

Novels by Laurie Halse Anderson

Speak

Fever 1793

Catalyst

Prom

SPEAK

LAURIE HALSE ANDERSON

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FIRST MARKING PERIOD

WELCOME TO MERRYWEATHER HIGH

It is my first morning of high school. I have seven new notebooks, a skirt I hate, and a stomachache.

The school bus wheezes to my corner. The door opens and I step up. I am the first pickup of the day. The driver pulls away from the curb while I stand in the aisle. Where to sit? I've never been a backseat wasteease. If I sit in the middle, a stranger could sit next to me. If I sit in the front, it will make me look like a little kid, but I figure it's the best chance I have to make eye contact with one of my friends, if any of them have decided to talk to me yet.

The bus picks up students in groups of four or five. As they walk down the aisle, people who were my middle-school lab partners or gym buddies glare at me. I close my eyes. This is what I've been dreading. As we leave the last stop, I am the only person sitting alone.

The driver downshifts to drag us over the hills. The engine clanks, which makes the guys in the back holler something obscene. Someone is wearing too much cologne. I try to open my window, but the

High—Home of the Trojans" didn't send a strong abstinence message, so they have transformed us into the Blue Devils. Better the Devil you know than the

4. No smoking is allowed on school grounds.
5. Our football team will win the championship this year.
6. We expect more of you here.
7. Guidance counselors are always available to listen.
8. Your schedule was created with your needs in mind.
9. Your locker combination is private.
10. These will be the years you look back on fondly.

My first class is biology. I can't find it and get my first demerit for wandering the hall. It is 8:50 in the morning. Only 699 days and 7 class periods until graduation.

OUR TEACHERS ARE THE BEST . . .

My English teacher has no face. She has uncombed stringy hair that droops on her shoulders. The hair is black from her part to her ears and then neon orange to the frizzy ends. I can't decide if she had pissed off her hairdresser or is morphing into a monarch butterfly. I call her Hairwoman.

Hairwoman wastes twenty minutes taking attendance because she won't look at us. She keeps her head bent over her desk so the hair flops in front of her face. She spends the rest of class writing on the board

The hot lunch is turkey with reconstituted dried mashed potatoes and gravy, a damp green vegetable, and a cookie. I'm not sure how to order anything else, so I just slide my tray along

south-facing windows. The sun doesn't shine much in Syracuse, so the art room is designed to get every bit of light it can. It is dusty in a clean-dirt kind of way. The floor is layered with dry splotches of paint,

with a wet-muzzled dog chewing Alaska—the opportunities are endless. It's almost too much, but you are important enough to give it to."

Huh?

"You will each pick a piece of paper out of the globe." He walks around the room so we can pull red scraps from the center of the earth. "On the paper you will find one word, the name of an object. I hope you like it. You will spend the rest of the year learning how to turn that object into a piece of art. You will sculpt it. You will sketch it, papier-mache it, carve it. If the computer teacher is talking to me this year, you can use

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tence. When the bell rings, we

stolen from everyone else. The only things that were really mine were my

Errant Student races down hall, waving and smiling. Principal Principal walks the other way, replaying the conversation in his mind, trying to figure out what went wrong. I ponder this and laugh.

F I Z Z E D

Gym should be illegal. It is humiliating.

My gym locker is closest to the door, which means I have to change my clothes in a bathroom stall. Heather from Ohio has the locker next to mine. She wears her gym clothes under her regular clothes. After gym she changes out of her shorts but always leaves an undershirt on. It makes me worry about the girls in Ohio. Do they all have to wear undershirts?

The only other girl I know in gym is Nicole. In our old clan, we had never been very close. She almost said something to me when school started, but instead looked down and retied her Nikes. Nicole has a full-length locker in a discreet, fresh-smelling alcove because she's on the soccer

is just not a bitch. It would be so much easier to hate her if she were.

FRIENDS

Rachel is with me in the bathroom. Edit that. *Rachelle* is with me in the bathroom. She has changed her name. Rachelle is reclaiming her European heritage by hanging out with the foreign-exchange students. After five weeks in school, she can swear in French. She wears black stockings with runs and doesn't shave under her arms. She waves her hand in the air and you find yourself thinking of young chimpanzees.

I can't believe she was my best friend.

I'm in the bathroom trying to put my right contact lens back in. She's smudging mascara under her eyes to look exhausted and wan. I think about running out so she can't pull the evil eye on me again, but Hairwoman, my English teacher, is patrolling the hall and I forgot to go to her class.

Me: "Hi."

Rachelle: "Mmm."

Now what? I'm going to be completely, totally cool, like nothing has happened. Think ice. Think snow.

\\> I l o w ' s it going." I try to put in my contact, and poke ins .(II 111 die eye. Very cool.

