

## STICKS AND STONES

Susan smoothed her dress and glanced at her reflection in the plate glass window. A little tinge of uncertainty nibbled at her self-confidence. Maybe the dress was too trendy... too stylish. She took a second look and felt her cheeks flush with pleasure. No, this was her true self now; it had always been her true self. Smoothing the dress one last time, Susan took a deep, determined breath, grabbed the metal handle of the door and plunged through the entrance of the Classifications Department.

The glare of sunlight was immediately replaced by the dull haze of humming fluorescents. Her confidence was quickly dimmed too by the unexpected paralysis of the atmosphere. Instead of the anticipated bustle of beaming bureaucrats, one lone man hunched over his desk behind the drab counter. As she gazed around the room, Susan observed papers piled and filed in every conceivable nook and cranny. They all seemed quite comfortable, the urgency of their demands having long ago been soothed to sleep. Since the man remained with his back toward her, Susan cautiously cleared her throat. No response. She tried again, this time aiming at the square of his back.

"Yes, I know you're there," parried a dry, curt voice. "I'll be with you in a minute."

"Probably a J-3," Susan thought with a wry grimace. After an annoyingly lengthy delay, the clerk rose from his desk and approached the counter. He was a small, thin man, almost bald, with round wire-rimmed glasses. Susan glanced at his Tag: J-7. "Hmph. Must have some redeeming qualities," she mused.

Peering inquisitively at Susan, the clerk began to rub his hands together. "And now miss," he asked in a most officious voice, "what can I do for you?"

"I'd like to apply for a change of classification."

"Hmmm. So, you'd like to apply for a change," he restated, with an undercurrent of amusement. "I see." He looked at her knowingly. "Win a lottery?!" he suddenly blurted. Then, obviously pleased with his own wit, he gave a little titter of approval. "Why yes, of course, a change," he continued. "Well, you've certainly come to the right place. Now, exactly what did you have in mind?"

"I'd like to apply for a change of Type," Susan stated. "You see, I'm currently listed as an M. But I've come to realize that given the... um... experiences I've gone through in the last few years I'm actually more of an H. It just seems to be the real me and I..."

Susan suddenly stopped speaking and looked at the clerk with a very puzzled and questioning expression. She noticed that the corners of his mouth were twitching, and she had the strong sense that he was trying desperately not to break into uncontrollable laughter. Susan glanced over her shoulder to see if something was going on behind her. She turned back in confusion to the clerk. He seemed to be the model of efficiency and professional detachment, except that his mouth twitched again, ever so slightly.

“As I was saying,” Susan continued, “Type H seems to be the real me and I...”

Again the twitching.

Susan began to feel irritated. “Is something wrong?” she asked, in a slightly challenging tone.

“Oh, no miss, nothing at all,” the clerk assured her. “So you are currently an M and you would like to be changed to an H.”

Susan was convinced that the clerk was inwardly roaring with laughter, though he somehow managed to control everything but the corners of his mouth.

“An H,” he repeated. Twitch, twitch.

Sensing that she could be in for a struggle, Susan took the offensive. “Look, this is really very simple. I have finally realized that it’s time to finish some business that I’ve put off for too long. Now, if you could please give me the necessary forms... I’m in a bit of a rush.”

“Ah yes, well you see, it’s not quite that simple,” the clerk responded. “Changes of Type are rather an involved procedure, though a small escalation in Status can be handled fairly readily. Now, I see that you are a 5.” He paused and rubbed his chin for inspiration. “I suppose with proper justification we could move you up to a 6, or perhaps a 7... though certainly nothing beyond that.”

“What do you mean ‘certainly’ nothing beyond that?!” Susan questioned, her eyes narrowing with indignation.

The clerk gave a sharp staccato laugh, as if the answer was obvious. “Well, my dear,” he began, with great amusement, “it’s very clear that your... ahem... I mean that you... uh...” Suddenly the amusement was gone, and he cleared his throat nervously as Susan glared at him. “What I mean to say is that everyone would agree that your... uh... that...” He swallowed hard and glanced around the room.

