

## Trading Places

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/980449) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/980449>.

Rating:	<a href="#">General Audiences</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>
Category:	<a href="#">Gen</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">Alien Nation</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Emily Francisco</a> , <a href="#">Buck Francisco</a> , <a href="#">Jill Moraskey</a>
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of <a href="#">The Gardens of Earth</a>
Stats:	Published: 2013-09-25 Words: 10,706 Chapters: 1/1

# Trading Places

by [Lt Zoe Jebkanto](#)

## Summary

An intriguing class assignment has unforeseen complications.

## Notes

This isn't a new story, but one I had a good time writing. I was moving the media cabinet when one side-door slipped open and a tumble of DVD's splatted across the floor. Among them was my well loved set of 'Alien Nation' which I hadn't (re)watched in a couple of years. That reminded me of the stories I'd written about that (vastly under-rated) series, so I (re)red them, then decided to share. If after so much time, anybody finds this... enjoy!

## Trading Places

### Foreword

Dear Buck,

This is a copy of my essay about the experiment that Emily and I were working on when I got majorly grounded at the beginning of the school year. Doesn't it seem kind of weird, me showing it to somebody who:

- a. Is not my teacher
  - b. Is not one of my parents
  - c. Is not only not taking the same class but doesn't even attend my school
  - d. Has actually already graduated
  - e. Studies at the college level
- Or how about
- f. All of the above

(ha ha)

I don't know whether you'll really want to look this over or not, but you were pretty helpful to us as we got ready for our experiment and throughout the process too. Anyway, you said that you'd like to read it when it was done, so I thought you'd at least like a copy so you'd have the chance to decide for yourself what you think. So, here you go!

With a lot of thanks,  
Jill

P.S. Sorry about mentioning the part about you being grouchy sometimes or putting your feet up on Emily's bed. It's probably not the way you'd want to be written up in hard copy black and white, or immortalized in the great literary tradition,(need I say again "ha ha",) but you know what they say, don't you?

Truth in journalism! Right?

Anyway, hope that you aren't too embarrassed about me putting that stuff in there, but if you were, maybe it'll help to know that I would have had to write approximately the same things about my own brother, only worse.

Thanks again for all the help.

J. M.

Trading Places  
An Essay by Jill Molaskey

(Caption to illustration: Author Jill E. Molaskey with her colleague, Emily D. Francisco)

### Introduction

The first thing that happened, was that I got grounded.

No big deal, right? It's a pain. But it happens to everyone. You can't get through ninth grade without it catching up to you. It's as much a sure thing as having a huge algebra exam the same day as a history test. You just make sure you have snacks in the top drawer of your desk, a good set of earphones so your parents can't hear whether you're playing a C D, and something good to read. Like I said, no big deal.

To be honest, I can see my Mother's point about shaving my head.

That was maybe a little bit radical.

I'm sure when she saw it, she was already looking ahead to my cousin's wedding next spring and thinking how I was supposed to be a bride's maid. She didn't say it, but I could almost see the balloon forming over her head, the kind that show what the characters in comics are thinking or saying. They'd all have been in capital letters, too.

"WHAT EVER IS AUNT MARSHA GOING TO SAY?"

Like I said, I could almost see her point about that.

What really did surprise me is that being told I was grounded turned out to be the easiest part of what happened regarding the experiment I set up with my friend, Em.

And I guess that's the whole point of what we set out to do. Find out how things are different than the ways we'd expected them to be.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

### Background

I'd seen the Newcomers before, of course, mostly on TV. I thought it was cool- people from outer space landing in our part of the country. In movies, it's always in the Midwest or Washington DC, not L A.

But until the day Emily and her mom showed up at my elementary school, I'd only seen them in person a few times. Not to talk to, except to say "excuse me" if we passed each other on the sidewalk in the morning when I was walking to school. Not to really look at either, even if I wasn't taught it isn't polite to stare. Mainly it was because they were all just a bunch of grownups trying to get somewhere in a hurry. They were on their way to jobs as maids or cooks or maybe handymen working at the fancier houses down toward Corcoran Street. Servants' jobs, my Mother said.

So, when this Tenctonese kid and her mom showed up at my grade school, the first thing I thought was how different she looked than the rest of us. Not one hair on her head, only markings- spots they're called, even if they're not round or anything close to it. This kid's spots were in a swirled pattern that looked like it could have been painted on, except I knew from TV that all of the Tenctonese had markings like that on their heads, each with a different pattern.

My next thought was, aside from that, how much she looked like any other new kid in school. Both excited and scared. She kept looking up at her mom and staying close beside her as they walked across the parking lot toward the building's main entrance.

I'd've been scared too if I had to pass by all the shouting adults in front of the school. About half of them were chanting, "Go back where you belong!" or "Not in our school!"

The others kept repeating "Civil rights, civil rights!"

They all looked very tall, and their faces were red from yelling.

Two or three police cars pulled up the driveway, their sirens louder than the crowd. Two cops got out of the first one- a human guy and a Newcomer. The human guy began pacing back and forth between the two groups and shouting. The "Not in our school" crowd shouted right back, clapping their hands, looking happy and pleased with themselves. After a minute he paced in front of the new kid and stopped long enough to grab her by the hand. She didn't try to pull away, only walked right beside him, even though he was still shouting. I didn't understand much of what he said, but after a minute he raised a gun and fired it up at the blue morning sky. The people who had been cheering all got quiet then and began walking away. It was the "civil rights" group that had its turn to applaud when the cop took the kid's hand and brought her up to my teacher. Miss Radcliffe bent over, took her hand, said something I couldn't hear and then led her through the front door of the school, beckoning us all to fall in behind them.

Right away as we walked indoors and down the hallway, things began to feel like any other day. But outside in the parking lot, that had sure been one great big riot over one little girl.

Of course, that girl turned out to be my best friend, Emily.

Not that we were friends right off.

That started later, when she showed me how to work the arithmetic problems we were assigned that morning. Not that they were any problem for Em. She made them look easy and when she explained what she was doing with the numbers, all of a sudden, it was easy.