Rachelle: "Eehn." She gets mascara in her eye and rubs it, smearing mascara across her face.

I don't want to be cool. I want to grab her by the neck and shake her and scream at her to stop treating me like dirt. She didn't even bother to find out the truth—what kind of friend is that? My contact folds in half under my eyelid. Tears well in my right eye.

Me: "Ouch."

Rachelle: [Snorts. Stands back from mirror, turns head from side

room. Neither one of them has toilet paper stuck to her boots.
Where is the justice?

I need a new friend. I need a friend, period. Not a true friend,
nothing close or share clothes or sleepover giggle giggle yak
yak. Just a pseudo-friend, disposable friend. Friend as acces-
sory. Just so I don't feel and look so stupid.

My journal entry for the day: "Exchange students are ruining
our country."

HEATHERING

As we ride home on Heather's bus, she tries to bully me into
joining a club. She has a Plan. She wants us to join five clubs,
one for every day of the week. The tricky part is choosing the
clubs that have the Right People. Latin Club is out of the ques-
tion, as is Bowling. Heather actually likes bowling—it was a big
thing in her old school—but she has seen our bowling lanes and
she could tel

Purple ball of fluff off the coffee table. "We must make plans," she says solemnly. She draws four boxes, one for each marking period, then writes "GOALS" in each box. "We won't get anywhere without knowing our goals. Everyone always says that and it is so true." She opens her soda. "What are your goals, Mel?"

I used to be like Heather. Have I changed that much in two months? She is happy, driven, aerobically fit. She has a nice mom and an awesome television. But she's like a dog that keeps jumping into your lap. She always walks with me down the halls chattering a million miles a minute.

My goal is to go home and take a nap.

BURROW

Yesterday Hairwoman yanked me from study hall and forced me to make up my "missing" homework in her room. (She made fluttering noises of concern and mentioned a meeting with my parents. Not good.) Nobody bothered to tell me that study hall was being held in the library today. By the time I find it, the period is almost over. I'm dead. I try to explain to the librarian, but I keep stuttering and nothing comes out right.

Librarian: "Calm down, calm down. It's OK. Don't get upset. You are Melinda Sordino, right? Don't worry. I'll mark you present. Let me show you how it works. If you think you're

going to be late, just ask a teacher for a late pass. See? No need for tears."

She holds up a small green pad—my get-out-of-jail-free cards. I smile and try to choke out a "thank you," but can't say anything. She thinks I'm overcome with emotion because she didn't bust me. Close enough. There's not enough time for a nap, so I check out a stack of books to make the librarian happy. I might even read one.

I don't come up with my brilliant idea right then and there. It is born when Mr. Neck tracks me thrTw0.335 Tc(didn') Tj3 1noug

roaches crocheted together with cobwebs. The taps are so rusted they don't turn. No janitor has chilled in this closet for a very long time. They have a new lounge and supply room by the loading dock. All the girls avoid it because of the way they stare and whistle softly when we walk by. This closet is abandoned—it has no purpose, no name. It is the perfect place for me.

I steal a pad of late passes from Hairwoman's desk. I feel much, much better.

DEVILS DESTROY

Not only is the Homecoming pep rally going to spring me from algebra, it will be a great time to clean up my closet. I brought some sponges from home. No need to goof off in filth. I want to smuggle in a blanket and some potpourri, too.

My plan is to walk toward the auditorium with the rest of the crowd, then duck in a bathroom until the coast is clear. I would have made it past the teachers with no problem, but I forgot to factor in Heather. Just as the Escape Bathroom comes into sight, Heather calls my name, runs up, and grabs my arm. She is bursting with Merryweather Pride, all perk and pep and purple. And she assumes I am just as happy and excited as she is. We troop down for the brainwashing and she can't stop talking.

Heather: "This is so exciting—a pep rally!! I made extra pom-poms. Here, have one. We'll look great during the Wave. I bet

the freshman class has the most spirit, don't you? I've always wanted to go to a pep rally. Can you imagine what it must be like to be on the football team and have the whole school supporting you? That is so powerful. Do you think they'll win tonight? They will, I just know they will. It's been a hard season so far, but we'll get them going, won't we, Mel?"

Her enthusiasm makes me itch, but sarcasm would go right over her head. It won't kill me to go to the rally. I have someone to sit with—that counts as a step up on the ladder of social acceptability. How bad could a rally be?

I want to stand by the doors, but Heather drags me up into the freshman section of the bleachers. "I know these guys," she says. "They work with me on the newspaper."

The newspaper? We have a newspaper?

She introduces me to a bunch of pale, zitty faces. I vaguely recognize a couple; the rest must have gone to the other middle school. I curve up the corners of my mouth without biting my lips. A small step. Heather beams and hands me a pom-pom.

