

BREAKING THE *Shyness* BARRIER

By Sally Johnson Odekirk
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Ever wish you could escape into a book and live there instead of in your own life? That was me in high school. My sister used to joke that if I was in the middle of a good read, the house could burn down and I wouldn't notice.

What's more, I was horribly shy. I felt awkward and unsure of myself and frequently had little or nothing to say. So to avoid socializing, I preferred to find a quiet spot where I could sit and read.

My family had moved several times during my middle school years. Changing schools so often added to my barrier of shyness. Why try to break through when it was easier to just get lost in the pages of a book?

But then one day, while I was reading, I kept thinking about what had happened the previous weekend. Nels, one of the young men in my circle of Church friends, noticed that I kept to myself most of the time. He decided to help me change that.

Nels's sister and my sister were friends, and one night I went with my dad to pick up my sister at Nels's house. While we were waiting, Nels came out and asked if I was going to the school dance that night. Just as I was about to say no, my dad said, "There's a dance? Of course she'll be there." On the way home, Dad talked to me about the importance of participating.



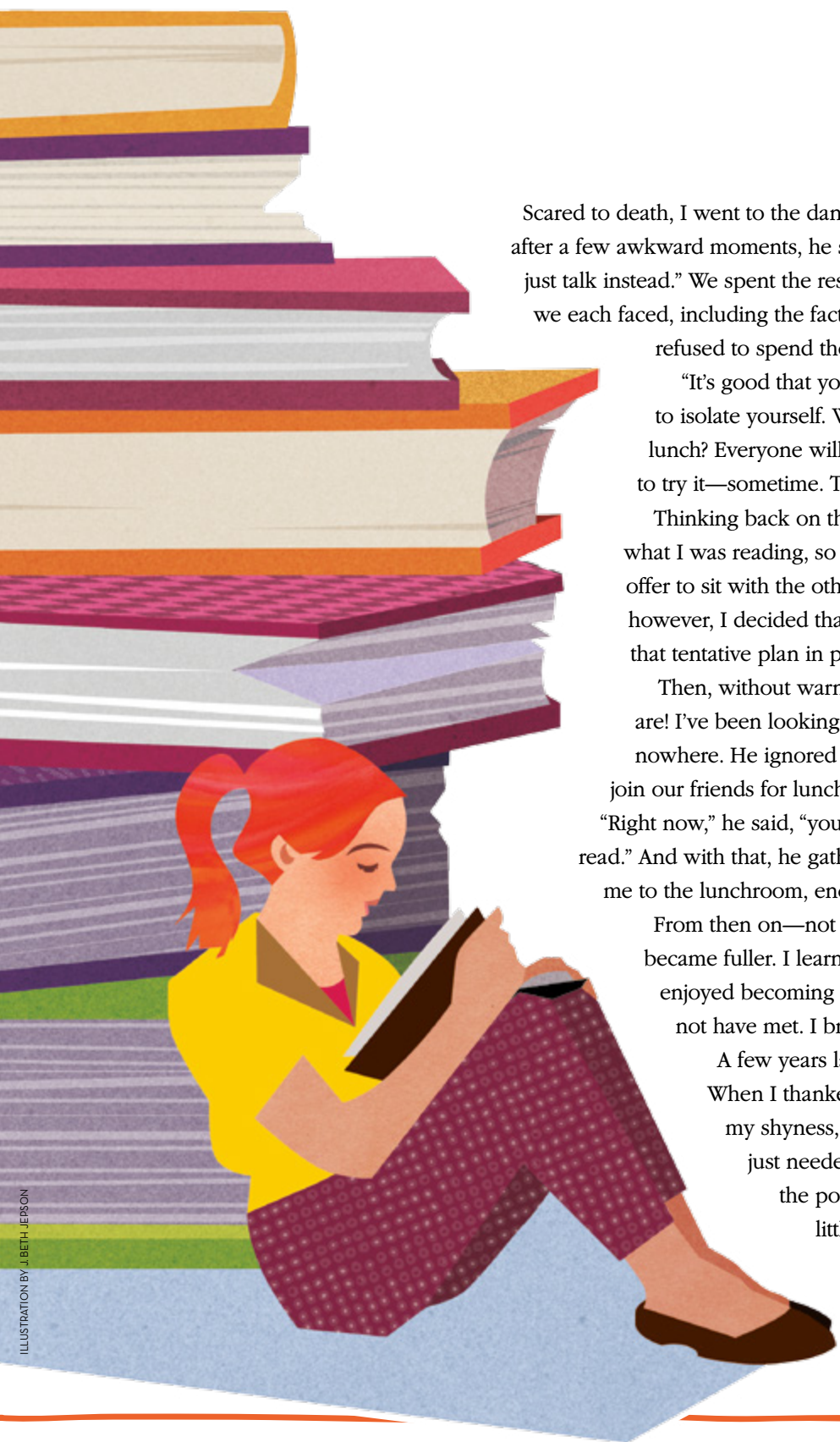


ILLUSTRATION BY JIBETH LEPSON

Scared to death, I went to the dance. Nels saw me, asked me to dance, and after a few awkward moments, he said, “You don’t like to dance, do you? Let’s just talk instead.” We spent the rest of the evening discussing the challenges we each faced, including the fact that I was painfully shy, liked to read, and refused to spend the lunch hour with our mutual friends.

“It’s good that you love to read,” he said. “But it’s not good to isolate yourself. Why don’t you come sit at our table at lunch? Everyone will be happy to see you.” I hesitantly agreed to try it—sometime. Then I changed the subject.

Thinking back on the weekend made it difficult to focus on what I was reading, so I thought about taking Nels up on his offer to sit with the others. Since the lunch hour was half over, however, I decided that I would be brave tomorrow. Maybe. With that tentative plan in place, I went back to my book.

Then, without warning, I heard someone calling, “There you are! I’ve been looking for you!” It was Nels. He appeared out of nowhere. He ignored my excuses about how it was too late to join our friends for lunch.

“Right now,” he said, “you need to socialize more than you need to read.” And with that, he gathered up my books and nearly dragged me to the lunchroom, encouraging me all the way.

From then on—not all at once, but a little at a time—my life became fuller. I learned how to talk to others. I found that I enjoyed becoming acquainted with people I otherwise would not have met. I broke through the shyness barrier!

A few years later Nels and I talked about that day. When I thanked him for helping me to overcome my shyness, he said, “Oh, it wasn’t much. You just needed a little encouragement.” And that’s the point: Sometimes a listening ear and a little encouragement can make all the difference. **NE**