Emily's problem were with some kids that kept calling her "freak" or "sponge-head".

During our lunch break, I went to the closet where supplies for the school play were kept and got her a wig, so she'd look like everyone else. She got this big smile on her face, then bent forward to pull it on, just as the other kids came back in from recess. They laughed when she looked up. In the half-dark closet, the wig had looked okay. But in the bright light of the classroom, it looked fakey. It would've been bad, even if she hadn't got it on lopsided.

I couldn't help it. I laughed too.

Em pulled the wig off, threw it at me and started to cry, then jumped up and ran out of the room. The sound of the door slamming was like a slap going through me. She must've believed I set her up as a joke to be laughed at. All afternoon I kept seeing how her smile broke and the tears flowed.

That night, after supper, I walked to her house. It was as scary as going to the dentist's office. But I had to talk to her. Tell her I hadn't meant to laugh, that I would like to try again to be friends.

All the way there, my stomach kept wanting to do somersaults.

What if she got mad at me? Or worse, cried some more?

I didn't want to run into her parents, so I circled around the house until I saw that she was sitting by an upstairs window, reading a book. As quiet as I could, I climbed a tree outside it and tapped on the glass. All the while, I was thinking that a visit to the dentist would probably be at least ten times less frightening than this was turning out to be. What if she started shouting and her parents rushed in and started yelling at me too?

None of that happened.

Instead, we got talking and decided that we wanted to do things together. We could play at her house, I said, or in the park. I really wanted us to be friends, even though my Mom said at first that she didn't want Emily coming over to our place. I couldn't understand that. I was only glad that later on, she changed her mind.

## The Idea

In the next few years, I almost quit thinking about Em being a Newcomer. She was just Emily from down the street. If we wanted a snack, it was as normal for us to both grab apples from her mom's fruit-bowl as it was for me to run home and snag a bag of chips while Emily pulled snails off of the ivy in front of her house.

It was almost like our minds worked in tandem with each other's. We liked so many of the same things- video games, music, and, when we got older, checking out the nearby malls for CD's or looking at jackets, jeans or jewelry.

That was where the difference between us was brought back to my attention. We were in a shop full of this kind of gaudy jewelry. My mother says anything so big and bold is tacky. That it looks cheap. But we weren't going for elegant, we were going for cool and dramatic. This skinny salesgirl kept hanging around, almost breathing down our necks, asking- just how could she help us? What did we want? What did we need? What were we interested in? I said we'd let her know if we had questions. She backed off, a couple feet anyway, but I could feel her staring at us from behind. What did she think? That we were going to lift something or what?

There were two braided belts Em was holding up, squinting at one then the other, as though, if she looked hard enough she could see herself in each of them. I'd been studying bracelets on the counter when I found a display of long, dangly earrings. "Cool!" I held up a pair beaded in orange and hot pink.

Emily hung the belts over her arm and took the earrings out of my hand. Holding them next to her face, she leaned toward the mirror on the counter, wiggling the card they were mounted on and watching them sparkle and flash. "Awesome!" she said. They're-

She was probably going to say they were pretty, or colorful maybe. I never found out. The salesgirl pounced, stepping between us and flicking the card out of Emily's fingers. "There's no point handling merchandise when you're not planning to buy it."

I snatched back the card. "How do you know she won't buy this?" I demanded.

"Well, isn't it obvious?" She gestured at Emily's s - curved, almost lobe-less ear valleys.

"These aren't made for her. How could she ever wear them?"

Em's chin came up. She didn't blink. Her voice was calm. "There are ways to change the wires-" she began.

I flipped the card back onto the counter. Then, snatching the belts from over Em's arm, I tossed them after it before turning back to the salesgirl. "But you're right. Why would she want to buy them, when everything here is-" My Mom's word came to mind, very handy at the moment. "So completely and absolutely tacky? Come on, Em, there're stores around here with better stuff than this!"

Emily's footsteps sounded behind me down the mall's echoing hallway. We were about three stores away when I turned to grab her arm. "That girl was disgusting!"

“Yeah, tell me about it!” said Em. “She won’t last there, though. She’s a real dork.”

“Is that all you can say? I mean, how rude can you get? First, she’s hanging all over us like she thought we were going to take something-”

Em shrugged. “Some Newcomers from the poor parts of Little Tencton do steal, Dad says. And sometimes the press plays it up. I guess she figured I must be one of them.”

“But you’re not from Little Tencton, and besides, your dad’s a cop!”

She gave me a very adult smile, sort of gentle and sad. “It doesn’t say that on the back of my tee shirt.”

“And what about the crack she made about those earrings? Didn’t that tick you off?”

The sparkle came back into her eyes. She grinned. “You didn’t hear me try to talk you out of not buying her stupid jewelry, did you? Besides, my Mom says sometimes you’ve got to choose your battles.”

“Choose your battles? How often does this kind of stuff happen to you, anyway?” I was looking at a stranger. Not familiar Emily, but someone with worlds of experiences inside her that I’d known nothing about, even though we’d been together almost every day for years. My guts were starting to do that same somersault thing as they had when I’d walked to her house after her first day of school. I had the feeling that I wasn’t living up to what I thought a real, true friend should be.

I needed a little time to sit down and sort it all out. “Come on,” I said. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Yeah, okay, whatever.” Em shrugged. “But don’t you want to go by Ice and Mice for a smoothie, like we talked about? Come on, it’s my treat.”

“Yeah. Okay.” I replied, though I wasn’t in the least interested in food just then.

While she sat, scarfing down her muskrat mocha, I played with my raspberry rapture.

“Look, Em,” I said at last. “I’d have stuck up for you way before now, but-”

There was no way around the risky part of what came next, except to say the words that might label me as a lousy friend. “Well, until today, I didn’t exactly notice people were giving you trouble like that.”

Emily sipped her drink, then shrugged one dismissive shoulder. “Most people aren’t so right there in your face as she was.”

“But I’m your best friend, I should’ve seen it.”

A smile made her whole face glow. “Thanks. But I probably don’t notice it every time you get hassled for being human, either.”

Hassled? For being human? Had that ever happened to me?

