The Fan Club
By Rona Maynard

1.
It was Monday again. Rain splattered the cover of Algebra 1 as Laura heaved her books higher on her arm and sighed. School was such a bore.

Before her, the high school building loomed massive and dark against the stormy March sky. In a few minutes she would have to face them – again. Laura closed her eyes trying to block out the memory of Diane Goddard's sleep blond hair and Terri Pierce's hot-pink fingernails. And Carol and Steve and Bill and Nancy.

But it was no good. She heard again their laughter, smothered at first, then outright loud as Laura had struggled to think of the right answer in Algebra class. That was Friday. Now it was Monday, another damp, cold day in a school filled with too many Dianes and Terris and Steves.

They sat in the back in Algebra and English class, passing notes and whispering to one another. Laura thought of their latest-fashion clothes and their identical outlooks and their superior stares as they passed by her in the corridors. They were clods, the whole gang of them.

Laura shoved her way through the main door of the building. Upperclassmen thronged the hall, streamed in and out of doors, and passed bulletin boards covered with red and yellow posters advertising the latest
rock concert. Reluctantly, Laura submerged herself in the stream.

Down the hall a short way were Diane and Terri and Steve, standing in a tight little circle, as always, in front of their lockers. They were laughing, as always.

As Laura opened her locker, she heard Diane squeal, “It'll be a riot! Can't wait to see her face when she catches on!”

Laura flushed painfully, hiding behind her open locker door so the three would not see her.

“What do you think she'll do?” Steve said.

“Run out of the room probably,” said Terri.

Again Laura closed her eyes. Her mind when back to the previous Friday.

Terri.

Again Laura closed her eyes. Her mind when back to the previous Friday.
She was standing alone in front of the class, unable to multiply or divide or factor, unable even to think – just feeling the room heat up like a hot-air balloon ready to explode.

“Don't you know the answer, Laura?” asked Mr. Knowles. His voice was hollow, distant, an echo behind the sound of rustling paper and hushed whispers. Laura stared at her half-finished homework and scribbled flowers in the margins. On the cover of her notebook was the sketch of a guitar she had drawn that morning in class.

“Well, Laura?”

She really had tried to memorize the theorems the night before. But then she had pushed the textbook aside to scratch into her notebook the lyrics to a new song she was writing. She could multiply and divide those words and rhythms better than she ever could the lifeless numbers in *Algebra 1*. Besides, what did it matter? One day she would be a musician and live in New York City or L.A. And everyone would accept her and, there would be no more algebra.

Snickers from the back of the room filled the silence. They swelled into mocking giggles that rang in her ears.

“You can sit down now, Laura” said Mr. Knowles, not trying to hide his exasperation. . .
“Laura!”

She looked up, startled. It was Rachel who was calling her and who stood beside her now at the locker. She was wearing a floral blouse and corduroy skirt that billowed over the heavy columns of her legs. Laura glanced sideways at Diane and Terri and Steve. They were fumbling with little yellow index cards, passing them out among the circle of freshmen guys and girls who had gathered around. Then Diane looked up, directly at Laura, and she laughed out loud. Laura closed her locker and turned away.

“How didn’t you come over this weekend like you said you were going to?” Rachel said.

Rachel stood there, her mouth half open, her pale, moonlike face strangely urgent. Shapeless black curls ringed her forehead.

Laura shrugged. “I had to study.”

Rachel shrugged too, forgiving the broken promise. The two girls started walking down the hall, away from the exclusive circle.

“So did you watch World of Nature last night,” Rachel asked, “on channel 11?”

“No, Rachel. I almost never watch that kind of program.”

“You used to.”

Rachel was her old friend. In
grade school, everyone called her “Horton,” a friendly nickname for Hortensky. Her father was Jacob Hortensky, the tailor. He ran a greasy little shop where Laura could always smell cabbage from the back rooms where the family lived. Laura hadn't been there since the two girls had started high school last September. As freshmen they shared only one class, English. No one called Rachel “Horton” anymore.