Susan slammed her palm down on the counter. “Just what exactly do you mean?!” she demanded.

This outburst quite shocked the clerk, and retreating quickly into his official role, he managed to regain his composure. “Now, now, no need to get upset,” he soothed, in his most objective tone of voice. “I’m only doing my duty here. But since you insist, I must state that... ahem... uh...” Summoning his courage and deciding to risk life and limb, the clerk boldly declared, “It is quite obvious that your figure would need some serious alterations in order to meet the departmental standard of excellence.” However, seeing the wrath rising in Susan’s eyes, he quickly blurted out, “Though I’ve heard you can do a lot with your hair!”

This was the last straw for Susan, who slammed her clenched fist in fury against the counter. “Now you listen to me, buster!” she threatened. “You give me those forms right now, or YOU will be the one who is seriously altered! You hear me?!”

The clerk jumped back a step and began to explain that he was not permitted to authorize a change of Type. “You’ll have to see a counsellor for that,” he stammered. “But

please... please go take a seat in the waiting room and I'll get one right away." Rushing to his desk, he grabbed the phone and began punching in the numbers of the proper extension. Still fuming, Susan turned from the counter while the clerk sought refuge behind a counsellor.

The waiting room was actually a very comfortable lounge that faced the busy street. Through narrow openings in the blinds and behind darkened glass, Susan could watch the bustle of the outside world. Inside were deep, inviting chairs, a rich blue carpet and dark walnut tables. The lighting was serene and subdued. In one corner there was a lamp filled with glowing orange liquid in which lighter coloured blobs slowly rose and fell in a never-ending cycle. It seemed the perfect place for reflection and meditation. Susan began to relax as her rage dissipated.

Scanning the room she noticed the usual supply of magazines and books. There was also a tall wooden rack of pamphlets which had been published by the Classifications Department. She glanced at some titles in an effort to fill the time, but the literature did not seem especially encouraging: How to "B" Happy; From 7 to 9 in Four Easy Steps; Dealing With D-pression; Self-Acceptance: Resignation or Celebration? She turned away and decided it would be better to watch the pedestrians outside.

As she cooled down, Susan began to ponder the reaction of the clerk. What was the big deal? M, H, Q, Z... who cares? Removing the classification Tag which had been pinned to her dress, she held it in her fingers. About the size of a large button, it consisted of an external case – which came in any number of designer styles and colours – and a laminated insert that snapped securely in the holder. She stared at her Tag for a moment and gave a weary sigh. M-5 was stamped boldly in the middle of the official Classifications seal.

She re-pinned it to her dress, closed her eyes and sank back into the welcoming armchair. Was everyone else as dissatisfied as she was? No, probably not; at least, her friends had never mentioned it. Certainly anyone would be glad to move up a notch or two in Status; but what about Type? Susan could not think of anyone who had seriously challenged his or her classification. But she had resented her designation for as long as she could remember. When would she be free? Her mind drifted.

"Susan dear! Come on over here now, please. Don't be shy!" her mom encouraged. "You remember your Aunt Gertie, don't you dear? Well she's come all the way from Twin Rivers so that she can be here for your confirmation birthday. Gertie, here's my little Susan. Isn't she just as sweet as I told you?"

"Why Mary, she's such a perfect little M, isn't she?" oozed Aunt Gertie. "So sweet and quiet, and already five years old. Why I bet you never say 'Boo!' do you dear?"

Susan reddened and mumbled her answer to the ground.

Aunt Gertie pinched her cheek firmly. "You know, you remind me so much of my friend's wee girl, Mabel. She's such a shy wisp of a thing too. Mary, you've made the ideal

choice. She's an M to the core. Oh Bill! Yoo hoo, Bill! Over here! Come and meet my niece Susan. She's such a perfect little M!"

Susan shifted restlessly in the chair. How could anyone tell? What gave them the right to choose for her? People put so much faith in the confirmation tests, but they could only evaluate the externals. How much of what she had said and done was due to the whims and demands of others? What about her heart, her desires? No, there was no test for that. And so every result became one more confirmation, forcing her to conform to the mold chosen for her.