Yes! When I stopped to think about it, I had, though I hadn’t attached those words to it at the time of the incident.

I remembered a substitute teacher who had our class one day last spring when Em and I were supposed to present a science project on volcanic irruption. She was a grey haired woman, who looked like she’d lived on a diet of lemons and green apples for so long that she’d forgotten how to flex her smile muscles. Pucker-faced, she sat stiff in her chair while Em and I took turns reading from our paper about lava and magma volcanic ash.

After class, the teacher called me to her desk and asked just what my contributions to the project had been, like she thought I hadn’t done my half. Everyone knows Tenctonese people usually tend to be quicker learners than humans are. I could almost see in her eyes that, without knowing anything about me, she’d already decided that I’d slacked off and left most of the work to Emily.

Even though I put a lot of effort into that report, all at once, I’d found myself wondering if I’d really done my share.

Had Em, who waited for me outside the door, heard her? Caught what she was hinting at? I

hadn't thought about it in months. But looking back, I could remember the hot sting of resentment the teacher's questions had stirred inside me. Did Em feel like that right now? Had this really been one of those battles not worth fighting? Or was the truth that she was as unsure how to wage a battle over this incident as I had been during the one with that substitute teacher?

"I think," I said, taking a sip of my smoothie and realizing I was hungry for it after all. "Good friends like us should figure out how to watch out for each other better."

"I think you're right." She took a long sip through her straw. "But how would we know what to watch for? I mean, some adults have it in for us, just for being kids. No problem understanding that, right? But people have different ways of hassling humans and Newcomers. We'd almost have to learn how to be each other to..."

She leaned toward me and her face lit up with excitement. "Jill! I think I know how we could do it! Oh, this could be so cool!"

My face tugged itself into a mirroring grin. All at once our minds were doing that old, familiar, working in tandem thing again. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking? Cause, if you are, oh, wow! We could learn lots, and besides, it'd be fun too! Like being spies, going under cover in disguise! We gotta start making some plans!"

## Setting Up

My mother doesn't like me wearing too much make-up. That whole idea of being gaudy and cheap looking again. It's a good thing she didn't know that's where my allowance all went over the next couple of weeks.

Not that I was buying the same kinds of cosmetics you'd get in the health and beauty aids at the pharmacy. For what Em and I needed, we both had to go to a theatrical costume place. Em's brother, Buck was elected chauffer. She said she had to bribe him to drive us by offering to do his chores for a week, though I bet he really didn't make her do them- or at least, maybe not all of them anyway. He likes to cook and really seems to enjoy the responsibility of taking care of his and Em's baby sister, Vessna. And, even if he's kind of grouchy sometimes and is always getting on her case about not remembering how to speak Tenctonese, he's young enough to remember what it's like not to have wheels. Besides, he was definitely curious about what we were up to, going to a shop like that when it was nowhere near Halloween.

"We're going in disguise," Emily told him one Friday afternoon in late September as we pulled up in front of Different Parts: Costumes for All Occasions. "We're writing a paper for school. I'm going to make myself up as a human and-"

Buck guided the car to a stop, then turned from the wheel to look at the two of us crowded into the front seat with him. "Emily, that's crazy! Why would you want to disguise yourself as a tert? Oops, so-oh-oh sorry, as a human?" Buck corrected himself, putting a lot of emphasis on the last word and casting a look at me that was only half way apologetic. "Don't you think that we spend too much of our time already, trying to assimilate ourselves into their culture?"

"And," I told him, before Em had a chance to answer. "I'm going to be a Newcomer." Honestly, I don't care what species they are, brothers can be such a pain.



“Yeah, right. You’re going to play at being Tenctonese. I’ll believe it when I see it.” Buck laughed. The sound had hard, sharp edges to it. When I looked over at him, though, his eyes looked to me more sad than angry.

“Prepare to believe it,” Em glared across me at her brother, then, with a toss of her head, turned to open the car door. “We’ll be back in fifteen minutes. Come on, Jill.”

It probably took twenty five. Everything had to be just right.

For Em, we needed a wig that could pass for real hair pretty close up. We made her a red-head, with a bob cut that would swing round her shoulders and cover her ear valleys. Then some foundation to give her face a little more color and dark pencil to create thin, delicate eyebrows for her.

For me, it was more of a challenge.

You can get Newcomer skullcaps, already complete with what Emily called really convincing spot markings and ear valleys. Humans have worn them in plays to portray Tenctonese people, though why Newcomers weren’t just cast to portray themselves in the first place, I don’t know. It would have been a lot easier. Getting fake scalps on and hiding the line that marks where the disguise ends and real skin begins is a major undertaking, and believe me, I should know.

When we got back to Emily’s house, she and I got a lot of practice using nose putty and liquid latex to secure her wig and to turn me into a Newcomer. Buck was called in to critique our work. Nobody, after all, can be more critical than a brother and we figured if I passed muster with him, everything would be cool.

The problem was with my hair. No matter how I gathered it, into one pony tail, two, or three, it didn’t make my skull look smooth enough. I tried an old fashioned German braid round my head, then a French twist, first at the top, then at the back. It still clumped. My new “skin” kept popping out in one place or another, creating an obvious distortion on the side or top of my head. Sometimes it almost seemed like I could see the bulge start to slide or crawl down toward my forehead or temple in a way that reminded me of the grossest sort of horror movies.

“This isn’t going to work!” I wailed to Emily, making a face at myself in the mirror of the dresser in her room.

Over my shoulder, I could see Buck’s smirking reflection as he leaned back on Em’s pillows. He folded his arms across his chest and snickered. “Oh sure it will,” he said. “Just convince everybody you’ve got a case of chimmock-ta coming on.”

“Yeah, right! And watch them run in all directions?” Emily spun toward him. Her hair swung. I saw her raise a surprised hand to touch it before she continued. “That idea is disgusting! And, by the way, get your great big feet off my bed, Buck!”

He wiggled his high-tops at her, but then sat up and put his feet back on the floor.

“Chimmock-ta?” I asked, watching my reflection try to smooth out the latest bulge. “What’s chimmock-ta?”