“It was a really good documentary. It was all about monarch butterflies and how for they can travel.” Rachel was smiling, flapping her hands as she talked. “Remember when we found the monarch chrysalis and kept it at my house until it hatched? Remember how beautiful it was? We let its wings dry off and took it outside so it could fly away to Mexico. And then waved good-bye. That really was exciting!”

Once they had shared a deep interest in science and insects. Now, even if you still liked that stuff, you should have enough sense not to show it.

“That was a pretty good poem you wrote for English class last week,” Rachel said.

“You think so?” said Laura. “I mean, not many people like poetry.”

“You stuff is good, though. I wish I could write like you.”
Laura turned, “I have to go.”
“Why don't you come over after school today? You can stay for dinner. My parents would really like that – they ask about you all the time. They wonder what happened to you.” Laura remembered the narrow, dirty street and the tattered awning in front of the tailor shop. Once, none of that had mattered.
“OK,” Laura said, faking enthusiasm. “I'll see you later.”
In homeroom, Laura spread her notecards over her desk, reviewing one last time her speech for English class.

“We will now have the national anthem,” said the voice on the loudspeaker. Like the others, Laura stood. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. It was so false, so pointless. How could they sing of the land of the free when there was still so much that was unfair going on in the world?

That thought was the theme of her oral report. Laura imagined herself in front of the class, in front of that exclusive little circle led by Diane and Terri and Steve and Bill, and her throat went dry. Just be confident, she told herself.

The steel sound of the bell shattered the silence. Amid scraping chairs and cries of, “Hey, Wait!” Laura escaped homeroom and started for English class. She moved down the hall with the crowd, a thronging, jostling mass. Laura felt someone nudge her. It was Bill. “Now there's a good-looking girl.” Smiling, he pointed to the other side of the hall.

The gaudy flowers on Rachel's blouse stood out garishly, too summery for gray March. What a lumpish, awkward creature Rachel had become! Did she have to dress like that? Laura thought. Didn't she
see how her stocking wrinkled around her heavy ankles? Laura turned to say something to Bill but he had gone ahead into the room. Rachel went in behind him, and then just her books tumbled from her arms onto the floor.

Laura was behind her, still in the hall, but she heard the laughter.

The bell rang. Students ambled to their seats. Laura saw Diane and Terri exchange eager last-minute whispers. “Steve doesn't have his,” Diane said.

“Don't put it on until it's time,” said Terri.

After 20 minutes of reviewing last night's homework, Miss Merrill, pushed aside Adventures in Literature and beamed and the class as if they were in for a real treat. “All right, people, get out your notecards. Today we start our oral reports. Laura, will you begin, please?”

At once, Laura's throat clamped tight like a hinged lid. It was as if she had eyes in the back of her head, so clearly could she Diane and Terri and Steve grinning at her, waiting for her to make a fool of herself again.

Careful, careful, she thought as she stood and walked to the front of the room. Look confident.

Before her, the room was large and still; 25 round, blurred faces stared back at her. Was that Diane's muffled laughter already? Laura
folded her hands over her notecards and looked at the rear wall, strangely distant now, its brown paint cracked and peeling. A dusty portrait of Robert Frost, a board with the seven rules for better paragraphs, last year's calendar . . . the hollow ticking of the clock.

“Well,” Laura cleared her throat. “My report is on civil rights.” A chorus of snickers rose from the back of the room.

“Most people,” Laura began, then began again, “most people don't care enough about others, but we are all responsible for those people who haven't had the same advantages as we” even as she repeated the words she had practiced all weekend, Laura wondered if anyone was really listening.

“A lot of people think prejudice is limited to ethnic groups. But most of us are prejudiced – whether we know it or not – in other quiet ways. It's not just that we don't give people who are different a chance; we don't give ourselves a chance either.” She looked past the rows of blank, empty faces, past the bored stares of Diane and Terri. All they cared about were concerts and parties.

