

Illusions and Realisms

By Jennifer Perry

I was shaking from excitement when I walked home. The sun was shining, the sky was bright, and everything was right with the world. In other words, the school dance was tonight – and I was determined to talk to Sarah.

Sarah Armelle was my longtime crush. I had also never talked to her. Well, unless you count the time she asked me for a pencil, and I nearly melted when she smiled at me. The only problem was the fact that she was incredibly popular, incredibly gorgeous, and just plain...incredible. It also didn't help that she didn't even know I was alive. But tonight, everything was going to change. I could feel it.

As I entered my house, I shut the door quietly, hoping to avoid any encounters with the members of my family. I tiptoed up the stairs, avoiding the creaky spots I knew so well. But of course, Nicky and Mickey were waiting at the top of the stairs anyway.

Nicky and Mickey were my two stepbrothers. They had never liked or even been kind to me, a total skater boy, and I had never got along with them either. I waved, and tried to get past them to my room, but they blocked my way. Mickey started. "Chase, Mom wants you to take out the garbage and make dinner in an hour. Oh, and my homework is on your desk. I want it finished by 5." Nicky joined in. "We need you to clean our rooms too. Oh, and one more thing. I hope you weren't thinking of going to the dance tonight, because Mom needs you to look after Fifi."

I balked at them. They glanced at each other slyly, with what can only be described as an evil smile on their faces. I was in shock; all my plans were falling apart in front of me. "Vicky wants me to baby-sit the dog?"

Nicky and Mickey gave identical shrugs, and Mickey said, "Don't argue with us. It's Mom who wants you to, not us. Besides, you know how lonely Fifi gets." He gave a small giggle as he said it. I rolled my eyes and turned around to find Vicky, my stepmother. As I jogged down the stairs, I heard them laughing and whispering behind me. I found Vicky in the kitchen, eating ice cream out of the tub. She was a bulky, large woman, but had only been that way after my father died. We had never gotten along either; she was jealous that I held my father's attention so raptly. Now, three years after my father's car crash, and her inheritance of his estate, she was refusing to give me college money unless I did everything she wanted. Literally, everything she wanted, as well as the commands of her sons. She looked up, but didn't acknowledge me. "Vicky," I said carefully, "I can't baby-sit Fifi tonight. I promised Fran I'd take her to the dance." This wasn't strictly true, but not really a lie either. Vicky just looked at me, ice cream dripping from her spoon. She took another bite. "Too bad for her then. She shouldn't have bothered with you, should she? You're babysitting Fifi tonight. I feel like going out." My eyes narrowed, and I tried again. "Vicky-"

"Do you want to go to college or not?" I breathed in deeply, trying to restrain myself. I left the room without saying another word. I doubt she even noticed. When I got to my room, the phone rang, and I answered immediately. "Hello?"

"Hey Chase, it's Fran." I rolled my eyes. I knew her voice inside out by now, but she always said that when she called. Francesca Goddard was my best, longest, and truest friend, who I had known for many years. She was a tiny person, her features packed into a short, lean body, and pixie-like face. "Hey," I said, "I can't go to the dance tonight. Vicky's making me baby-sit Fifi."

"You can't be serious," she said in a monotone. "That woman is so incredibly selfish. And stupid. I seriously doubt Fifi would care if you were there or not." I smiled. "Yeah, I don't think so either," I said. Fran could always cheer me up. I heard Fran huff on the other end, then say, "Well, look. I know you really wanted to go to this, so we need to make it happen anyway. I'll bring over Dad's tux and shoes, and get someone else to make sure Fifi doesn't accidentally kill herself, or whatever it is Vicky thinks she's going to do. Then I'll meet you at the dance. Okay?"

I grinned. Normally, I would have ignored my own thoughts, but tonight I was going to indulge the rebel inside me, and go with this crazy plan. "You're the best Fran. I really want to talk to Sarah tonight. I feel like this is my chance." Fran ignored that sentence, saying "One more thing. Whatever you do Chase, don't lose the shoes. They're my Dad's favorite. Plus, they're Armani."

"No problem," I said. I thanked her again, and hung up. Sighing, I started Mickey's homework. Just after Vicky yelled up the stairs that she was leaving with Nicky and Mickey, Fran's older sister arrived. She had a beautiful silk tux and leather shoes that looked extremely expensive, as well as a car waiting to take me to the dance. I got dressed fast, and on the way I bought a lottery ticket for good luck. It was a kind of tradition Fran and I had.

When I arrived at the dance hall, I was more nervous than I could ever

remember being before. I kept picturing Sarah's face in the back of my mind, and I wondered what she would look like. I couldn't find Fran anywhere. But when I went inside again, I saw Sarah. She was standing at the foot of the staircase, laughing with her friends. She was in a pink strapless dress that ended at her knees, and matched her honey-blond hair perfectly. Her blue eyes sparkled under the disco lights. It took me five minutes to get the nerve to go down the staircase. A further ten minutes later, I still hadn't worked up the nerve to talk to her. But she got to me first.

"Hey," I heard behind me. Her voice. The voice. I turned around slowly. She looked even better up close. "Hi," I said slowly, hardly even believing this was happening. Sarah was swinging around a glass of something sparkly, and probably spiked, in one hand. "Do you want to dance?" she asked abruptly, continuing honestly, "Because you're kind of cute, and you have a really expensive-looking tux, and this is my favorite song."