“Tenctonese mumps,” he supplied, still grinning.

“Don’t be such a dweeb, Buck. She isn’t trying to look contagious!” Emily threw him a dirty look.

“Just a suggestion,” he shrugged, his grin growing, if possible, even wider.

“Oh, this is hopeless!” I shook my lumpy head. “To get this right, I think I’d almost have to-”

“To what?” asked Em.

“To cut off all my hair and...”

“Want a scissors?” Buck’s tone was brother-evil.

Emily made a disgusted face at him. “Want a life? Of course she doesn’t want a scissors,

she-”

“Wait a sec,” Gazing into the mirror, I ran a thoughtful hand over my fake scalp. “You know? I could do it! I mean, it would grow back, right? Meantime, I wouldn’t have bulges or look contagious! And I could find out what it feels like for you guys when you take showers! I bet the hot water feels really, really good, doesn’t it? That’s what this is all about, right? Finding out about each other?”

“But...” Em looked horrified. “You’d be bald!”

“Well, it looks okay on you, doesn’t it? Anyway, that Irish singer, Sinead O’Connor had her head shaved on one of her music videos and she looked really cool. She had these candles all around and it seemed kind of mystical, like an ancient Celtic priestess or something! Anyway, if I did it, then I could tell you how much putting on that wig will feel like really having hair. Come on, let’s do it!”

## The Experiment: Stage One The Initial Reaction

First thing that happened when I got home was that I got grounded.

Well, it was the second thing, actually. First, I had to listen to my Mom scream. When I walked in through our kitchen door, wearing nothing on my head except my brother’s beat up old Dodgers cap, she turned around from where she was mashing potatoes for supper, said “Hello, Jill. Go wash up so we can- oh, my God!”

I bet she topped fifty decibels.

I guess I should have warned her first, on the telephone maybe, though I don’t know what I could have said that would have made it any better. Somehow telling her “Hey, at least I didn’t get a nose ring” really wouldn’t have done it.

I knew things were going to be bad when she started talking about not letting me out of my room for a year.

It was, I decided, in my own best interest not to point out that there was no bathroom in there, that the truant officer would show up wondering why I wasn’t in school, or that I needed to be let out to go to Cousin Amy’s wedding in the spring. Better to just keep quiet, listen and hope she’d wind down.

“I suppose you’re trying to look like that silly girl, what’s her name?- on that music video you keep playing at full volume!”

So, that was it! She always hated my choices in songs. Probably she thought the only good rock music was the kind that came from clunking two stones together back in cave days.

Maybe, if she knew this had nothing to do with anything like that, there’d be a way out of jail after all. “Mom, I know you don’t like Sinead O’Connor, but this hasn’t got a thing to do with her! Really!”

“Well, what is all this then?”

“Emily and I are trying to look like each other. We want to do an experiment-”

“Oh, my God, Jill! You’re not trying to look like a Newcomer! I knew I should never have let you start playing with that child! Well that’s it! No more Emily Francisco, do you hear me? She’s filling your head...”

She shuddered as that particular word brought her gaze back to my shaved scalp, then gulped

and went on. “Filled your silly, bald head with all sorts of crazy, outworldish ideas these last few years, and now this! Well, no more! Now, upstairs with you!”

It had been totally the wrong move.

I should have remembered that there had been a time when Mom hadn’t wanted Emily coming around our house. I’d thought that, whatever it was my mom had against the Tenctonese back then, it had faded away with time. Instead, it must have only gone to sleep, deep inside her somewhere.

Now, it was back and wide awake. The way she said Newcomer didn’t sound like she was describing anybody nice, let alone Emily, who’d been my very best friend ever since grade school. She said it like it was a dirty word.

That stung worse than if she’d slapped me or called me an awful name.

“But, Mom! You’re not being fair! It was my idea! We were each going to write an essay for school about what it’s like-”

She pointed at the staircase. “Go! Whatever you thought you were going to do, you can forget it! There must be a thousand other things you can write your essay about. You’ll have plenty of time all weekend to think them up!”

I glared at her over my shoulder, then clumped up the steps and down the hall to my room and slammed the door hard enough that I heard china rattle in the hutch downstairs and possibly to show up on the Richter Scale.

A thousand other things I could write about for school, she said? Yeah, okay, but I wanted to do this one! Maybe now more than ever!

Not that the assignment itself had been such a big deal before. That had been little more than an excuse that gave Em and I a reason for going ahead with our idea to learn something about each other’s world sooner instead of later.

But I’d never once imagined that the first effect of our plan would take place right in my own house.

Now, our great experiment lay in ruins. For the most part, anyway.

But at least, I decided, as I got ready for bed later that night, my Mom couldn’t stop me from discovering what it might be like to shower as a Newcomer!

It was amazing! I ran the water so, so slowly. No hair to come between me and the flowing stream. One warm drop, two, three, four, each separate and distinct, tapping on the top of my head. It was almost like I could feel their teardrop shapes flatten against my scalp, then slip in small, tickling trickles down, down, down the smooth, empty skin at my temples.

A turn of the dial and the drops became a hundred fast flowing streams. I tipped my face up into the spray and laughed and cried as the water ran.

## Back on Course

The phone ringing got my attention the next morning. What if it was Em? Mom had to let me talk to her, at least to tell her what had happened when I got home. But she was there first, turning away from me as she held the phone to her ear. “No, Emily. Jill can’t come to the phone right now.”

“Mom, please, wait! Let me tell her...”

She held up an arm, barring me from grabbing for the receiver. “She is not taking calls at all.

After this stunt the two of you cooked up, she is grounded indefinitely-”

“Mom, just let me...”

She pointed to the stairs. “And, Emily, I would appreciate it if you don’t try to contact my daughter any more after this.”

“Mom, that’s not fair-!” Even as I dove for the phone, she broke the connection.

“Upstairs! Now!” When she got that tone, there was no arguing with her. Em’s mom found that out a little later. Emily must’ve spilled the story to her as soon as she got off the phone. Kneeling on the landing, I listened as my mother gave her an earful as well.

