"Are you happy, Nicole?"

I looked at Mrs. Finnigan like she'd lost her mind. "Of course, I'm happy. What a silly question!" I exclaimed, glad that Morn wasn't anywhere near to hear how I'd spoken to our five-doors-away neighbor. But there were times, like now, when she irritated me--grated on me. Perhaps it was because she was so very shrewd and intuitive, like Mom. Honestly, there were times when I declared she knew me and read me like a much-used
book. I tolerated and put up with her because of Leslie. Leslie Finnigan and I are the same age. We've been friends all of our natural lives.

"Are you really happy?" she asked, pouring the delicious-smelling, cooked fudge frosting over the tall chocolate cake, smoothing it up the sides and swirling it on top.

"Of course, I'm happy. I told you that once." I hadn't meant to sound so curt and testy, but I couldn't help myself. She bugged me but good today!

Mrs. Finnigan was a good woman. I knew this. Everybody else knew it. She was an upright woman, too. A widow of five years, she was doing an excellent job raising her five children, Leslie included. She had strict rules and regulations and each child respected those rules and conformed to the standards laid down by the only remaining head of the house. But she could be so tactless at times, especially with me. Like today. I guess I should be used to it. She's talked to me like this ever since I could walk. Treats me just like she does Leslie. Corrects me. Scolds me. And, I guess, loves me, too.

I felt Mrs. Finnigan's eyes on me. I kept mine glued to the pretty brown and white tiles on the kitchen floor, pretending to be counting them.

"You used to be so sweet..."

Her voice died in a sort of sob. Her sentence trailed meaningfully above me, making my head swim and feel hot.

Raising my eyes and holding my head at a defiant sort of angle, I rejoined, "What do you mean, used to be so sweet?"

With that sob still in her voice, Mrs. Finnigan said, "You used to be such a sweet Christian girl, Nikki, but you've changed. And you're breaking not only your dear mother's and father's heart but mine, too."

I felt an uprising in the deep recesses of my heart. So what! I thought. What right did she have to criticize me? Frankly, I resented what she'd said. Still, she had called me Nikki, the endearing little pet name she always used on me to comfort my heart when I was frightened or hurt or injured.
"The Saviour's waiting patiently to take you back into His fold," she said. "And we are praying for you, Nikki dear."

I looked down at the tiles and counted to twenty, afraid to speak lest I lash out verbally against her. After all, it was Mrs. Finnigan who first led me to Christ. (How many years ago was it?) Mom had a tremendous impact on my life, to be sure, but it was in Mrs. Finnigan's Sunday school class that I first got saved.

It was a wonderful experience, I'll have to admit. But I was then only a rather small child and didn't think about such things as being popular with the in crowd, dating boys, and making a name for myself. Now that I was sixteen (almost seventeen) too many other things occupied my mind and filled my time. I continued going to church though; my parents saw to it that I did. But I was there mostly only in body, not much in mind, and never in spirit or spiritual worship.

Leslie was different. She was a devout Christian, and everyone knew it. Like me, she got saved that same Sunday in her mother's class. But, unlike me, she went to the altar sometime later on and was sanctified wholly. Talk about a sweet Christian; that was and is Leslie! And, strange as it may seem, in spite of my changed attitude, Leslie and I have remained close friends. Truth of the matter is, I still prefer Leslie's company and friendship to any of the other young people with whom I am friends.

"Why are you trying so hard to be popular?" Mrs. Finnigan's question brought me back quickly out of my musings to the immediate present.

I scowled at her. She was a mind-reader, reading me and my desires like a book. She was no docile, mouse-like woman when she "scented" she was on the right track, Mrs. Finnigan wasn't. She "plowed right down the furrow" of conversation-topic, pursuing the subject with the determination of a bloodhound, much the same way she did her housework. No putting things off for a more convenient season or time. Rather she rolled up her sleeves and dug right in, getting immediately to the heart of the matter, or the work, as the case may be.

"I've been praying for you, Nikki," she said. "Don't think I haven't noticed the change. I still keep tabs on you like one of my own children. And I don't approve of your friends at school."
"How should you know who my friends are?" I asked curtly.

"Leslie's still in school, Nicole. I ask her often if you've eaten lunch together."