As Susan sat in weary reflection, she glimpsed a familiar face sauntering past the door of the waiting room. Immediately she turned away and began reaching for a magazine.

"Suzie, Suzie," a belittling voice prodded, "now what could you possibly be doing here?"

Groaning inwardly, Susan turned back toward the door. "Hello Spencer," she answered flatly. "I'm..." Susan hesitated. Then, continuing with determination, "I'm here to apply for a change."

"Wonderful!" came the cheery response. "Good for you! You certainly could use it!" Spencer laughed. "Just kidding, Suzie, just kidding. But really now, you're not serious are you? What would we do without our 'little Suzie-M' around the office?"

Susan restrained the urge to jump up and throw Spencer across the room. Instead she gave him her "my-aren't-you-funny" smile. "But what about you, Spencer? I don't suppose that you are applying for a change?"

"Well of course," answered Spencer, as if stating the obvious. "You don't really think I'm a T do you? I've been coming here almost every month for about a year, but for some reason I can't seem to get past that obnoxious, irritating clerk. I'm trying to request a change to a Q-9."

In spite of herself, Susan let out a short burst of laughter, which was quickly reined in. She tried to respond to Spencer's glare, but found that she could only snicker again.

Spencer was nettled by this reaction. "You must be related to that clerk, I suppose. I don't see what all the giggling is about. It's perfectly obvious I'm a Q-9! I've always known it, and I'm sure everyone in the office would agree. I mean, look at me! I'm intelligent, talented, good looking..."

Susan tried to hide the smirk behind a finger she rubbed thoughtfully across her lips, but the desperate hilarity in her eyes betrayed her.

"Okay, missy," responded Spencer, with a curt nod of his head, "what about you? I suppose you think you're a Q-9 yourself."

Susan's cheeks reddened as a wave of self-consciousness swept over her. It broke with emotional force, leaving her mind in a foam of confusion. She felt her throat begin to tighten. Glancing at Spencer, she noticed that his previous irritation had been replaced by a condescending expression of amusement. Immediately she understood. Spencer had determined to put her back into the mental slot he had assigned to her. Susan now found that

she didn't care what he thought. A deep calm settled in her heart. "No, Spencer," she finally replied. "I am not a Q-9. I believe I'm an H; maybe a 6 or 7. Who knows?" she shrugged.

Spencer snorted. "I suppose that accounts for some of your recent outbursts at work. But don't you worry, missy," he winked unkindly, "to me you'll always be 'little Suzie-M'. Oh, by the way, that dress doesn't suit you at all." With that he turned and walked out of the room.

Closing her eyes, Susan flopped back into the deep, welcoming chair. When would it ever end? Was life that static? With a long sigh she began to process the reaction of her colleague. It seemed that to some people these designations were carved in stone. At least, for everyone else, she thought wryly. Spencer was glad to give himself a new classification. But he would never let her change. In fact, he would never let anyone change. She felt a little surge of anger and frustration. Why not?! What harm did it do him? It wasn't a competition, was it?! And even as she asked the question, Susan knew the answer. Yes... yes it was... to him. The more she considered the truth of this answer, the more she was filled with a great sadness. So many events from the past began to make sense. So many Spencers, each one desperately trying to maintain some sense of superiority relative to her. What fragile worlds they had created in their minds! And they reigned supreme by treating others as inferior subjects. Control was their only defense against reality.

"Susan!"

A rich, cheerful voice broke in on her meditation. Startled, she looked up to see a tall, dark-haired man smiling warmly down on her. His athletic build filled out the stylish suit he wore with casual ease. He exuded a tremendous confidence, yet in his face there was an element of compassion.

"Susan, I'm Bill, your counsellor. Thought we'd lost you there for a minute," he joked as he extended his hand. "Why don't you come down to my office and we can have a chat about your request for a change of Type."