It was probably an hour later when the doorbell rang. Had Em come to plead our case in person? When Mom opened the door, I could make a break down the stairs and right out through it. There’d be trouble later, but at least I could tell Em it was only Mom that was mad, not me. But the voice I heard from my place by the top of the stairs, wasn’t Em’s at all. Just a man’s. But on the way back to my room, I paused. There was something familiar about his voice. It took a few sentences to recognize Mister Sikes, who’s a detective along with Em’s dad. Why was he here? Because of Em, or had my Mom done something to get in trouble with the cops? Probably not, but right then the idea was very satisfying. I lowered myself to a crouch behind the banister and listened closer as he talked and talked and talked. How hard it was, he said, having a creative daughter. Not real comfortable seeing what she could get up to. He had a daughter himself, and she’d’ve been read the riot act if she came in with her head shaved. But after the shock wore off, he figured most parents would be proud of a gutsy kid with the mind and spirit of an aspiring journalist.

Aspiring journalist? Me? I listened closer.

He launched into a big, long description of this guy who decided to disguise himself as a black man then traveled into the Deep South during the race riots in the 1950’s or ‘60’s, to see how he’d be treated different than a white man. Mister Sikes said the guy was famous, even if he couldn’t remember what his name was. But he remembered his work and that the guy had won national and international recognition and illustrious prizes for writing about his experiences.

Imagine what kind of grade he’d have gotten if he’d come up with a plan like that when he was still in school!

Man, I thought, a little disappointed. Emily and I had believed we were the first to come up with that idea!

But what he said worked.

With a heavy sigh, my Mom looked directly up at the landing where I’d been crouching, still and silent and, I thought, hidden. “Come on down,” she said. “Go tell Emily you can do your experiment.”

## The Experiment: Stage Two Final Preparations

Five minutes later, I’d changed out of my prison clothes and into something fit to wear to the mall.

In ten, Missus Francisco was letting me in through the kitchen door. To my surprise, she gave me a quick hug, before sending me up to Em’s room.

After an hour and a half, Emily and I were climbing into the front seat of the car, as Buck got ready to drive us to a place several miles away. “You didn’t think you could just go where

you usually hang out, did you?” he asked, fastening his and Em’s little sister, Vessna, into her car chair in the back seat. “I mean, you don’t want to be recognized, right?”

“Why?” asked Emily. “Don’t you think we look okay?”

Closing Vessna’s door, Buck came round and hopped in behind the wheel. “Want an honest answer?”

Em stiffened, getting ready to do the whole battle-with-the-brother thing. But before she could say anything, Buck raised a curled hand and made a light sweep across her temple, a Tenctonese gesture of affection. He did a double take, smoothed down her shining red hair, then sighed. “I only mean, it would ruin the experiment if you ran into people you knew, wouldn’t it? Or people whose reactions you can already guess?”

“Yeah, good point, it would.”

I swung the passenger side door shut, startled as I did so to catch a glimpse of my unfamiliar Tenctonese reflection looking back at me from the rear-view mirror.

I turned to give Buck an appreciative nod, but didn’t embarrass him or Em by saying how smart he was. For all that he kept teasing us, he was really getting into the spirit of the thing and had anticipated a lot of fine details that Emily and I, in our excitement, had overlooked. It had never occurred to me that anybody would know Em or me while we were in our disguises, but the risk was there, wasn’t it? We would still move and talk like ourselves, wouldn’t we?

What else hadn’t we thought of?

All at once, it was like I was getting ready to walk on stage right before a school play. My stomach was jumping and bubbling like soda in a bottle that had just been dropped and my mouth had gone as dry as Saltine crackers.

Beside me, Em wiggled forward in her seatbelt and bent down to massage her feet, a sign that she was as nervous as I was.

Was it or wasn’t it a good thing we had no lines to remember? They’d be something to lean on if we got tongue-tied. But if we leaned too hard on them and then spaced out, wouldn’t that be even worse? I was having a hard enough time just remembering my name by then.

Well, not my real name of course, I was being somebody else today.

I hadn’t even thought about the need for a different name, until we were about to head downstairs from Emily’s room. Halfway along the hallway, Buck turned to me and said “You know, if you’re going to be Tenctonese for a day, then you really ought to pick up the whole package.”

I’d paused at the top of the stairs. “What do you mean?”

“Did you ever think that someone might start a conversation with you? Ask you what your name is? You’ll blow the whole thing if you say that it’s Jill Molaskey. I mean, it might work, but it could raise suspicions, too. Most of us didn’t get labels that were quite so... well, generic American, if you get what I mean. Not when you consider names like Flora Ann Fawna, Marsha Mellow or Drew Pitcher.”

I grimaced.

Buck nodded. “Some joke, huh? Half of us didn’t know we’d be cringing until we’d been out of quarantine for over a year.”

To cringe at the sound of your own name? I’d never thought about such a thing before. Why had the immigration people done that? The Tenctonese must have already had names when they came here. Why hadn’t they been allowed to keep those, instead? Because they were hard to spell or pronounce, maybe? That hardly seemed like a reason.

Okay, I can’t say being named “Jill” wows me every time I hear it. It definitely doesn’t have the same distinguished ring or elegance as “Cecilia” or “Victoria” does. Even if my parents

had gone for “Virgilia” or perhaps “Jillian” it would have sounded a little more intellectual. I used to sign some of my English papers like that, Jillian Molaskey, just to make them seem more literary.

But Jill’s an all right name and it goes down good and fast on school papers. I don’t have to ignore cruel jokes about it and then try to build up some dignity just to face hearing it every day.

“You mean I should pick out a Tenctonese name for myself?” I asked Buck’s back as he started past me and down the stairs.

“Yeah. It’s not just the face you’re wearing, Right? It’s the identity.”

I tried to think. It had to be something quick and easy to remember. Something that sounded right and that wouldn’t be so embarrassing that I couldn’t keep from blushing when I heard it.

“Okay, then, like what?” I challenged.

“Oh, come on, Buck,” said Emily from just behind me. “This is our first time out. The more stuff we have to think about, the more there is to risk forgetting. She can use mine. By the way, Jill, my middle name’s Dickenson. Like the poet, okay?”