I nodded slowly, screaming in my head from excitement. As I cautiously took her hand – her very soft hand – to lead her onto the dance floor, she tripped over her foot, nearly spilling her drink, before I grabbed it and left it on the table. Yes, I realized, she was a little tipsy. It was not something I completely approved of, but I was sure she had other qualities. When we started to dance, she practically fell on me. Then, she started talking. And talking. And talking. She talked about her visit to a Bryan Adams concert, and how she got to meet him after, and he smelled really good. She talked about the trips she's taken all over the world. She talked about the time she went to LA and ran into Brad Pitt, and he told her she was pretty. She talked about her Prada backpack. She talked about her Gucci purse. But most of all, she talked about her shoes. Shoes, shoes, shoes. By now, I was feeling so disappointed, as well as bored. This wasn't my Sarah. I thought she had been deeper, more intellectual. Even now, her layers of makeup were so thick I could hardly see her face.

I interrupted the stream of mindless chatter right as the clock chimed twelve.

Taking that as my cue I said quickly, "Oh my god, its midnight!" I took a glance at my watch, and gave a look of mock disappointment. "I'm so sorry, but I have to go...clean my room. Or I'm grounded. Sorry." I unclasped her hand from mine, and started to back away slowly, making apologetic motions.

She looked very confused and sad, a puppy dog look on her face. Her lower lip was jutting out slightly, and an hour ago I would have done anything to take that expression away. Feeling nothing towards her now was so strange. I was amazed that I honestly did not care, and I realized she didn't attract me whatsoever. Sure, she was pretty. But I could never have the kind of conversations with her that I do with Francesca; intellectual, comical conversations. More than anything, I realized it felt liberating.

I started to smile from that thought, that feeling of being set free, until her eyes set sight of my shoes. Her blue beams suddenly turned glassy out of shock, and gained a hazy look of dim adoration. They glanced up at me, and as I started to turn away she grabbed me with a shocking burst of energy. I froze, more out of shock than anything else. She whispered huskily into my ear, her breath hot on my cheek. "Are you wearing the Armani Leather Derby shoes?"

She was clutching me so hard I thought it might bruise. "Um, yeah, I think so," I said awkwardly, trying to shake her off me. Her perfume was suffocating. Instead of letting me go, she clutched tighter, and slowly reached her hands down my leg, to the shoes. She stroked the shoes gently, her glassy eyes shining at the leather. We were standing in the middle of the dance floor, and getting a lot of weird looks by now, and I was feeling pretty uncomfortable. I stepped back, trying to make my getaway, but she clutched my foot tighter, so tight I was starting to drag her across the floor. I shook my foot; she was being ridiculous. She held on. I shook my foot harder, stepping away again. She grabbed onto the edges. I shook my foot, and took another step. She tore off the shoe.

I was so surprised I didn't even run. She looked just as surprised as me, but instead of having my look of horror, she looked ecstatic. In emphasis, she gave a shriek of joy, kissed the leather, and ran off. She didn't even give me a second look. I almost sighed in relief, until I remembered what Francesca had told me when lending them to me.

"Whatever you do Chase, don't lose the shoes. They're my dad's favorite."

I groaned. Despite my instincts, I thought of Francesca, and ran off after Sarah. Well, I couldn't really run with only one shoe, but I tried. Limping, I looked everywhere. Sarah was gone. She wasn't in the dance hall, the bathrooms (don't ask), or outside. Finally, I went out into the parking lot to search for her car. I couldn't find it either. Sighing in frustration, I collapsed on a bench. I looked beside me, and realized in shock that there was already a pretty girl sitting there. "Oh sorry," I said, "I didn't mean to disturb you-"

I cut off when I realized that the girl was Francesca. She didn't look like her usual understated self tonight, with a fairytale white dress on, and her hair up in curls. She looked beautiful. Much more beautiful than Sarah had ever been. But as I looked closer, I saw tear tracks underneath her eyes.

She was looking at me in shock too. "Wow," she finally spluttered out, "You look amazing in that tux." She laughed. "Way better than Dad ever did."

"You look amazing too," I said eventually. We both looked away, a little awkwardly. I decided to get straight to the point. "What's wrong?" I whispered, wiping a tear off her cheek. "Oh, nothing," she said, her voice squeaky, and her reply too fast. I pursed my lips. "Come on Fran, I know you aren't okay. What's wrong?"

"No, no, I'm fine," she said, putting a hand on my arm to calm me. "I'm just...glad you had a good time with Sarah." She smiled sadly up at me. "I saw you two dancing." I gave a small snort with laughter, and Fran looked confused. I looked at her, saying honestly, "Sarah is so materialistic!"

She's ridiculous, she's almost as bad as Vicky! And she's so boring too; I seriously think she has fewer brain cells than the rest of us." Fran just stared at me in shock. Then she started laughing, a deep, long, contagious laugh. I laughed with her, glad that I had made her happy. When we stopped we shared a comfortable silence for a few moments. Then, Fran said seriously, "Chase, there's something I need to tell you." I nodded, listening intently. "I know we've known each other for a really long time, and you probably don't think of me like this, but...where is your shoe?"

She looked up at me in confusion, and I blanched. "Well, Sarah actually grabbed it and ran away with it." Her jaw dropped. "I'm so sorry Fran, but she knew they were Armani, and I don't think she's going to give them back, and-

Fran was laughing.

"It's okay, don't worry. They're not the Armani pair. I couldn't give them to you because Dad was already wearing them. They're an old pair I found at the back of his closet. I don't think he's even used them, actually."

I laughed again, at all the unexpected, crazy occurrences of the night, and the strange predicament that was my life. Adding to the list of unexpected occurrences, when I turned to Fran, she came right out and said it. "Chase Cinders, you're my best friend, but I think I love you." And the craziest thing was, with Sarah out of the way, I realized I felt the same way.

I won't say we lived happily ever after, but it was definitely close.

I also won my lottery ticket.