

The

POPULAR

*Could I really walk away from
the popular crowd?*

Table

By Meredith Stockman-Broadbent

In elementary school, I always heard about the “popular” kids. Being popular wasn’t something you did, it was who you were—and by the beginning of my first year in middle school, I was at the top of the middle school popularity chain. I hung out with the popular kids in the popular part of the hallway, had the same popular brand clothes, and most importantly, ate lunch with them at the exclusive Popular Table in the cafeteria.

The Popular Table had the perfect location, right by the lunch line but far away from the teachers. Even better, it was the only table where boys and girls sat together. I felt so cool as I sat with them, and we talked about our TV shows and our clothes.

But one thing was just a little off—these popular kids weren’t really that nice. When I was with them I felt popular, but I didn’t feel happy. Sometimes we all gossiped or made fun of others. There was a lot of swearing and talking about things I knew were not appropriate, and I didn’t feel like they cared about me. My “friends” rarely did anything really nice for me, and eventually I began to feel like a doormat.

“You should try to make some new friends,” my older sister said. “By the time those kids get to high school, they’ll probably be drinking and maybe even doing drugs. That’s what happened to a lot the popular kids from my middle school.”

I was shocked. “These are my friends,” I thought, “and

they’re not going to do anything that would bring me down. Besides, even if they aren’t that nice, at least they still let me hang out with them.”

One day, as I was walking to my lunch table, I saw Cindy, a girl from church who was in the grade above me. She sat on the complete opposite side of the cafeteria.

“Hey there!” Cindy called to me. “Do you want to sit with me and my friends?”

“Ah . . . no thanks,” I said, “I have my own lunch table.”

But one day, at the Popular Table, one of the girls was rude to me. She hurt my feelings, and I was tired of feeling like my friends just tolerated me. But where else could I go?

Then I remembered Cindy’s offer.

“All right,” I thought. “I’m going to sit with Cindy. But just today.”

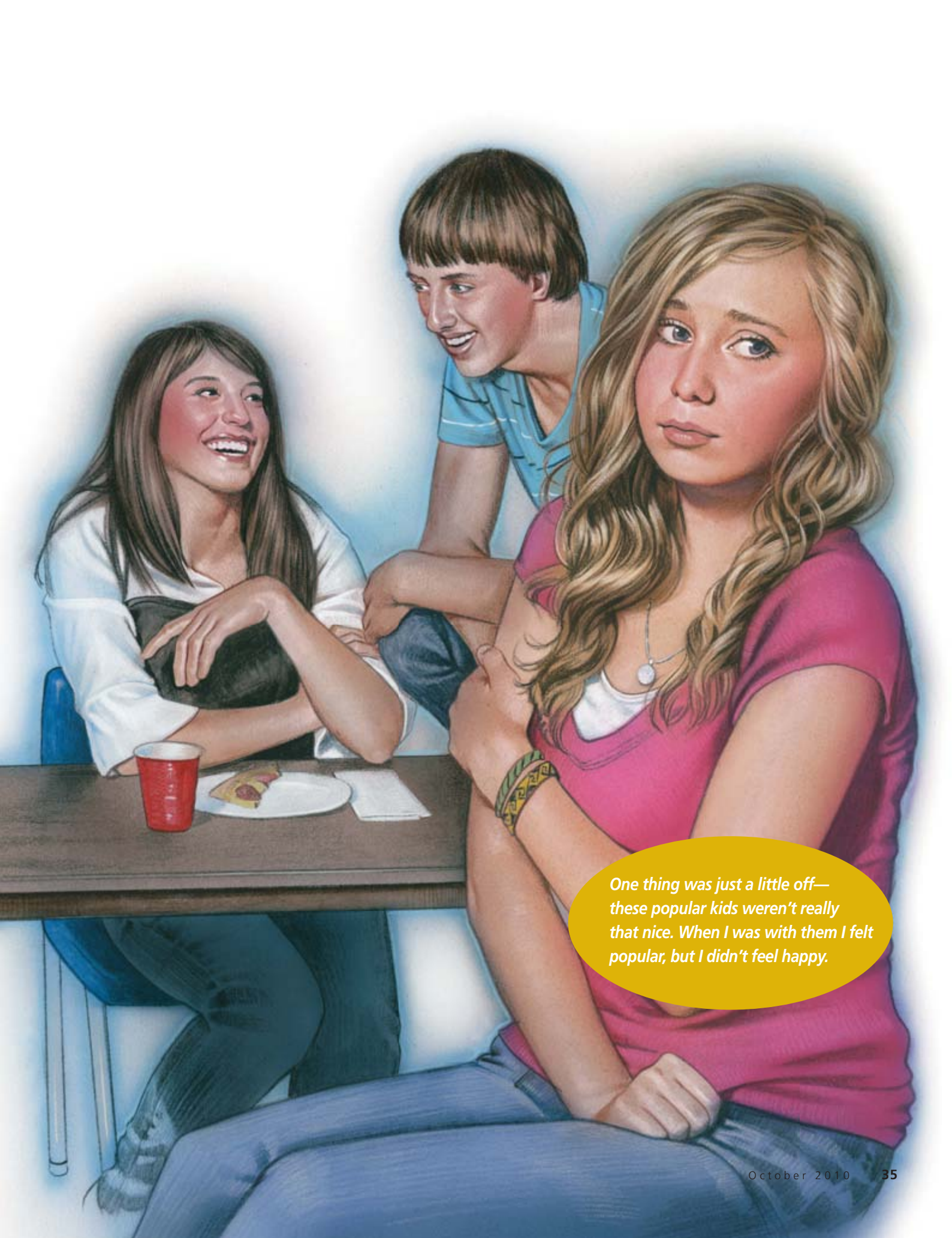
I picked up my lunch tray and tried to hold back the tears as I walked away from the best table in the cafeteria.