As Susan seated herself in the plush office, she felt her peace and confidence evaporating. Large oak bookcases were carefully filled with matching sets of gold-embossed volumes. The room was well lit by a number of expensive brass fixtures, complementing the thick burgundy carpet which cushioned her feet. Gazing across the imposing desk, with its small pile of neatly stacked documents, Susan glanced at Bill's Tag. With a shock, she realized for the first time that she was in the presence of a B-9. It almost took her breath away. A B-9!

Bill's warm smile steadied her as he placed his folded hands on the polished desk top. "Now, Susan," he began, "why don't you tell me a bit of your story." He paused reflectively. "I guess we all have a story, don't we?"

While Susan recounted her thoughts and experiences, Bill listened attentively, encouraging her with various nods of affirmation and "mhms" along the way. It took about fifteen minutes, but finally Susan was satisfied that the tale was told. Once again it was apparent to her that she had never really been an M. It was simply a role she had assumed,

while the real her, the true H, had been hidden under the costume forced on her by others. With this concluding argument, Susan's eyes appealed confidently to Bill, fully expecting vindication and justice.

There was a silence... a long silence. Tiny droplets began to form on Bill's temples. He rolled his chair away from the desk and stood up. Placing his hands in his pockets, he walked in meditation to the window. He stared through the blinds for a few seconds and then turned to face Susan. It seemed that a great weight of responsibility had suddenly settled on Bill's shoulders. He appeared fatigued and slightly stooped. Returning to his chair at the desk, he bowed his head and began to speak in measured tones.

"That's a very interesting analogy, Susan. I can tell that you've given a lot of thought to your situation. Unfortunately, you are not really understanding the big picture, which leaves me the sad task, as your counsellor, of helping you to get the proper viewpoint."

Tragically, Susan was repeating the mistake of so many others who had only considered life from their own perspective. This was a narrow, self-centered way of thinking that needed to be corrected. The "play of life", to use her analogy, was very complex. In order to present a winning performance, it was necessary that all the actors work together in harmony from the same script.

"So you see, Susan, the role that you play is much more important than you may have realized. Now the Classifications Department is aware of all these intricacies. That is why we are concerned not so much with people who change, as with people trying to appear they have changed. Obviously any official reclassification of Type must represent a permanent transformation, otherwise society would be chaotic. We all know that traumatic experiences can cause genuine life change. But could you imagine, Susan," Bill asked with a warm chuckle, "...could you imagine what the world would be like if we could change our Tags whenever we wanted?"

"But what would be so wrong with that?" Susan responded plaintively. Already she had felt the tide of hope beginning to ebb, its powerful forces drawing her confidence along with it. "Am I not the best judge of who I am, or who I can be?"

Bill gave a heavy sigh and rubbed the back of his neck with his hand. "Susan, I'm afraid I'll have to be blunt with you. Before I came to the waiting room I reviewed your file. Every year, without fail, the Classifications Analysis Testing has confirmed that you are an M. As you know, these tests are 97% accurate."

"Maybe so," Susan persisted, with a growing sense of desperation, "but why don't I get to evaluate myself? I've written many of these tests for others, but the questions are all based on externals, on what people say or do. What about how we think or feel?"

"The problem with thoughts and feelings, Susan, is that it is so easy to fool ourselves." Now Bill's voice had a slightly aggressive edge to it. "The Classifications testing is not haphazard. The individuals chosen for this evaluation process are carefully selected for their

unique perspective on your life. Then too, though the questions may seem straight forward, they are actually full of hidden indicators. All things considered, Susan, can the agreed conclusions of ten others really be wrong? What you need to do, is ask yourself in all honesty, if you are not simply wishing you could be different.”

Leaning forward across his desk, Bill spoke with self-revealing intimacy. “The truth is, we all wish we could be different... better. Who wouldn’t want to move up in ranking? But wishing is not reality. If that ‘inner person’ is never expressed in action, then what is the value to society? Why should I treat you like an H, if all your life you have lived as an M? Is the H the real person, or merely a self-delusion? And for yourself,” he continued, speaking with compassionate concern, “all this striving and desiring, but never acting... what is the benefit of that? All it does is create emotional stress and unrest. Susan,” Bill concluded, “are you really an H?”