“Okay,” I said, reaching the landing. “Got it. Mine’s Elizabeth. Like the queen.”

But her name hadn’t always been Dickenson, had it? She’d had another name before that, hadn’t she? And Buck? Who had he been, back on the ship before it crash landed here? He was several years older than either Em or I, out of school already, working odd jobs and dropping in and out of college. Old enough that he was seriously trying to decide what he wanted to do with his life. Had he been old enough to not just know what his birth name had been, but to remember being called by it?

I’d never looked far enough into their world before to wonder about those names, either what they might have been, or whether Buck and Emily would prefer being called by them. I was about to ask when, beside me, Em checked her watch. “Come on, we’ve got to get going.”

That name thing had been my first eye-opener, the first scary glimmer that our little undertaking might not be as simple and straight forward as I’d imagined until then.

I’d always thought we’d be talking and laughing on the way to the mall.

Instead, I found myself wondering what else we might have overlooked. Now, both Em and I kept looking at each other and fidgeting, running lists of things we needed to remember to do and not do.

Remember not to tug on the wig, it’s on straight right now, even if it feels weird. Latex will only take so much stretching. Too much, and the whole thing could come off.

Don’t forget too much spot rubbing can be considered an insult if it’s done in front of Tenctonese Elders, because it’s like calling them senile.

Remember most humans can’t jump high enough to pull things down off the top shelves at some of the shoe store, so ask the clerks or use the footstools.

Don’t forget, even if a good song is playing in the C D store, be really careful about humming along with it. A Tenctonese male might consider it an offer to have sex.

“The main thing to remember is, I don’t want to wait around here all night for you two,”

Buck interrupted our frantic conversation. “So be right here to get picked up at five, got it?”

The soda in my guts gave an extra fizz as I turned to look out the window and realized we had already reached the mall.

We walked around together for the first half hour, like we always did when we went to the mall, except maybe with our sides a little closer together and our elbows brushing once in a while. People we passed gave us the kind of looks we usually got. Clerks gazing out of store-fronts showing C D's, beauty supplies or video games, seemed hopeful of making a sale, while those with formal wear or diamonds looked right through us, searching for adults. Shoppers looked curious about whether we were heading into someplace where a really good special might be happening, or else ignored us, more interested in getting their own purchases made. All of it just the same as usual.

But, to me at least, it didn't feel at all the same as when I was the human half of our twosome. I'd been a lot of things strolling past shops before, eager, excited, talkative, curious, once in a while even bored, but never nervous. Never scared.

Was it because people would know I was a human pretending to be a Newcomer? Or because they really thought I was Tenctonese? I wasn't sure.

I remembered the expression Buck had used for humans, *tert*. It had given me the prickles, though he'd dodged Em's fury by giving me at least a token apology before she could blast him. There had been such a world of anger and frustration in that word. It almost sounded like it could be a threat, even coming from someone that I knew, when it came right down to it, wouldn't intend to hurt me. But there was one that humans used to put Newcomers down, too. Slag. If someone happened to use it on me today, I might not know right away what their intentions were.

Beside me, Em was glancing down at her feet like she wanted to bend over and give them a good rub. Were her thoughts running in the same direction? "Hey," I warned her. "If you do that, make sure and gripe about your shoes."

"Yeah, right," she shivered a little, then sighed. "I hope I can remember everything we talked about. At least I figure we must look pretty good or Buck would have had something to say about it."

"And at least we know now why spies get paid the all big bucks." I managed a queasy sort of grin as I looked around. "You ready to fly solo?"

"Ready as I'm going to be, I guess." She managed a grin of her own. "Well, now's as good a time as any for us to go get started then. We can meet right down there in front of that electronics place about five to five, okay?"

"Okay. See you then!" I called over my shoulder as Em gave a toss of her red bob and started toward the entrance to ElectroWorld. I was glad to see she resisted the urge to reach up to pat her hair. What had she said about not rubbing my spots too much?

No, I wasn't going to ask. That would just lead to one more question and one more question and we'd stand here all day second guessing ourselves.

Turning away, I took one slow step and then another as I searched for my best plan of action. Had we allowed enough time to do everything we wanted? I wondered. Oh, well, if not, we could just consider this a test run and try again later. It would give me time to shake off my stage-fright jitters, anyway.

I started toward a jewelry shop a short distance away and was almost reluctant to hear Em's footsteps fading away in the other direction. Maybe we should have hung together a while longer, after all. Oh, well, if I didn't strike out on my own, what experiences could we compare later?

Maybe I'd just window shop to start. My Tenctonese reflection nodded from the glass of the jewelry store, agreeing that was a very good idea. I hadn't been to this particular mall before.

I could walk around for a while and get a feel for the place without drawing too much attention to myself.

Too much attention?

That was a weird thought. One I hadn't had since my Mom still bought most of my clothes for me and had picked out something really dorky. But there'd only been a clunky sort of embarrassment connected to the idea then, not uneasiness. Not this sense of being like a little kid, all on my own in a strange place. A place where there might be people like the salesgirl whose comments had started this whole crazy experiment. People who might not like the idea of this new me being here. Maybe, on the way in, I should've checked to see if there were other Newcomers around. It would be reassuring, thinking there was somebody else in the place that looked like me. Someone besides Emily...

Who wasn't...

Exactly...

A Newcomer anymore right now...

Had there ever been another mall in all of California that seemed so big and lonely?

Oh, come on, Jill, get a grip here! You're giving yourself a case of the creepies for no reason. I glared at my reflection. Good thing she didn't look as uncertain as I felt.

Big deal whether or not there were other Newcomers here. I was trying to learn something, and I wasn't going to find it out talking to myself in the window glass.

Well, this whole thing had started with a jewelry store, right? Before I could chicken out, I lifted my head and strode through the wide entranceway, adjusting the purse hanging over my shoulder. The people in there would know, right off, I was carrying money, right? That way there'd be no reason for them to get suspicious like that snotty girl I'd encountered with Em.

"Can I help you?"