I relax an eensy bit. The girl behind me taps me on the shoulder with her long black nails. She had heard Heather introduce me. "Sordino?" she asks. "You're Melinda Sordino?"

I turn around. She blows a black bubble and sucks it back into her mouth. I nod. Heather waves to a sophomore she knows across the gym. The girl pokes me harder. "Aren't you the one who called the cops at Kyle Rodgers's party at the end of the summer?"

A block of ice freezes our section of the bleachers. Heads snap in my direction with the sound of a hundred paparazzi cameras. I can't feel my fingers. I shake my head. Another girl chimes in. "My brother got arrested at that party. He got fired because of the arrest. I can't believe you did that. Asshole."

You don't understand, my headvoice answers. Too bad she can't hear it. My throat squeezes shut, as if two hands of black fingernails are clamped on my windpipe. I have worked so hard to forget every second of that stupid party, and here I am in the middle of a hostile crowd that hates me for what I had to do. I can't tell them what really happened. I can't even look at that part myself. An animal noise rustles in my stomach.

operate in two realities simultaneously. In one universe, they are gorgeous, straight-teethed, long-legged, wrapped in designer fashions, and given sports cars on their sixteenth birthdays. Teachers smile at them and grade them on the curve. They know the first names of the staff. They are the Pride of the Trojans. Oops—I mean Pride of the Blue Devils.

In Universe #2, they throw parties wild enough to attract college students. They worship the stink of Eau de Jockey. They rent beach houses in Cancun during Spring Break and get group-rate abortions before the prom.

But they are so cute. And they cheer on our boys, inciting them to violence and, we hope, victory. These are our role models—the Girls Who Have It All. I bet none of them ever stutter or screw up or feel like their brains are dissolving into marshmallow fluff. They all have beautiful lips, carefully outlined in red and polished to a shine.

When the pep rally ends, I am accidentally knocked down three rows of bleachers. If I ever form my own clan, we'll be the Anti-Cheerleaders. We will not sit in the bleachers. We will wander underneath them and commit mild acts of mayhem.

THE OPPOSITE OF INSPIRATION IS . . . EXPIRATION?

For a solid week, ever since the pep rally, I've been painting watercolors of trees that have been hit by lightning. I try to

paint them so they are nearly dead, but not totally. Mr. Freeman doesn't say a word to me about them. He just raises his eyebrows. One picture is so dark you can barely see the tree at all.

We are all floundering. Ivy pulled "Clowns" as her assignment. She tells Mr. Freeman she hates clowns; a clown scared her when she was a little girl and it put her into therapy. Mr. Freeman says fear is a great place to begin art. Another girl whines that "Brain" is just too gross a subject for her. She wants "Kittens" or "Rainbows."

Mr. Freeman throws his hands in the air. "Enough!"

I stay awake. I take out a M5hg Tj0 Tc(e) Tj1.879 Tz0.499 Tc55ou

Me: "We are nobody."

Heather: "How can you say that? Why does everyone have that attitude? I don't understand any of this. If we want to be in the musical, then they should let us. We could just stand on-stage or something if they don't like our singing. It's not fair. I hate high school."

She pushes her books to the floor and knocks the green nail polish on the sand-colored carpet. "Why is it so hard to make friends here? Is there something in the water? In my old school I could have gone out for the musical *and* worked on the newspaper *and* chaired the car wash. Here people don't even know I exist. I get squished in the hall and I don't belong anywhere and nobody cares. And you're no help. You are so negative and you never try anything, you just mope around like you don't care that people talk about you behind your back."

She flops on her bed and bursts into sobs. Big boohoos, with little squeals of frustration when she punches her teddy bear. I don't don'e

grades up or your name is mud. Hear me? Get them up!" [Attacks baked potato.]

Mom: [annoyed at being upstaged] "I'll handle this. Melinda. [She smiles. Audience shudders] We're not asking for much, dear. We just want you to do your best. And we know your best is much better than this. You tested so well, dear. Look at me when I talk to you."

[Victim mixes cottage cheese into applesauce. Dad snorts like a bull. Mom grasps knife.]

Mom: "I said look at me."

[Victim mixes peas into applesauce and cottage cheese. Dad stops eating.]

Mom: "Look at me now."

This is the Death Voice, the Voice that means business. When I was a kid, this Voice made me pee in my pants. It takes more now. I look Mom square in the eye, then rinse my plate and retreat to my room. Deprived of Victim, Mom and Dad holler at each other. I turn up my music to drown out the noise.