In the painful silence that followed, hope now completely receded. Susan’s heart was left a dark and barren expanse of despair. She felt helpless as she watched something inside herself begin to wither and die. She had been ready to burst into bloom. Life had been full of nurturing sunlight. Now...

“I don’t like this system,” she responded quietly. Bowing her head, she stared at the floor. “And I don’t like my Tag.”

Bill rose from his chair and began to pace around the room. With sympathetic understanding he explained to her that, once again, she failed to see the big picture. Through the creation of Tags, the Classifications Department had only made objective and explicit what had always been implicit in society. Everyone was aware, whether consciously or sub-consciously, that people always evaluated themselves relative to others. The net result was a mental determination of classification and an appropriate ranking. What the Department had accomplished, after considerable study, was to clarify and codify the standards by which people were to be judged. On the basis of these findings, individuals were assigned accurate Type and Status designations. The advantages of this system were enormous. Now people no longer had to question their own conclusions, or wonder whether others were pretending. This greatly facilitated honesty in relationships, improved verbal and non-verbal communication, and encouraged harmonious social groupings. The creation of Tags had also given a real boost to business and commerce. Advertising could accurately target its audience! Entrepreneurs could uncover niche markets!

By this time Bill was speaking with rich enthusiasm. “So you see, Susan, what to you is one little change will be extremely disruptive to society. Everyone will have to start treating you differently! You’ll probably have to move... maybe even get a new car or find a new job! Isn’t that a tiny bit selfish?” he argued persuasively. “You need to think of others. Try to view life from their perspective. Then, in a year or so, after your next set of tests, if you still feel as

you do, well..." he shrugged, "you can always reapply for a change of classification. Does that sound all right to you?"

"I don't know, really," Susan heard an empty voice answer. "I guess so." There seemed to be a dull haze in the room and a quiet humming in the background. Suddenly she felt tired... very tired. All she wanted to do was to go home and lie down.

"Fine, fine," Bill continued. "I'll just have you fill out a short departmental form. It won't take a minute." He returned to the desk and sat down in his swivel chair with a victoriously cheerful smile. Reaching over into a lower drawer he pulled out a small sheet of paper. "I'm sure this..." he began. But his voice stopped in mid-sentence.

While straightening up in the chair, Bill's Tag had caught the edge of his desk and popped off. It went clattering across the shiny surface and dropped to the floor at Susan's feet. The Tag must have broken, for it now lay in two pieces. Susan stooped to pick them up and was reaching out to return them when a questioning awareness checked her. She looked at the two pieces in confusion. Glancing up at Bill she did a quick double-take. His face was a deep shade of red, and the victorious smile had been replaced by a storm of anxiety.

"I'll... I'll... uh... take those please..." he quavered, seeking to affect a tone of indifference. "My Tag... please..."

Susan looked down again at the plastic in her hand. Her eyes began to widen and her mouth slowly dropped open. Indignation rising to her cheeks, she raised her head to glare at Bill. His face was now a pasty white. One eye had developed a nervous twitch.

"Could I have those please... please?" his voice trailed off in defeat.

"You have two Tags!" Susan stated vehemently. "You're not a B-9; you're a K-3! Look!" she demanded, holding out one of the Tags. "You're a K-3!"

Clearing his throat, Bill surveyed the desk. "Yes, well it's all very... um... easily explained. You see, I... uh... I..."

"You're a fraud!" Susan interjected, her lips tight with anger. "You were only pretending to be a B-9"

"But I'm allowed to pretend," Bill protested. "It's in my job description. I'm a professional."

"You're a fraud! You rat!" Susan stormed, jumping out of her chair. "Now you listen to me! I'm applying for a change of classification and I want it done right now! Do you hear me?!"

"Yes Susan," Bill answered meekly, "whatever you want. But, can I please have my Tag back? Please?"

Eyes glowering, Susan tossed the pieces on his desk and watched as Bill's trembling hands snapped a B-9 cover over the K-3 Tag.

"So that's how you do it," she steamed. "I don't suppose the general public can use Tag covers?"