Cindy saw me, smiled, and said, “Hey, Meredith! Want to sit with us?”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Sure,” I said and sat down at her table.

Cindy and her friends welcomed me to their table and were really nice. It was a completely different feeling from sitting with the popular kids. I was surprised. Not only were these girls nicer, but we also had similar standards, and that made it easier to go through lunch without having to listen to swearing or crude stories.

I decided to eat with them the next day, and the day



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after that, until eating with Cindy and her friends became routine. I was still nice to the popular kids, and we got along fine in class, but I stopped hanging out with them in the hallways.

One day, at the end of the year, Cindy and her friends had a field trip and were gone during lunch. I walked over to the popular side of the cafeteria and sat with my old friends again. During lunch, there was all the old swearing, telling crude jokes, and making fun of people, but now they were also talking about drugs and immoral activities. I couldn't believe how much they had changed over the course of the year, and I was so grateful I had moved to the other side of the cafeteria when I did.

My sister was right; their standards were different from mine, and it would have become more difficult to follow the counsel of the prophets and stay close to the Lord if they had been my only friends. That year I made friends who were not of my faith but who shared a lot of the

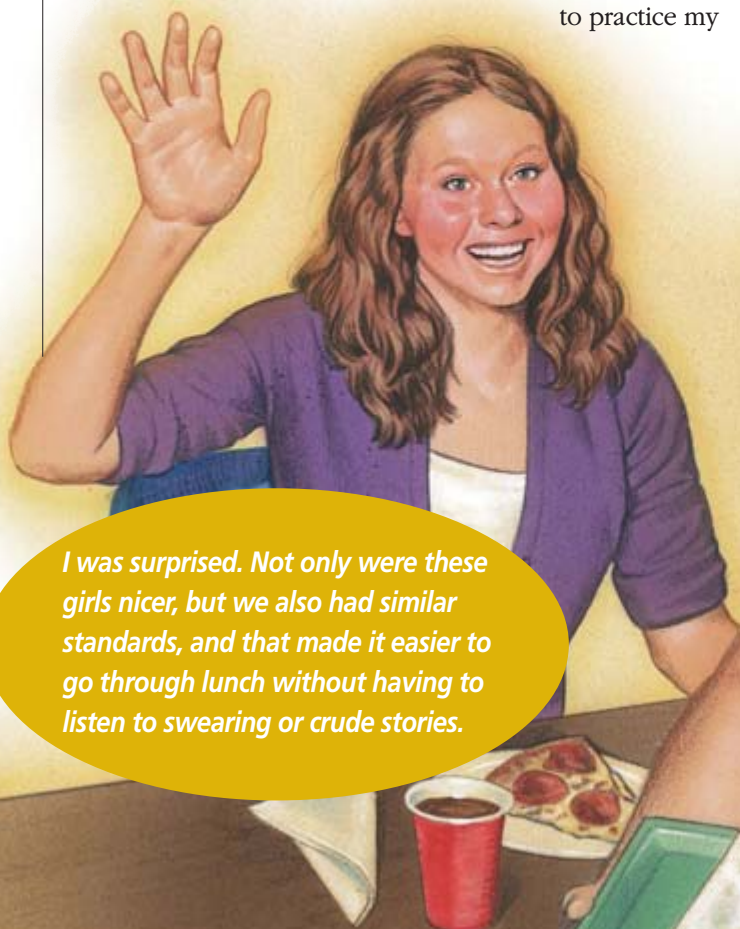
same standards and made it easy for me to practice my

beliefs. They stayed my friends all the way through high school.

I'm grateful for my friend Cindy, who invited me to sit with her, and to the Lord for giving me courage to change lunch tables. It seemed like such a big deal, but having friends with different standards was an even bigger deal.

President Thomas S. Monson counseled, "Friends help to determine your future. You will tend to be like them and to be found where they choose to go. . . . The friends you choose will either help or hinder your success" ("In Harm's Way," *Ensign*, May 1998, 46).

The Lord blessed me to find friends who were fun, encouraging, and shared my standards. Trading being "popular" for being happy was definitely worth it. **NE**



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For some good advice about friendship, read the Friends section of *For the Strength of Youth* (2001, 12–13).