BLUE ROSES

After last night's interrogation, I try to pay attention in biology. We are studying cells, which have all these tiny parts you can't see unless you look at them under a microscope. We get

to use real microscopes, not plastic Kmart

I sit in the back row, where I can keep my eye on everyone, as well as whatever is going on in the parking lot. I think of myself as the Emergency Warning System of the class. I plan disaster drills. How would we escape if the chemistry lab exploded? What if an earthquake hit Central New York? A tornado?

I look out my window. A group of little creatures is coming up the walk. A pirate, a dinosaur, two fairies, and a bride. Why is it that you never see a kid dressed as a groom on Halloween? Their parents chat at the curb. The night is dangerous, parents are required—tall ghosts in khakis and down jackets floating behind the children.

The doorbell rings. My parents squabble about who will answer it. Then Mom swears and opens the door with a high-pitched "Ooooh, who do we have here?" She must have handed out only one mini-chocolate bar to each creature—their thank-yous do not sound enthusiastic. The kids cut through the yard to the next house and their parents follow in the street.

Last year, our clan all dressed up as witches. We went to Ivy's house because she and her older sister had theatrical makeup. We traded clothes and splurged on

They call me Me-no-linda for the rest of the period. This is how terrorists get started, this kind of harmless fun. I wonder if it's too late to transfer to German.

I just thought of a great theory that explains everything. When I went to that party, I was abducted by aliens. They have created a fake Earth and fake high school to study me and my reactions. This certainly explains cafeteria food. Not the other stuff, though. The aliens have a sick sense of humor.

THE MARTHAS

Heather has found a clan—the Marthas. She is a freshman member on probation. I have no idea how she did it. I suspect money changed hands. This is part of her strategy to make a place for herself at school. I am supposed to be tagging along. But the Marthas!

It's an expensive clan to run with; outfits must be coordinated, crisp, and seasonally appropriate. They favor plaid for autumn with matching sweaters in colors named after fruit, like apricot and russet apple. Winter calls for Fair Isle sweaters, lined wool pants, and Christmas hair ornaments. They haven't told her what to buy for spring. I predict skirts with supp7/eee

IT sees me. IT smiles and winks. Good thing my lips are stitched together or I'd throw up.

MY REPORT CARD:

Plays Nice	B	Social Studies	C	Spanish	C	Art	A
Lunch	D	Biology	B	Algebra	C+		
Clothes	C	English	C	Gym	C+		

SECOND MARKING PERIOD

GO

(FILL IN THE BLANK)!

The Ecology Club has won round two. We are no longer the Tigers because the name shows "shocking disrespect" for an endangered creature.

I know I'm shocked.

The Ecology Club made great posters. They laid out headlines from the sports page: **TIGERS RIPPED APART! TIGERS SLAUGHTERED! TIGERS KILLED!** side by side with color photos of Bengal tigers with their skins peeled off. Effective. The Ecology Club has some good PR people. (The football team would have protested, but the sad truth is that they've lost every game this season. They are happy not to be called the Tigers. Other teams called them Pussycats. Not manly.) More than half the school signed a petition and the tree huggers got letters of support from a bunch of outside groups and three Hollywood Actors.

They herd us into an assembly that is supposed to be a "democratic forum" to come up with a new school mascot. Who are we? We can't be the Buccaneers because pirates supported violence and discrimination against women. The kid who suggests the Shoemakers in honor of the old moccasin factory is laughed out of the auditorium. Warriors insults Native Americans. I think Overbearing Eurocentric Patriarchs would be perfect, but I don't suggest it.

Student Council is holding an election before Winter Break.
Our choices:

- a. The Bees—useful to agriculture, painful to cross
- b. Icebergs—in honor of our festive winter weather
- c. Hilltoppers—guaranteed to frighten opponents
- d. Wombats—no one knows if they're endangered

CLOSET SPACE

My parents commanded me to stay after school every day for extra help from teachers. I agreed to stay after school. I hang out in my refurbished closet. It is shaping up nicely.

The first thing to go is the mirror. It is screwed to the wall, so I cover it with a poster of Maya Angelou that the librarian gave me. She said Ms. Angelou is one of the greatest American writers. The poster was coming down because the school board banned one of her books. She must be a great writer if the school board is afraid of her. Maya Angelou's picture watches me while I sweep and mop the floor, while I scrub the shelves, while I chase spiders out of the corners. I do a little bit of work every day. It's like building a fort. I figure Maya would like it if I read in here, so I bring a few books from home. Mostly I watch the scary movies playing on the inside of my eyelids.

It is getting harder to talk. My throat is always sore, my lips raw. When I wake up in the morning, my jaws are clenched so tight I have a headache. Sometimes my mouth relaxes around Heather, if we're alone. Every time I try to talk to my parents

or a teacher, I sputter or freeze. What is wrong with me? It's like I have some kind of spastic laryngitis.