“Oh, no!” Bill replied, glancing up with a look of dread. “That wouldn’t be... I mean, we couldn’t allow that.”

“Hmph!” Susan snorted, continuing to glare mercilessly at the beleaguered bureaucrat. “Now what about my forms?”

The new registration took only a few minutes, though it seemed like ages to the heavily perspiring official. When the job was done, he stamped her form and handed it across the desk.

“You can have it processed on the second floor,” he directed, “room 203.”

“Thank you very much,” Susan responded, her words hard as ice. “You’ve been most helpful.” Slamming the door behind her, she left the room.

Bill slumped in his chair. He leaned his head back, and with eyes closed exhaled a loud sigh of relief. He was in the process of wiping his forehead with a handkerchief when the desk phone buzzed. Lifting the receiver, he asked in a hollow voice, “Yes?”

Moments later his countenance changed and he bolted upright in his chair. “No, no... fine, fine, Wilson,” he boomed with sudden cheerfulness. “Heh, heh! Just caught me napping, that’s all. Yes, of course. What’s his name? Daniel? Okay, I’ll be right there.”

Returning the receiver to its place, Bill picked up his Tag and bounded to his feet. He strode impressively around the office while fixing the Tag in place. “Hello Daniel,” he crooned, “how are you today?” He shook his head in dissatisfaction. “Danny?” he mumbled to himself. “Dan?” Taking a deep breath and clearing his throat, Bill lowered his voice from a baritone to a bass and tried again. “So, you must be Dan!” He smiled with satisfaction. Glancing in the mirror, he brushed his suit and straightened his tie. He worked his shoulders up and down a few times, grabbed the door knob firmly and went marching from his office.

On the second floor, Susan handed her form across the counter to an emotionless, coffee-sipping processor. After scanning the paper he reached out his hand. “Tag please.”

“Pardon?”

“Your Tag please. You don’t want to keep it do you?”

“No thank you!” Susan responded adamantly as she hurried to remove her former designation.

Taking her Tag, the processor tossed it into an empty garbage pail where it rattled around the bottom. He collected her reclassification fee and then, motioning with his hand, blandly instructed, “Down the hall, third door on the right. I’ll bring you your new Tag.”

Susan was quite surprised by this efficiency; she had expected another delay. However her optimism waned when she reached the door and read: Transition Counselling. Her hesitant knock was greeted by a woman’s hearty, “C’mon in!” Opening the door, she was met by a large, dark-skinned lady in a very brightly patterned dress. The woman was beaming as she ushered Susan into a chair.

“So you made it!” she enthused in a melodious voice. “Good for you, Honey, good for you!”

Susan felt immediately at ease and returned the smile. “Yes, I guess I did,” she laughed. “But if I had known what I was in for I might have stayed at home.”

“Obviously that would have been a mistake,” the counsellor responded. “Far better to risk and stretch, than spend your life boxed in by other people’s perceptions. But we’ll get into that in a minute. My name is Gracie, and you are...”

“Susan.”

“Glad to meet you, Susan,” said Gracie while seating herself in a large comfortable chair. “My job, as you have probably noticed from the door, is to assist you in your transition into a new life with a new classification. However, the real difficulty will be in assisting others to accept the change in your designation.”

Susan nodded her agreement. “Yes, I’ve already found that out. I happened to meet a fellow from the office who refused to accept that I could change.”

“Honey, you ain’t seen nothin’! If you think co-workers will struggle with your new Tag, wait until your family hears about it!” Gracie laughed heartily. “My oh my, then you’ll be pulling some teeth... and Honey, I mean wisdom teeth! You see, Susan – and now I’m going to talk like a counsellor – people who already know you are used to interacting with you on the basis of your old Type. Over the years they have unconsciously developed patterns of thought, speech and action when relating to you. But now, because of your new classification, these habits have to change. This can be a very difficult shift for some people.”

“But Gracie,” Susan responded, “it’s not as if I picked a Type out of the blue. I think I’ve been acting more like an H than an M for years.”