"Um, well..." Oh, great, not again. The soda in my stomach was turning into a solid lump of ice. "I'm, well... I'm looking for earrings."

The girl eyed me up and down. "Posts or wires? For yourself or as a gift?"

What was it Em had said at the other store? That there was a way of doing something with the wires so the jewelry could be worn in ear valleys? Did this girl know about that? Or was she being sarcastic?

She was waiting for an answer. I cleared my throat, but no words came. Some great spy I'd turned out to be! Come on kid, this is what you came in here for!

Her face, her voice seemed kind, but... What would I say if I was wrong?

"Me." The word came out on a squeak. "That is, for myself."

"Well, okay, cool. We have a really good selection right over this way, I'll show you. They're designed as wires, but just the front portions of the earrings. If there are any you particularly like, we'll attach the kind of backing that'll let you wear them comfortably."

She left me to browse for a few minutes, then gave me a little wave as, empty handed, I turned away and left the shop, along with a cheerful "Come back soon!"

I don't remember much about the jewelry. Either it wasn't all that special or I was too nervous to notice. But I remember that girl. Her name-tag said Leah.

Had that gone well? I wasn't sure. It hadn't gone badly, I knew that much. Leah had given me the kind of service I'd grown up expecting, so why was I still uneasy? Because odds were the next time, I might not get the same treatment? I knew Em didn't walk around with a soda stomach all the time.

I wasn't used to being a Newcomer yet, that was all. Once I'd checked out a few more places, I'd feel better. But where should I go to next?

Help came from down the hall, as a great mix of smells called to me. Food court, they said,



and my stomach answered. It was still jumpy, but worse, it was empty. I'd skipped breakfast this morning as part of a prison style hunger strike, then I dashed off without lunch, making my getaway before Mom could change her mind. Following the beckoning aromas, I checked my purse. Fifteen bucks. More than enough, I realized as I read the overhead signs. I didn't see an Ice and Mice like the one at the mall Em and I usually went to, but there were signs for the usual chains as well as a few places I'd never come across before.

What to have? I started reading the menu on the wall of the closest place.

Cheeseburger, oh yeah... One quarter of a pound of ground beef with lettuce, onion, mayonnaise and choice of cheddar or Swiss...

Blast it! No! I couldn't have it. The bread, the veggies and probably the chese, but not the meat. It was cooked and indigestible for Newcomers.

French fries?

Nope. Ditto. Cooked. And full of salt. That'd be like swallowing pure battery acid.

Chicken burger, fishburger, garden-burger. Cooked, cooked, cooked.

Oh, man, there had to be something a Newcomer could eat.

Like what? Bladder bits? Pancreas patties? Spleens with greens?

None of them were listed at either burger place. My human stomach was definitely glad not to get introduced to those delicacies, but it was getting real annoyed at the delay.

Tacos? Burritos? Refried beans? Cooked. What would a Newcomer do if they got hungry here? Pizza? Oh, yeah, right. That was cooked, too.

Maybe Tenctonese didn't really come here. Was this the management's way of letting them know they- oops- that we- weren't quite welcome, even if Leah had been nice?

But no! About ten steps further on, at Stan's Seafood, I saw what I'd been watching for- raw squid and sesame snails and several kinds of sushi... What a relief!

Oh, no way it's a relief, my stomach complained. You might look like a Newcomer, but I don't. It's gotta be something both Newcomers and humans can eat.

Which brought me, at last, to a salad bar. The guy at this counter was nice too, even said he was about to restock the salt-free Catalina if I didn't mind waiting. I smiled a little as, at a nearby table, I saw a young Tenctonese couple stroke each other's temples and gaze with long, romantic looks into each other's eyes. But even while my stomach sighed in contentment as I munched spinach and strawberries, I realized it was the only part of me that was feeling better.

Even after the hunger had gone and I headed back into the hallway and wandered up and down in front of the store-fronts that lined it, the uneasiness stayed, mixed with an odd sadness. It was almost a relief when my watch told me it was time to go and meet Emily.

Conclusion:

The Unexpected Results

"There you are! Come on, quick! Your brother's gonna kill us!"

"Sorry I'm late!" exclaimed Em, her red hair bouncing on her shoulders and her feet echoing across the large entryway as she almost ran toward me. Since we were leaving anyway, I didn't bother reminding her to pant. "I got lost in this department store and..."

I found a smile, that tugged loose the ache inside me for a moment. I tossed it her way as we headed out the long panel of doors at the end of the hall. "Their stuff was that good, huh?"

"No, not really." She fell into step beside me. "These two guys were talking about the L A

Dodgers signing their first Newcomer pitcher to a major league contract for next year. I was so busy following their conversation as they walked through the sporting goods that I got lost!”

Buck was scowling at us from a car parked at the curbside. “It’s almost ten after,” he complained, reaching across the seat to swing the door open. “I’d’ve come looking, but I’ve got Vessna in the back and she fell asleep. Probably got bored waiting for you two.”

“Yeah, right,” said Em, gesturing me ahead of her. I nodded, then slipped in next to Buck. It was one of those tandem minds things again, me doing for her what she’d done for me more than once when it was my older brother that had been irritated about driving us someplace. Served as insulation. Not that it always worked.

“Dad’s cooking supper tonight,” Buck told her as we swung out of the parking lot and caught the main street back toward our neighborhood. The irritation over our lateness had faded from his voice, but there was a definite note of amused satisfaction. “Mom had to run some papers down to her office, so she wants you there to help out.”

“Me?” Em wailed. Her voice made three long, distinct syllables out of the word. She rolled her eyes, then glared across me at him. “In the kitchen? Buck, you know that cooking is male’s work!”

“Go call an attorney!” he flashed back with a wicked grin.

It was an old argument. Usually, I’d have been right there, sticking up for Em’s point of view on that subject. I really thought Tenctonese culture was far more enlightened in that area than mine. Not that I’d ever convince my Mom on that point, let alone Dad.

Not this afternoon, though. I settled back in my seat and watched all the cross-streets advance, only to slide away underneath our wheels then disappear behind us. I was wondering how things had gone for Emily. As for me, I was growing more aware with each passing block, that I wasn’t sure how I’d describe how it had been for me, either.