I know my head isn't screwed on straight. I want to leave, transfer, warp myself to another galaxy. I want to confess everything, hand over the guilt and mistake and anger to someone else. There is a beast in my gut, I can hear it scraping away at the inside of my ribs. Even if I dump the memory, it will stay with me, staining me. My closet is a good thing, a quiet place that helps me hold these thoughts inside my head where no one can hear them.

ALL TOGETHER NOW

My Spanish teacher breaks the "no English" rule to tell us that we had better stop pretending we don't understand the homework assignments or we're all going to get detention. Then she repeats what she just said in Spanish, though it seems as if she tosses in a few extra phrases. I don't know why she hasn't figured it out yet. If she just taught us all the swear-words the first day, we would have done whatever she wanted the rest of the year.

Detention does not sound appealing. I do my homework—choose five verbs and conjugate them.

To translate: *traducir*. I traducate.

To flunk: *fracasar*. Yo am almost fracasaring.

To hide: *esconder*. To escape: *escapar*.

To forget: *olvidar*.

J O B D A Y

Just in case we forget that "we are here to get a good foundation-
so we can go to college live up to our potential get a good job live hap-
pily ever after and go to Disney World," we have a Job Day.

Like all things Hi! School, it starts with a test, a test of my de-
sires and my dreams. Do I (a) prefer to spend time with a
large group of people? (b) prefer to spend time with a small
group of close friends? (c) prefer to spend time with family?
(d) prefer to spend time alone?

Am I (a) a helper? (b) a doer? (c) a planner? (d) a dreamer?

If I were tied to railroad tracks and the 3:15 train to Rochester
was ready to cut a path across my middle, would I (a) scream
for help? (b) ask my little mice friends to chew through the
ropes? (c) remember that my favorite jeans were in the dryer
and were hopelessly wrinkled? (d) close my eyes and pretend
nothing was wrong?

Two hundred questions later, I get my results. I should con-
sider a career in (a) forestry (b) firefighting (c) communica-
tions (d) mortuary science. Heather's results are clearer. She
should be a nurse. It makes her jump up and down.

the
Heather: "This is the best! I know exactly what I'm going to
do. I'll be a candy striper at the hospital this summer. Why

don't you do it with me? I'll study real hard in biology and go
to S.U. and get my R.N. What a great plan!"

How could she know this? I don't know what I'm doing in the
next five minutes and she has the next ten years figured out.
I'll worry about making it out of ninth grade alive. Then I'll
think about a career path.

F I R S T A M E N D M E N T

Mr. Neck storms into class, a bull chasing thirty-three red
flags. We slide into our sea464.400 Tj3.475 Tc(path) T0 Tc1sea464.4a12(stormjc(minu

relax. This is like when my father complains about his boss.
The best thing to do is to stay awake and blink sympathetically.

His son wanted to be a firefighter, but didn't get the job. Mr. aTh61ksd ts s433Tj0 Tcm(e) Tj0.863 Tw0.871 Tc(s423Tj0 Tki(d) Tj2.290 Tw0 m) Tc(m)0Tj0 T

David Petrakis My Lab Partner has stood up. The class stops talking. I put my pencil down.

Mr. Neck: "Mr. Petrakis, take your seat."

David Petrakis is never, ever in trouble. He is the kid who wins perfect attendance records, who helps the staff chase down bugs in the computer files of report cards. I chew a hangnail on my pinkie. What is he thinking? Has he flipped, finally cracked under the pressure of being smarter than everyone?

David: "If the class is debating, then each student has the right to say what's on his mind."

Mr. Neck: "I decide who talks in here."

David: "You opened a debate. You can't close it just because it is not going your way."

Mr. Neck: "Watch me. Take your seat, Mr. Petrakis."

David: "The Constitution does not recognize different classes of citizenship based on time spent living in the country. I am a citizen, with the same rights as your son, or you. As a citizen, and as a student, I am protesting the tone of this lesson as racist, intolerant, and xenophobic."

Mr. Neck: "Sit your butt in that chair, Petrakis, and watch your mouth! I try to get a debate going in here and you people turn it into a race thing. Sit down or you're going to the principal."

David stares at Mr. Neck, looks at the flag for a minute, then picks up his books and walks out of the

Dad strides across the back yard, wearing an oven mitt and carrying the steaming turkey by one leg. "He said it would take hours to thaw," mutters Mom. A tiny voice squeaks from the receiver. "No, not you, Ted," she tells the phone. Dad lays the turkey on the chopping block and picks up his hatchet. Whack. The hatchet sticks in the frozen turkey flesh. He saws back and forth. Whack. A slice of frozen turkey slides to the ground. He picks it up and waves it at the window. Mom turns her back to him and tells Ted she's on her way.