“That may be true,” Gracie countered, “but now people have to accept you for who you actually are. However, once this mental adjustment has taken place, the social transition is usually fairly easy.”

Their conversation was interrupted by a knock at the door, and the entrance of the emotionless processor. “Your new designation, miss,” he said, handing the plastic Tag to Susan. “You can get a full refund in thirty days if you’re not satisfied.” He turned and left the room, closing the door behind him.

After gazing at the Tag in her hand, Susan looked up at Gracie with a radiant smile.

“Well let’s go girl!” Gracie clapped her hands enthusiastically. “You get that thing pinned on and tell the whole world who you are! My oh my, would you look at that... H-7! Now you’re talkin’, Honey, now you’re talkin’!”

“Thanks Gracie,” Susan said with genuine gratitude. “I wish everyone could be as positive as you.”

“So do I, but then, I have nothing to lose.”

Susan looked puzzled. “I don’t understand.”

“Now I don’t want to get negative, but the reality is that some folks are going to feel mighty threatened by your new classification.”

“Threatened?!”

“Like your friend from work,” Gracie continued. “You see, some people come to attach all their sense of self-worth to their designations. They see the classifications system as a barnyard pecking order. So, if someone they know changes her Type or Status, well... they may perceive this as a threat to their own ranking. Then there can be all sorts of different reactions: anger, resentment, bitterness.”

“But I’m not trying to hurt anybody,” Susan protested. “I only want to be myself... my real self.”

“I know that,” Gracie soothed, “and I’m not saying that everyone will respond negatively. But I do want to prepare you for what could happen. However,” she continued with a reassuring smile, “the most important thing is what we think about ourselves. Take me, for instance. Would you believe that back where I came from I was considered quite a catch? It’s true. I may not look like much to you, but I was an 8 in my country. Then, when I moved here, I became a 5! I didn’t realize it at the time, but there can be significant cultural deviations in classification. Well, I was some upset for a while! But then I thought, ‘Now what’s changed here? I haven’t changed. It’s just the way other people look at me that’s changed.’ And I decided that I didn’t care. I liked myself, and if others didn’t... well tough on them!” she concluded, laughing heartily again.

As Susan joined in the laughter, she shook her head with admiration. “I sure wish I had your self-confidence. I would have changed my Type years ago.”

“Self-confidence?” Gracie questioned. “Yes, I suppose. Though that is really rooted in our self-image, in a positive acceptance of who we are. But now I have a question for you, and I’d like you to think carefully before answering. Why did you take so long to apply for a new classification? What kept you from making that final official step?”

After reflecting for a minute, Susan responded, “I guess I was afraid. I was afraid of how other people would react... and I really didn’t know if... if I could handle life as an H... which doesn’t seem to make sense.”

“Actually, it makes perfect sense,” Gracie corrected. “Nothing attacks hopes and dreams as powerfully as fear; fear as it concerns ourselves and fear in relation to others. This is a big topic because it raises issues of insecurity, conflict and risk taking. Still, you went ahead and applied for a change. Why?”

Susan’s face became resolute. “I got angry! Gracie, I nearly came here a hundred times, but I always pulled back. Finally I became so fed up with myself and so furious with others that I had to do something!”

Gracie chuckled sympathetically. "Yes, anger is certainly a great motivator. It'll get you out of your comfort zone in a hurry. Just don't stay angry, Honey. Well I suppose that's enough for today," she concluded, "but we can carry on next week, if you'd like."

"Really?" Susan asked with delight. "Oh yes, I'd love that."

"Good, I was hoping you'd say so. A few more sessions will help ease the pain of those first bumps and bruises. You call me in a couple of days, and we'll set up an appointment," Gracie instructed, rising to open the office door.

Susan paused in the doorway and turned back to hug Gracie. "Thank you for your help. You've done so much for me already."

"It was definitely my pleasure. Now, as a last word of encouragement, remember this: a seed only needs a little water and sunshine to produce a beautiful flower. Chin up, girl!" Gracie smiled warmly. "And by the way..."

"Yes?"

"I really like your dress!"