“One person's misfortune is every person's responsibility,” she recited. She wondered if Diane or Terri or Steve knew what it was like to be unwanted and unaccepted. What
misfortunes did they have? None.
   “Most of us are proud that live in a free country. But is it really true?
Can we call the United States a free country when millions of people face prejudice and discrimination every day?” Laura looked at Rachel, who was staring at her with deep attention.
   Laura took a breath, ready for the big finish. “Only when Americans learn to respect the dignity of all people can we truly call our country free.”
The room was silent.

“Very nice, Laura.” Miss Merrill looked briskly around the room. Laura returned to her seat, and the other students waited in dread to see who would be next. “Rachel Hortensky,” Miss Merrill announced.

There was a ripple of dry, humorless laughter – almost, Laura thought, like the sound of a rattlesnake. Rachel stood before the class now, her face red, her heavy arms piled with shoeboxes.

“Shoes?” whispered Steve.

“She's going to talk about shoes?”

Rachel's smile twitched at the corners, and Laura knew that her old friend Horton, who had never been afraid of mice, or gater snakes, or spiders, was frightened now. Rachel set her stacked boxes on the desk without paying much attention to how they were balanced. Immediately, they collapsed to the floor with a ringing clatter. Now everyone, not just Diane, was giggling.

“Hurry and pick them up, Rachel,” Miss Merrill said sharply.

Rachel crouched on her knees and began very clumsily to gather her scattered treasures. Some of the boxes had broken open, spilling their contents. Her index cards had fallen, too, and she shuffled them together quickly. At last she stood. “My report
is on shells,” she said. A cold and stony silence settled upon the room.

“People might collect shells simply because they're kind of pretty. They might find them on the beach.”

“Well, whaddaya know!” It was Steve's voice sounding a mock amazement. Laura jabbed her notebook with her pencil. Why was he so cruel?

“This one,” said Rachel, opening her first shoebox, “is one of the best.” Off came the layers of paper and there, at last, smooth and pearly and shimmering, was the shell. Rachel turned it over lovingly in her hands. “It has white, fluted sides like the close-curl pedaled petals of a flower and a scrolled, coral back,” she said.

Laura held her breath. It was beautiful, really beautiful, but from the back of the room the snickers had started again.

“I bet she bought it at Woolworth's,” said Diane.

“It might make a nice ashtray,” said Steve.
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Rachel seemed not to hear. The shells were something she knew about and loved. She held out another small, drab, brownish thing.
“This is the common snail shell,” said Rachel. “It’s a different kind of pretty . . . .”
Just as Rachel finished, the bell sounded. Suddenly, chairs were shoved aside at the back of the room and there was the sound of many voices whispering. They were standing, the whole row of them, their faces grinning with delight. Choked giggles, shuffling their feet, and then applause—wild, sarcastic, malicious applause.
Laura turned and stared at them. They were all wearing the little, yellow index cards that Diane and Terri had passed out earlier that morning. Drawn in the center was a fat, frizzy-haired figure. Printed in big, red block letters above and below it was HORTENSKY FAN CLUB.
Then Laura understood. It was what all the snickering had been about that morning at the lockers. She had been wrong. Diane and Terri and Steve weren’t out to get her after all. It was Rachel they were after.
Rachel stared in frozen confusion, looking at the applauders in the back of the room. Her hand holding the brown shell began to
tremble, and she dropped it. As it shattered on the floor, the sound was drowned out by the laughter and the clapping.

Diane slid forward. “Here, Laura,” she said, holding out a yellow index card. “Here’s one for you.”

For a moment, Laura stared at the card. It was pierced with a safety pin. They must have planned the joke over the weekend and brought the pins to school with them. Laura looked at Diane’s mocking smile. She heard the pulsing, frenzied rhythm of the claps and the stamping, faster and faster.

Laura reached out slowly and took the card from Diane. She pinned it to her sweater. As she turned back, she saw Rachel’s stricken face.

“She’s such a nerd, isn’t she?” Diane’s voice was soft and intimate. And Laura began to clap.

7 and 8.

*Rona Maynard was a 15-year-old student when she wrote this story.*