Bones are heaped on the

After Mom leaves for the store, Dad takes over the dinner. It's the principle of the thing. If he gripes about the way she handled Thanksgiving, then he has to prove he can do a better job. He brings in the butchered dirty meat and washes it in the sink with detergent and hot water. He rinses off his hatchet.

Dad: "Just like the old days, right, Mellie? Fellow goes out into the woods and brings home dinner. This isn't so difficult. Cooking just requires some organization and the ability to read. Now get me the bread. I'm going to make real stuffing, the way my mother used to. You don't need to help. Why don't you do some homework, maybe some extra-credit work to pull those grades up. I'll call you when dinner is ready."

I think about studying, but it's a holiday, so I park myself on the living-room couch and watch an old movie instead. I smell smoke twice, wince when glass shatters on the floor, and listen in on the other phone to his conversation with the turkey hotline lady. She says turkey soup is the best part of Thanksgiving anyway. He calls me into the kitchen an hour later, with the fake enthusiasm of a father who has screwed up big-time.

the effect of commercialism on this holiday. This is wonderful, wonderful! Be the bird. You are the bird. Sacrifice yourself to abandoned family values and canned yams."

Whatever.

At first, I want to glue the bones together in a heap like firewood (get it?—tree—firewood), but Mr. Freeman sighs. I can do better, he says. I arrange the bones on a black piece of paper and try to draw a turkey around it. I don't need Mr. Freeman to tell me it stinks. By this point, he has thrown himself back into his own painting and has forgotten we exist.

He is working on a huge canvas. It started out bleak—a gutted building along a gray road on a rainy day. He spent a week painting dirty coins on the sidewalk, sweating to get them just right. He painted the faces of school board members peering out the windows of the building, then he put bars on the windows and turned the building into a prison. His canvas is better than TV because you never know what is going to happen next.

I crumple the paper and lay out the bones on the table. Melinda Sordino—Anthropologist. I have unearthed the remains of a hideous sacrifice. The bell rings and I look at Mr. Freeman with puppy-dog eyes. He says he'll call my Spanish teacher with some kind of excuse. I can stay for another class period. When Ivy hears this, she begs permission to stay late, too. She's trying to conquer her fear of clowns. She's considering some weird sculpture—a mask behind a clown's

face. Mr. Freeman says yes to Ivy, too. She waggles her eyebrows at me and grins. By the time I figure out that this might be a good time to say something friendly to her, she is back at work.

I glue the bones to a block of wood, arranging the skeleton like a museum exhibit. I find knives and forks in the odds-'n'-ends bin and glue them so it looks like they are attacking the bones.

I take a step back. It isn't quite done. I rummage in the bin again and find a half-melted palm tree from a Lego set. It'll do. Mr. Freeman hangs on to everything a normal person would throw out: Happy Meal toys, lost playing cards, grocery-store receipts, keys, dolls, a saltshaker, trains . . . how does he know this stuff could be art?

I pop the head off a Barbie doll and set it inside the turkey's body. That feels right. Ivy walks past and looks. She arches her left eyebrow and nods. I wave my hand and Mr. Freeman comes over to inspect. He almost faints with delight.

Mr. Freeman: "Excellent, excellent. What does this say to you?"

Darn. I didn't know there would be a quiz. I clear my throat. I can't get any words out, it is too dry. I try again, with a little cough.

Mr. Freeman: "Sore throat? Don't worry, it's going around. Want me to tell you what I see?"

I nod in relief.

"I see a gir

She takes off another point. They saw their apples, mutter, mutter, curse, curse, old cow, stupid teacher.

David Petrakis My Lab Partner cuts his apple into eight equal wedges. He doesn't say a word. He is in the middle of a Pre-Med Week. David can't make up his mind between pre-med and pre-law. Ninth grade is a minor inconvenience to him. A zit-cream commercial before the Feature Film of Life.

Applesmell soaks the air. One time when I was little, my parents took me to an orchard. Daddy set me high in an apple tree. It was like falling up into a storybook, yummy and Iyr 0 1 90 357.6 T472.960 Tm0 Tw1nd

The tape will not be able to pick up the angry gleam in Mr. Neck's eyes, though.

ber Cheerleader on the way to my bus. They wrinkle their brows as they struggle to rhyme "wombat." Democracy is a wonderful institution.

WINTER BREAK

School is out and there are two days until Christmas. Mom left a note saying I can put up the tree if I want. I drag the tree out of the basement and stand it in the driveway so I can sweep the dust and cobwebs off it with a broom. We leave the lights on it from year to year. All I have to do is hang the ornaments.

There is something about Christmas that requires a rug rat. Little kids make Christmas fun. I wonder if we could rent one for the holidays. When I was tiny we would buy a real tree and stay up late drinking hot chocolate and finding just the right place for the special decorations. It seems like my parents gave up the magic when I figured out the Santa lie. Maybe I shouldn't have told them I knew where the presents really came from. It broke their hearts.

