed my hand away. She dropped the last anchovy into the glass. "I don't want to be like nobody."

On the way out, we ignored the bulletin board. She was mad for shopping. It was as if she had just discovered clothes. She bought shirts and pants and shorts and costume jewelry and makeup. I began to notice that the items of clothing had one thing in common: they all had the designer's name plastered prominently on them. She seemed to buy not for color or style but for designer label size. She constantly quizzed me about what other kids would do, would buy, would say, would think. She invented a fictitious person whom she called Evelyn Everybody. "Would Evelyn like this?" "Would Evelyn do that?" Sometimes she misfired, as with laughing. For several days she was on a laughing jag. She didn't just laugh, she boomed. Heads turned in the lunchroom. I was trying to work up the nerve to say something when she looked at Kevin and me and said, "Would Evelyn laugh this much?" Kevin stared at his sandwich. I sheepishly shook my head. The laughing stopped, and from that moment on she did a perfect imitation of a sullen, pout-lipped teenager. In every way she seemed to be a typical, ordinary, everyday, run-of-the-mill teenager.

And it wasn't working.

At first I neither noticed nor much cared that the shunning continued. I was too busy being happy that she was, as I saw it, now one of us. My only regret was that we could not play the basketball season over again. In my mind's eye, I pictured her aiming her incredible zeal and energy exclusively at the Electrons. We could have won games on her cheering alone.

It was she who said it first: "They still don't like me." We were standing outside the TV studio after school. As usual, people were passing by as if we weren't there. Her lip quivered. "What am I doing wrong?" Tears made her eyes even larger.

I squeezed her hand. I told her to give it some time. I pointed out that the state basketball finals would take place in Phoenix that Saturday, and that would end the season and clear the way for her cheerleading crimes to be forgotten. Her mascara was muddy. I had seen her sad many times before, but always for someone else. This was different. This was for herself, and I was powerless to help. I could not find it in me to cheer up the cheerleader.

That night we did homework together at her house. I ducked into her room to check out her happy wagon. There were only two stones in it.

When I came to school next day, there was something different about the buzz in the courtyard. The arriving students were milling about, some roaming at random, some in clusters, but as I approached, there seemed to be a distinct clearing around the palmetto. I wandered in that direction, and through the crowd I could see that someone-Susan- was seated on the bench. She sat upright and smiling. She was holding a foot-long stick shaped like a claw on one end. Around her neck, dangling on a string, was a sign that read: TALK TO ME AND I'LL SCRATCH YOUR BACK. She was getting no takers. No one was within twenty feet of her.

Quickly I turned away. I walked back through the crowd. I pretended I was looking for someone. I pretended I hadn't seen. And prayed for the bell to ring. When I saw her later that morning, the sign was gone. She said nothing about it.

Neither did I.

Next morning she came running at me in the courtyard. Her eyes were bright for the first time in days. She grabbed me with both hands and shook me. "It's going to be okay! It's going to end! I had a vision!"

She told me about it. She had gone to her enchanted place after dinner the day before, and that's where the vision had come to her. She had seen herself returning in triumph from the Arizona state oratorical contest. She had won first prize. Best in the state. When she returned, she got a hero's welcome. The whole school greeted her in the parking lot, just like in the assembly film. There were streamers and confetti and tooting kazoos and horns blaring, and the mayor and city council were on hand, and they had a parade right then and there, and she rode high on the back seat of a convertible and held her winner's silver plate up for all to see, and the happy faces of her classmates flashed in the sparkling trophy. She told me this, and she threw up her arms and shouted, "I'm going to be popular!"

The state contest was a week away. Every day she practiced her speech. One day she called over little Peter Sinkowitz and his playmates and presented the speech to us from her front steps. We applauded and whistled. She bowed grandly, and I, too, began to see her vision. I saw the streamers flying and I heard the crowd cheering, and I believed.