“Better get in there,” Buck said as the car coasted to a stop in the Francisco’s driveway.

“Dad’s burning some hamburger for Matt because he and Cathy are coming for supper. You wouldn’t want him to cook it for an hour like the last time we had humans over for a meal, would you?”

“Like I know how long hamburger cooks! Maybe Matt’ll just eat salad again! It’d be easier if he was a vegetarian, like Cathy.” Em’s complaint was good natured as she swung open her car door and climbed out. I knew she really liked her Dad’s detective partner and his pretty Newcomer girlfriend.

“Well, it’s not for an hour, that’s for sure!” Buck sighed. “I could have told him that when it started to smoke! Just give me a minute to get Vessna and I’ll be right in to supervise the supervisor!”

Emily nodded. Grinned. “Okay, deal. Jill, I’ll call you after supper. We can get together and compare notes, okay?”

“Okay,” I sighed, sliding toward the door, glad for a little more time to sort through my odd reaction to this afternoon’s outing.

As Em dashed across the lawn and banged through the front door, Buck turned to me. “You were pretty quiet all the way home. It didn’t go so well, huh?”

I stared at him. I couldn’t answer that question for myself, let alone for Buck. “I’m not sure how it went. I guess I’d have to say the experiment didn’t exactly work.”

“In science,” he said. “An experiment can be a success, even if it looks like it fails. Because you learn something from it, right?”

“I don’t know if I learned anything at all!” I exclaimed as all of the uneasiness and isolation and sadness threatened to press up a geyser of tears.

Buck settled back in his seat. "So, what happened, anyway?"

"I don't know. I just walked around this mall for a couple hours and I don't know..."

But all at once, as I looked at him, I did know. And, to my surprise, it was for Buck, even before Emily, that my flood of words came.

Nothing at all had happened, except that I'd looked at jewelry. I'd eaten salad. People had been nice to me. The problem wasn't that I'd hadn't found somebody to say or do something nasty to me so I could remember what to watch out for in case something like it happened to Emily at some later time. Maybe the truth was that we really had been able to go days, weeks and even months without the kind of incidents we'd had with that salesgirl. Maybe that was why that event, like the one with that substitute teacher stood out so sharp, clear and unfair. The problem had been inside of me. I hadn't felt like a spy, doing undercover work, or an aspiring journalist in search of a story.

"It wasn't like I thought it would be at all, Buck!" I looked down at my hands as though I could find words on their palms. "All I felt was out of place, caught somewhere between one world and another. Even if I was disguised as a Tenctonese person, I walked in there, looking around me with human eyes. I was worrying whether I'd remember all the stuff Em and I'd talked about in the car. Not how it would be if I was truly believable to everybody around me as a Newcomer. Under all the jitters, until the instant Emily left for the electronics store, I'd still been sure of my right to walk the halls of that mall in confidence."

I glanced over at him. Beside me, he was sitting very still, turned slightly toward me, waiting, as if he knew already that I would go on.

"Then, all at once, Buck, I was scared. Not a little. A lot. I quit thinking that I'd be found out at any moment. I just wondered what people were going to say to me and what I'd say back. And I didn't know. Not from one minute to the next. I never had a reason to not feel quite safe like that before. I always just figured there'd be someone nearby I could turn to. I always just knew I could get what I wanted or needed. But today, it was like everybody was a stranger."

I'd never seen Buck looking so interested in what I'd had to say. Not so serious. Or so kind. None of the almost hostile, teasing light I'd seen in his eyes from time to time was in them now.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Like knowing for sure I'd find something to eat." I felt a fleeting grin. "It never occurred to me I'd go into a place and not be sure there'd be a restaurant that would have something I could get down without it making me sick."

He nodded. "Go on," he said.

"Until then," I told him, looking again for words in my hands. "I never imagined that I could feel so alone. So..." The one word that came to mind took on a whole new meaning... So...

"Alien," I whispered, not looking at him.

He was silent for several long seconds. I thought, when I at last looked up at him again, I might see anger in his eyes. Or maybe that hint of sadness I'd noticed before. Instead, he was smiling.

"A long time ago," he said. "My Great Uncle, Moodri, told me we are all the same, all star stuff. I was never quite sure I believed him. But what you said, it's not alien at all. I always told myself terts never felt alone like that. How could they? They hadn't been slaves. Maybe they weren't even evolved enough to recognize loneliness. After all, they weren't as advanced as the Tenctonese were, were they? I'd remind myself their culture... your culture... was really backward... You know, females denied their rights as heads of household, stuff like that?"

“Yeah, most of us women would agree that’s pretty backward,” I returned the smile.

“Anyway,” he went on, his words coming faster now. “I don’t know how it was for Emily, but that was a better experiment than either you or I must have figured it would be. Whatever else you thought you might find, you discovered the real truth behind the name they gave us when we came here. Newcomers. Because everything around you is new to you. And you’re new to yourself because you’ve never experienced something like it before.”

In the back seat, there was a soft wrustling as Vessna stirred in her sleep, then was quiet again.

“It’ll be different for her,” Buck said, after listening for a moment to see if she was about to wake up. “What you’re describing sounds just like how it was for me the first day they let us out of quarantine and told us we were free to go where we wanted. We didn’t know what we’d find from one minute to another. Whether the next person we met would be kind or not, if they’d accept us or not. Even whether we’d be able to find food that we could eat. It’ll be different for Vessna. This is going to be her world. I want to do something to help make sure it’s a good one. And maybe your experiment is showing me that how we react to new situations makes us like Moodri said... Makes all of us a lot more alike than I was ever willing to admit before.”

“Can I quote you on that?” I asked. “Mister Sikes said I’m an aspiring journalist.”

To my surprise, he raised a hand and stroked gentle knuckles across my temple. It was a light brush. Even through the fake scalp, I could feel the warmth of it, without a wall of hair to muffle the smooth, gliding stroke. I could understand what made it such a pleasurable gesture.

“You sure can,” he said before he opened the car door. “That is, as long as I get to read your story when you’re done with it.”

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!