I bet they'd be divorced by now if I hadn't been born. I'm sure I was a huge disappointment. I'm not pretty or smart or athletic. I'm just like them—an ordinary drone dressed in secrets and lies. I can't believe we have to keep playacting until I graduate. It's a shame we can't just admit that we have failed family living, sell the house, split up the money, and get on with our lives.

Merry Christmas.

I call Heather, but she's shopping. What would Heather do if she were here and the house didn't feel like Christmas? I will pretend to be Heather. I bundle up in geeky snow clothes, wrap a scarf around my head, and plunge into a snowdrift. The back yard is gorgeous. The trees and bushes are all wrapped in ice, reflecting sunlight into something powerful. I just have to make a snow angel.

I tromp to an unmarked piece of snow and let myself fall backward. The scarf falls over my mouth as I wave my wings. The wet wool smells like first grade, walking to school on a cold morning with my milk money jangling in the tips of my mittens. We lived in a different house then, a smaller house. Mom worked at the jewelry counter and was home after school. Dad had a nicer boss and talked all the time about buying a boat. I believed in Santa Claus.

The wind stirs the branches overhead. My heart clangs like a fire bell. The scarf is too tight on my mouth. I pull it off to breathe. The moisture on my skin freezes. I want to make a wish, but I don't know what to wish for. And I have snow up my back.

I break off branches from the holly bushes and a few sprigs of pine and carry them inside. I tie them together with red yarn and set them on the fireplace mantel and the dining-room table. It doesn't look as nice as when the lady on TV did it, but it makes the place smell better. I still wish we could borrow a kid for a few days.

We sleep in till noon on Christmas. I give Mom a black

seal them up, and stick on mailing labels. He sits at his desk and talks to buddies on the phone.

He gets to work with his feet up. He gets to laugh with his friends on the phone. He gets to call out for lunch. I think he deserves to be in the basement folding shirts and helping my mother. I deserve to be watching cable, or taking a nap, or even going to Heather's house. By lunchtime, my stomach boils with anger. Dad's secretary says something nice to me when she drops off my lunch, but I don't answer her. I glare daggers at the back of my father's head. Angry angry angry. I have another million envelopes to close. I run my tongue over the gross gummy envelope flap. The sharp edge of the flap cuts my tongue. I taste my blood. IT's face suddenly pops up in my mind. All the anger whistles out of me like I'm a popped balloon. Dad is really pissed when he sees how many calendars I bled on. He mentions a need for professional help.

I am actually grateful to go back to school.

FOUL

Now that there are two feet of snow on the ground, the fizz-ed teachers let us have class inside. They keep the gym at about forty degrees because "a little cool air never hurt anyone." Easy for them to say, they wear sweatpants.

The first inside sport is basketball. Ms. Connors teaches us how to throw foul shots. I step up to the line, bounce the ball

twice, and put it through the net. Ms. Connors tells me to do it again. And again. She keeps bouncing balls my way, and I keep putting them up—swish, swish, swish. Forty-two shots later, my arms wobble and I miss one. By that time, the entire class has gathered around and is watching. Nicole is just about bursting. "You have to join the team!" she shouts.

Ms. Connors: "Meet me back here during activity period. You are Going Places with That Arm."

Me:

It is a sad and downtrodden Ms. Connors who meets me three hours later. She holds my current grades by two fingers: D, C, B-, D, C-, C,

life to education. A color picture of the work-in-progress accompanied the article. Someone said a few school board members recognized themselves. I bet they sue him.

I wish Mr. Freeman would put a tree in his masterpiece. I mem

all. I don't come back to earth until Heather says, "I kne

whole point of not talking about it, of silencing the memory, is to make it go away. It won't. I'll need brain surgery to cut it out of my head. Maybe I should wait until David Petrakis is a doctor, let him do it.

MODEL CITIZEN

Heather has landed a modeling job at a department store in the mall. She says she was buying socks with her mother the week after her braces came off and some lady asked if she modeled. I suspect the fact that her dad works for the mall management company had something to do with it.

The modeling gig is paying off in major Martha points. They all want to be Heather's New Best Friend. But she asks me to go with her for the bathing suit shoot. I think she's afraid to screw up in front of them. Heather's mother drives us. She t

He comes to class each day with a new Real-Life Application. It is sweet that he cares enough about algebra and his students to want to bring them together. He's like a grandfather who wants to fix up two young kids that he just knows would make a great couple. Only the kids have nothing in common and they hate each other.

