

The animosity I felt toward Janice began the first day she rode my bus to attend high school in northern Minnesota. I sat alone in the middle of my assigned seat, luxuriating in the space. The bus pulled up at a freshly graveled driveway. A new girl with dark hair and a statuesque build climbed into the bus.

The driver consulted her clipboard. "Janice Maki. Hello."

She pointed at me. "Sit with Emily."

I slid over next to the window.

The bus lurched ahead and Janice plopped down. "I want to sit by the window." Her hazel eyes were set a shade too close, giving her a slightly mean look.

"I was here first."

"I'm a senior and get first choice. Besides, I get carsick if I can't see out. You want me to barf all over the seat? She leaned toward me, retching and gagging.

Alarmed, I shrank as close to the aisle as possible, clutching my book pack, ready to spring away should the gagging produce results. Fortunately, it didn't, and as long as Janice was allowed to sit by the window, she remained passive and eventually made friendly overtures. I still lusted after the window seat, but I went along with her wishes, wary of that mean look.

Then too, she was a full head taller and outweighed me by a good thirty pounds.

Since doing homework on the jolting, forty-five-minute ride was difficult, we began to exchange personal information.

"This is Mom's third marriage, but I'm her only kid," Jan said, combing her wavy, chocolate-colored hair. She smeared on some lip gloss, her only make-up, and then twirled the diamond earrings she wore. At least they looked like diamonds to me.

"It must be nice having your own bedroom. I have to share with two sisters," I said, noting that she wore yet another new sweater, of which she seemed to have an inexhaustible supply.

"I wish I had a sister. You're *so* lucky to have someone around to talk to whenever you want."

Lucky? I didn't reply, knowing that I'd *never* confide in either of my sisters. Conversations with the eight-year old involved harrowing threats to her life if she fingered my blush, mascara or cologne. The younger one, a toddler still in diapers, had a vocabulary of seven words.

And Janice thought I was lucky.

After she graduated, we didn't cross paths for a few years, when we again met in the local post office. We'd both married and had jobs, although neither of us had kids. From the costly clothing that Jan wore, I realized she must be making plenty of money. Besides that, she'd gained a good deal of weight, but with her frame, it didn't look bad.

"You're thin as a rake handle," Janice said. "I go to the spa and work out, plus play golf and ski, but I keep gaining.

You're *so* lucky! How do you do it?"

My husband and I had not yet reached the point where we'd paid off our student loans. We were able to buy meat only once or twice a week. Besides my job, I slaved away in our garden, and then labored for endless hours in the kitchen, canning and freezing vegetables to provide much of our food.

Lucky, indeed.

"Oh, I garden and eat lots of veggies." I did my best to sound breezy.

"I'll have to try that."

We made vague promises about visiting each other, but six years passed before we bumped into each other again, this time at a nearby greenhouse. While Janice hadn't *gained* any weight, she hadn't lost any, either. Her dark hair was attractively frosted with silver.

"It's striking," I said, gesturing to her hair. "I really thought you'd be one of those women who would dye or pluck out every last gray strand."

"I developed an allergy to dyes and I'd be half-bald if I plucked them out. You're lucky. You don't have any gray yet."

With my mousy hair, I'd never considered myself particularly lucky to avoid gray. I didn't even have a gorgeous silver to look forward to, only a dusty hue like Mom's.

Lucky? Not hardly.

Janice paid for several flats of magenta petunias, and I helped her haul them to her new SUV, which was parked next to my rusty, third-hand truck. She wrote her phone number down on scrap of paper, saying that she was expecting her first baby in November. I told her that I had two girls, ages six months and nearly three, and that I had little time for socializing. I did, nonetheless, give her my number and wished her well.

At the beginning of that November, when my husband was in the hospital recovering from a car accident that we'd been in, I saw her again, this time purposely. I hobbled to her room on crutches, having broken my leg in the accident.

Janice had given birth to a six-pound baby boy with a head of thick, dark hair. After I spent an hour admiring her son, she finally thought to ask, "How badly was your husband hurt?"

"He has a concussion, seven cracked ribs, and he lost all his front teeth. He might have some brain damage—he can't remember things."

"Oh, my. But you're lucky, you know. It could've been a lot worse."

Lucky? If we'd have been lucky, it wouldn't have happened at all. Only by leaving immediately did I manage to resist whacking her with my crutches.

Lucky? Lucky?

I didn't see her for close to seven years, by which time my temper had cooled. We ran into each other at a winter concert at the grade school where our children were performing. I sat on the aisle seat near the back, a coveted location for parents who wished to leave immediately after their kids had finished.

A thin woman squeezed her way in front of me to sit in the vacant chair on my right. She collapsed, sighing heavily.

It was Janice.

"They used to call them Christmas concerts when *we* sang in them," she murmured. Her hair had turned a beautiful shade of silver, still thick and wavy, but in desperate need of a good cut. I was tempted to mention a costly salon in Duluth where I'd been having mine brightened, but I noticed the frayed cuffs on her coat, so I didn't.

Instead, I said, "You're thinner than I've ever seen you.

Find a new spa?"

She sighed again. "No, my husband lost his job, then we lost the house and got divorced. I'm working two jobs and don't have time or money to eat much."

I was shocked. "I'm sorry. Do you have any kids besides your son?"

"No."

The kindergarten class filed in and lined up on a tier of bleachers erected on the stage. They lisped their way through a cheerful, carefully non-religious song. We applauded their efforts and they filed away.

Janice eyed my clothing and rings, estimating their value in a blink. “You’re doing well.”

“Yes, it took quite a few years, but we finally got our settlement from that car accident.”

“Lucky you.”

I felt my temper rise but suppressed it. “No, we only got what we were entitled to.”

“I don’t know about that. You’ve always been lucky.”

“Not really.” Only once in my life had I been lucky, and that in the past week, but because Janice had lost so much, I felt it lacked compassion to mention it.

“Yes, you are,” she insisted.

I swallowed years of wrath and forced a smile.

“You even got the better seat today,” she whined. I have to go to work as soon as my son is done. You should change places with me.”

“I have to leave early too.” Janice still looked mean, but she no longer frightened me. She snorted.

“You’re right about my being lucky, though. I won close to five-million-bucks in the lottery last week—from the only ticket I ever bought.”

I simply couldn’t resist.