

MATTIE'S SMILE

The term had already started when Mattie entered Edison Junior High. I was in the hall with Jason Tate when I first saw her. "What is it?" he said. Mattie was a big girl. Not fat, but tall and big-boned. Her clothes hung on her as if she could have turned around inside them. Her face was plain and her hair was drab. But the really startling thing was the way she was beaming at everyone with a great cheesy grin that made her look like a horse.

"Oh, Please!" Jason said. "What planet did this come from?" Mattie wasn't really a freak or anything. She might have settled down in the student body and been accepted--but she started off badly the very first day.

Have you ever seen new students in the lunchroom, looking lost, finally finding an empty table way at the back? Mattie didn't do it that way. She looked around happily, marched over to our table, and put down her tray. "Hi!", she yelled, "I'm Mattie Babcock."

Everyone stopped talking. There were five of us at the table--the same five who always sat there day after day. You see, our crowd sort of runs the school, and we always sit together at lunch at the same table--that's just the way it is. Well, Mattie just stood and grinned and finally I realized she was waiting for our names.

"I'm Heather Martin," I said. The others gave their names: Carol Deering, Ashley Allen, Laura Nelson and Melissa Wade.

"I sure do like it here," Mattie said. "This is sure a swell school." "Really?" Carol said. "I guess it's all right." "All right?" Mattie waved her fork at her. "It's a lot better than that, believe me. Back in my old school we didn't have anything like this. No gym, no auditorium." Mattie went on raving about our school while we listened, silently resenting her.

"I hope she's not going to hang around us," Ashley Allen said afterward. "Something tells me she'd be hard to get rid of." And that turned out to be true. She got to be a joke. In the hall at school, Jason Tate would put in a set of those plastic false teeth. "I'm Mattie Babcock," he'd say. "Isn't this a swell place?"

Everybody howled, and I didn't even feel mean about laughing. She was so darn dumb. In classes she was smart enough. But with other kids she seemed too dumb to know the crowd was making fun of her. Even when we put her down right to her face, she just grinned.

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know the crowd was making fun of her. Even when we put her down right to her face, she just grinned.

Everyone said that Mattie Babcock didn't have any feelings, except about Rick Sanders. Mattie was too friendly and talkative with the rest of us. But when Rick was around she seemed paralyzed. She couldn't speak to him without stammering. And she'd look at him with little blinking glances, while her face got red.

Mattie wasn't the first girl to fall for Rick. Still, she was the most hopeless case. If our crowd leads the school, Rick Sanders leads our crowd. The mere thought of Mattie and Rick was the joke of the year.

Rick took all the kidding with a smile. He started talking about "my girl Mattie." And he'd go out of his way to speak to her in the hall, or wave to her on the street, while the rest of us tried to keep straight faces.

I laughed at first, but I began to feel a little ashamed when I found out that Mattie was taking the whole thing seriously. She seemed to like me. She'd follow me around whenever I didn't just brush her off. From the way she talked, I gathered she thought Rick was secretly mad about her. Maybe she wasn't dumb enough actually to believe it, but I know that was what she wanted to believe.

Anyway, it would have been all right if it hadn't been for the Christmas Dance. Jason had asked me long before, so I sat back while the others wondered how the crowd would pair off. Rick Sanders was sure to ask either Carol or Ashley, but nobody knew which one it would be.

One night, some of us were out for pizza and the talk got around to the dance. Jason winked at me across the table and said, "You know, Rick's not talking, but I hear he's taking Mattie Babcock."

"Why Jason," Rick said, pretending surprise, "how did the news get out?"

They kicked it around for a while--how Rick would send Mattie a bunch of radishes to wear on her old floursack dress and how he'd wear shin guards to protect himself from her big feet. That's how it started. By the next day, the whole school was giggling over the story. Everybody knew it was a joke--everybody except Mattie.

After classes she came up to me in front of my locker. She started off calmly enough asking about an English theme. But then she said, "Heather, you get around a lot; I mean, you know what's going on and everything."

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"Oh, I have my moments," I said lightly. I felt a funny little shiver along my back.

"Well," she said, "I thought you might just happen to know who Rick Sanders is taking to the Christmas Dance?"

I didn't know what to say. She'd heard the whispering and... she believed it? Dumb, dumb, dumb, my mind kept saying. I was mad at her for being dumb, and mad at myself for not knowing how to stop it. "I don't know," I said finally. "Rick hasn't asked anybody yet."

Her face seemed to light up clear through the back of her head. "Well, I was just wondering," she said.

That week, Laura and Melissa were in charge of the big Social Events bulletin board in the main floor hall. They put up a drawing of a couple dancing. All around it were small pieces of paper. Each one had on it the names of a couple who were dates for the Christmas Dance. It was a cute idea and got a lot of attention. "A very good layout," Jason said, "but something is missing."

I remembered what he'd said the next morning when I looked at the board. A new piece of paper had been added. It was scribbled--and clearly a joke. It bore the names of Rick Sanders and Mattie Babcock.