"And she tells you I've been eating with Glenn and Karma and Bill and Paulette and..."

Without waiting for me to finish, Mrs. Finnigan asked softly, "Would you feel comfortable in their presence if Jesus came into the room, Nikki? All that foul language, the smoking and cursing, the filthy stories and dirty jokes? Can't you see it, Nicole? You don't belong there. You're a sort of stooge."

I rose to leave, but Mrs. Finnigan's hand was on my shoulder, pushing me back on the stool at the counter in the kitchen. "No you don't," she declared, with the same firm tone Mom employed when she was determined that I must listen. "You're going to 'hear me out' today. Then if you still feel it's so great to be popular, well..." She broke down and cried, unable to finish.

My cheeks burned with both rage and shame. I loved Mrs. Finnigan. I did. But she had said I was a stooge... the butt of my friends' jokes! That hurt. Hurt bad.

"They're laughing at you, Nikki!" she exclaimed in an outburst of anguish and pain. "Behind your back they laugh at you. Leslie's come home from school more than once, weeping over the way they pretend to be your friend then laugh behind your back. They're making sport of you, and it's killing Leslie. Oh, don't think Les is a tattletale; she's not. She's perhaps the only real friend you have. She's staunchly loyal to you. But if you think I'm going to stand by and watch the devil make shipwreck of your life and do nothing about it, you're mistaken. I'm going to do everything within my power to help turn you around and get you saved. Then, if you still refuse to confess and forsake your sins and to repent and return to Christ, choosing Satan and hell's fire to God's salvation and forgiveness, well, my conscience will be clear; my hands clean. Your blood will be upon your own head."

Talk about a sermon! Mrs. Finnigan's "sleeves" were "rolled up" to fight the devil for my soul. Our pastor preached many good sermons, I'm sure, but I never heard one to equal my neighbor's. It cut through me like a sharp two-
edged sword, piercing straight into my heart. I knew what she said was true. I had never gained the respect of those whom I called friends. Leslie had. She was friendly to them, but never accepted any of their invitations. And yet they admired her.

"This life you're trying to lead, Nikki, what good is it? What will it profit you if you gain the whole world but lose your soul? Think about it, will you, dear?"

I nodded my head. My life seemed topsy-turvy. Upside-down. Mixed up. The things I'd hoped to gain I hadn't gained at all. The person I'd tried to be wasn't fitting me at all. I was trying to force myself into the mold of Karma and Paulette and several other popular girls, and I wasn't "molding." I was a phony. The girls knew it; the boys, too. What's more, I knew it. I guess I wasn't as good at pretending as I thought I was.

I heard Mrs. Finnigan blow her nose. Raising my eyes, I saw she was crying. That got to me. I felt sudden, hot tears sting my eyes then dance down my cheeks.

"Oh, Nikki! Nikki, dear, don't go to hell. Please don't!"

That was just too-too much for me. Suddenly I was bawling. I mean bawling, not crying. "I Won't, Mrs. Finnigan. No, I won't!" I cried. "I want Jesus. I want to be forgiven. Now!"

I didn't wait to be asked to kneel nor did I need any encouragement or prodding to pray. It rolled out of me. Poured out of me. I told the Lord every bad, wicked, and evil thing I knew about me, begging and pleading with Him to have mercy on my soul and to save me and forgive me. I was afraid hell would open up for me any minute and I would drop into its blistering, everlasting flames to never again know a loving Saviour's forgiveness and pardon.

The battle was a dreadful one, with Satan struggling to maintain his mastery and hold upon my life and me pleading for mercy from God. In desperation, I cried, "O God, I need you now! I want you now! Save me, I'm lost."
My prayer got through. I touched God. Satan's powerfully-binding shackles and fetters were shattered and broken. I felt them drop off. I was free. Free! And forgiven! My heart felt happy and light and so peacefully at rest. I was shouting for pure joy. Jesus was back in my heart!

I opened my eyes and saw Mrs. Finnigan. She looked like an angel--an angel with open arms. Too happy to speak, I collapsed in those waiting arms. Together we laughed, shouted, cried and praised God for His wondrous miracle of salvation. Then I lifted my head and said, "Thank you, God, for Mrs. Finnigan; my wonderful, wonderful, tactless Mrs. Finnigan."