

Barbara Park



THE KID IN THE RED JACKET

First-grade freak-o
for a friend?
NO WAY!



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"My leg's hot," I announced as our car pulled out of our driveway.

It was the day of the "big move." At least that's what my parents kept calling it. I hated that. It's not that I didn't realize moving from Arizona to Massachusetts was "big." It's just that when they said it, they made it seem real exciting and fun. They never made it sound like what it really was—rotten.

My mother turned around and gave me one of

her looks. "Please, Howard, don't start. We haven't even made it to the street yet."

I glanced over at my baby brother, Gaylord. He was sitting happily in his car seat, staring at his hands. He had just discovered his hands, and he kept opening and closing them like they were some great new invention.

I reached out and touched his leg.

"Gaylord's leg isn't hot," I reported. "Gaylord's in the shade. Has anyone ever noticed how Gaylord always gets the shade? I mean, I'm aware that he's a baby and everything, but I don't think you should play favorites like this. I think we should flip a coin for the shady side."

When no one said anything, I leaned toward him. "What's that, Gaylord?" I asked. "You want what?"

I tapped my father on the shoulder. "Gaylord says he wants to switch places. He says he wants to get some sun on those lily-white legs of his."

My mother just sighed. She probably would have yelled, but I had been making her yell so much lately, I think she was getting sort of sick of it. Normally, parents really enjoy yelling. But I guess it's like anything else—too much of a good thing, and it's not as fun anymore.

What's weird is, until this move came along, I hardly made my parents yell at all. I don't mean I am an angel or anything. But I get good grades at school, and I've never been arrested. I don't think parents can ask for much more than that.

I used to actually even *like* my parents. They had always been pretty understanding, pretty fair. They didn't go around tickling me in public or embarrassing me the way some parents do. That's what was so crazy about our "big move." They hardly even discussed it with me! I'm not kidding. My father just came home all excited one day and told me he'd gotten this big promotion and we'd be moving to Massachusetts. That was it! We didn't even take a vote!

He made it sound real cheery, of course. Whenever parents announce something you're going to hate, they try to spice it up and make it sound better than it is. They kept calling the move "a great new adventure." Then they spent a lot of time telling me how much better off I was going to be because of my father's new job. They talked about college and my future, stuff I couldn't care less about right now. So instead of feeling better, mostly I just felt sick to my stomach.

"I CAN'T BELIEVE IT. I'M ACTUALLY GOING TO BE THE NEW KID."

Howard Jeeter is living his worst nightmare. His parents have moved him across the country without even asking, and they don't care one bit that they've ruined his life. The kids in Howard's new town act as if he's totally invisible—except for his six-year-old neighbor, Molly Vera Thompson. True, Howard could use a friend, but an annoying little girl who talks nonstop and looks like a miniature Bozo isn't exactly what he had in mind. Of course, when you're *really* lonely, you'll be friends with anyone—almost.

★ "Another first-rate addition to the middle-grade popular reading shelf."

—*School Library Journal*, Starred

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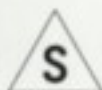
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