Now that I look back, I don't know why I didn't reach up and take it down. I thought of it. But Jason was there waiting for me to laugh. I remember thinking I'd come back later when no one was around. But later turned out to be too late because when I looked up, Mattie was standing there.

I think even Mattie ought to have known it was a joke. I don't think even she could have believed it. But just then, when the silence was so thick you could almost see it, Rick Sanders came down the hall.

It would have been better if he'd gotten mad, but Rick prides himself on being a good sport. He handled this smoothly--the way he handles everything. When he saw the board his look never changed. He turned to Mattie, smiled and winked, "Well, Mattie," he said, "It looks like we're a couple."

It was a smooth way to pass it off. Mattie should have known that it was just a way of talking, but Mattie didn't understand about joking. I watched her smiling and blushing and a sick feeling twisted in my stomach. The story bubbled through the school all day.

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"She actually believes it," Ashley screamed. "Can you imagine? She's walking around on pink clouds."

Mattie waited for me outside my first class. "I need your advice, Heather," she said, "about the Christmas Dance." I could feel myself getting cold all over. She grabbed my arm. "You see," she said, "I don't have an evening dress. Back in my old school we didn't have formal parties, so I didn't need one." I couldn't say anything. "But now," she said. "well now..."

She laughed happily. I couldn't even look at her. "Anyway," she went on, "I've been thinking about it for quite a while now and I talked to my mother. She has this purple velvet evening dress; it's old and it's not in style or anything. But the material's good and she thought she could make it over for me. Heather, do you think that would be alright for me to wear?"

All of a sudden I got a picture of Mattie and her mother getting the old dress out of a trunk. I could see them holding it up, shaking out the wrinkles, buying a dress pattern, talking about it, planning...

Right that minute, I wanted to explain everything to her. I wanted to explain it all carefully and kindly so she'd get it through her head and understand it so well that nobody'd ever be able to do anything like this to her again.

But Laura and Ashley were waiting for me down the hall. "Come on, Heather, we're waiting."

My mind seemed to spin, I could only say, "I don't know. Maybe purple velvet is a little outdated."

"Come on, Heather!" Laura called.

I started away, but Mattie held my arm. "Maybe you could come over to my house and look at it. Will you Heather?" I backed away, but Mattie held my arm.

"Sure," I said, "only not today. I can't today, but maybe tomorrow."

"Swell, " she called after me, "tomorrow will be swell."

As I joined Laura and Ashley, Ashley said, "The suspense is over! Rick Sanders finally asked Carol to the Christmas Dance." So the next day there was a new piece of

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paper on the bulletin board with the names of Rick Sanders and Carol Deering. I stayed away from the board all morning--I didn't want to be there when Mattie saw it. I wasn't. Ashley told me about it.

"Nothing happened," she said, sounding let down. "She just turned around and walked away." I don't know what she thought would happen. Maybe a big scene, with tears. Maybe I thought Mattie would quit school, or run away, or something dramatic. She didn't do anything. She just kept on going to classes, but she wasn't the same. She didn't smile anymore. Her head hung a little, like she didn't want anyone to see into her eyes.

I kept feeling there was something I ought to do. Like that feeling you get when you leave the house and you keep thinking, "I've forgotten something; I've got to go back."

It was two days later before I dared speak to her. I'd stayed late to work on chemistry and when I got down to the locker room it was empty, except for her. "Mattie?" I said, as if I didn't know who she was. She didn't turn around or answer me. She kept on taking things out of her locker.

"What are you doing?" I said stupidly. I didn't know what else to say.

"Straightening out my locker," she said, throwing the words at me without turning.

"Oh," I stood there, wishing I knew some magic word that would make everything right, not knowing any words at all. "Mattie, I...I...I'm sorry."

She looked at me then. The way she looked at me was terrible. As if she didn't even want to touch me with her eyes. "You could have told me," she said in an awful voice. "Why didn't you just tell me?"

We looked at each other, and I knew it was no use trying to explain or make excuses. I couldn't say, "It wasn't my fault, Mattie. I was just going along with the crowd." So I didn't say anything. After a while I left.

I still hang out with the crowd and I still go out with Jason, though I'll never like him as much as I used to. Our crowd still runs everything at school, and things are almost the same as ever. Sometimes I see Mattie coming down the hall--minding her own business and never smiling.

- Source Unknown

Name _____ Period _____ Date _____

MATTIE'S SMILE

1. How would you describe Mattie's self-concept at the beginning of the story?

2. What are three (3) physical characteristics that support your answers?

3. How would you describe Heather's self-concept at the beginning of the story?

4. How had Mattie's self-concept changed by the end of the story?

5. What physical characteristics support your answer?

6. What four (4) experiences in the story changed Mattie's self-concept?

7. How did Heather feel about herself at the end of the story?

8. What were three (3) reasons for the change?

9. What changes would you make to this story that would change the ending and not destroy anyone's self-concept?

10. Share an event that you are aware of when a person's self concept or self-esteem was damaged by an event or several events that took place at school.

