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The Leaders of Tomorrow

I knew only two of the other girls who were to be my classmates; both had been a half-grade ahead of me at my old school. The taller (five feet at age ten) was Mary Barker, the other Gina Pasquale. I had often admired Mary on the playground because she was the best softball player in school. She also won all-city prizes in track. And *smart!* I'd seen her give accurate, instant answers to intricate math problems that other girls had spent hours huddled over in the bathroom trying desperately to solve before handing in their papers. Sometimes Mary would only help others with homework for money. She had a side that was unscrupulous and fearless, and her almost insatiable appetite for makeup and earrings required money despite her tender age. Nobody could believe her mother *allowed* her to use lipstick and wear earrings, but no one would deny that she looked good. The shirtwaist, her thick, long, blunt-cut auburn hair, the skeptical brown eyes all made her look mature and intimidatingly attractive.

Gina, standing with her, was so completely opposite in character and values that the two seemed destined to despise one another. A little overweight, heavy-featured, and curly-haired, Gina didn't care what she wore, so long as her clothes were neat. For her first day at "gifted school," her parents had given her a genuine leather briefcase in which to carry her prized books. Gina, in everybody's opinion, was

some kind of genius. She did not have Mary's facile, smart-aleck intelligence. Rather, her intellect was deep, bottomless, almost weird. Information about *everything* just floated to the top of her brain whenever she needed it. She had taught herself algebra. She typed long, footnoted essays where a hand-written short composition would have sufficed. When she talked, she sounded forty years old. Mostly, Gina was reserved and distant, but quick to explode with biting come-backs. Ready to detect any insult, Gina instantly retaliated as though to protect herself from the cruelty so often showered upon homely children by their peers. She terrified me, and I looked away whenever her small, critical eyes examined me appraisingly.

Mary, always one to enjoy combat, stood with Gina that morning trying to engage her in conversation, inviting me to join in with a generous "Come on over here, Shrimp." Dutifully, as always, I obeyed Big Mary. I would rather have stayed back though, standing near another girl who had politely introduced herself as Linda Martin from Norton school.

Linda seemed nice; she talked easily to me about her poodle, Charlie. Her pixie haircut was darling — just like I wanted — and she wore a plaid jumper and new Hushpuppies, and carried a shiny red plaid satchel. Most enviable of all, she had a Barbie lunchbox, with containers and compartments for everything. That morning, she seemed to me the perfect girl — petite and neither ostentatious nor shy. She was probably really smart, but she didn't act it, and that, of course, was good. She was showing me the inside of her lunchbox when the bus came. By that time Mary and Gina were trading insults — "Jerk!" "Barbarian!" — and we all had to scramble to get aboard.

The fourth girl at the bus stop that day, I was small, anxious, and eager to please. Sometimes with others, if I knew them, I could show off a little; I could think up and write imaginative stories; I was reasonably good at school work. But looking around me on the bus that morning I felt terribly average — or even below average. As I admired