Today's Application has something to do with buying guppies at the pet store, and calculating how many guppies you could breed if i

Heather has another modeling job. Tennis clothes, I think. She asks me to hang the posters for her. I actually don't mind. It's nice having kids see me do something good. Might help my reputation. I'm hanging a poster outside the metal-shop room when IT creeps up. Little flecks of metal slice through my veins. IT whispers to me.

"Freshmeat." That's what IT whispers.

IT found me again. I thought I could ignore IT. There are four hundred other freshmen in here, two hundred female. Plus all the other grades. But he whispers to me.

I can smell him over the noise of the metal shop and I drop my poster and the masking tape and I want to throw up and I can smell him and I run and he remembers and he knows. He whispers in my ear.

I lie to Heather about the masking tape and say I put it back in the supply box.

RENT ROUND 3

My guidance counselor calls Mom at the store to pave the way for my report card. Must remember to send her a thank-you note. By the time we eat dinner, the Battle is roaring at full pitch. Grades, blah, blah, blah, Attitude, blah, blah, blah, Help around the house, blah, blah, blah, Not a kid anymore, blah, blah, blah.

I watch the Eruptions. Mount Dad, long dormant, now considered armed and dangerous. Mount Saint Mom, oozing lava, spitting flame. Warn the villagers to run into the sea. Behind my eyes I conjugate irregular Spanish verbs.

A minor blizzard blows outside. The weather lady says it's a lake-effect storm—the wind from Canada sucks up water from Lake Ontario, runs it through the freeze machine, and dumps it on Syracuse. I can feel the wind fighting to break through our storm windows. I want the snow to bury our house.

They keep asking questions like "What is wrong with you?" and "Do you think this is cute?" How can I answer? I don't have to. They don't want to hear anything I have to say. They ground me until the Second Coming. I have to come straight home after school unless Mom arranges for me to meet with a teacher. I can't go to Heather's. They are going to disconnect the cable. (Don't think they'll follow through on that one.)

I do my homework and show it to them like a good little girl. When they send me to bed, I write a runaway note and leave it on my desk. Mom finds me sleeping in my bedroom closet. She hands me a pillow and closes the door again. No more blah-blahs.

I open up a paper clip and scratch it across the inside of my left wrist. Pitiful. If a

Mom sees the wrist at breakfast.

Mom: "I don't have time for this, Melinda."

Me:

She says suicide is for cowards. This is an ugly nasty Momside. She bought a book about it. Tough love. Sour sugar. Barbed velvet. Silent talk. She leaves the book on the back of the toilet to educate me. She has figured out that I don't say too much. It bugs her.

CAN IT

Lunch with Heather starts cold. Since winter break, she has been sitting at the fringe of the Martha table and I eat on the other side of her. I can tell something is up as soon as I walk in. All the Marthas are wearing matching outfits: navy corduroy miniskirts, striped tops, and clear plastic purses. They must have gone shopping together. Heather doesn't match. They hadn't invited her.

She is too cool to be nervous about this. I am nervous for her. I take an enormous bite of my PBJ and try not to choke. They wait until she has a mouthful of cottage cheese. Siobhan puts a can of beets on the table.

carve. I start a new linoleum block. My last tree looked like it had died from some fungal infection—not the effect I wanted at all. The cold makes the linoleum stiffer than usual. I dig the chisel into the block and push, trying to follow the line of a tree trunk.

I follow the line of my thumb instead and gash myself. I swear and stick my thumb in my mouth. Everybody looks at me, so I take it out again. Mr. Freeman hurries over with a box of Kleenex. It isn't a deep cut, and I shake my head when he asks if I want to go to the nurse's office. He washes my chisel off in the sink and puts bleach on it. Some sort of AIDS regulation. When it is germ-free and dry, he carries it back toward my table, but stops in front of his canvas. He hasn't finished painting. The bottom right corner is empty. The prisoners' faces are menacing—you can't take your eyes off them. I wouldn't want a painting like that hanging over my couch. It looks like it might come alive at night.

Mr. Freeman steps back, as if he has just seen something new in his own picture. He slices the canvas with my chisel, ruining it with a long, ripping sound that makes the entire class gasp.

THIRD MARKING PERIOD

MY REPORT CARD

Attitude	D	Social Studies	D	Spanish	C-	Art	A
Lunch	C	Biology		B	Algebra	C-	
Clothes	C-	English		C-	Gym	C-	

DEATH OF THE WOMBAT

The Wombat is dead. No assembly, no vote. Principal Principal made an announcement this morning. He said hornets better represent the Merryweather spirit than foreign marsupials, plus the Wombat mascot costume was going to suck money from the prom committee's budget. We are the Hornets and that is final.

The seniors support this decision totally. They wouldn't be able to hold up their heads if the prom had to be moved from the Holiday Inn Ballroom to the gym. That would be so elementary-school.

Our cheerleaders are working on annoying chants that end in lots of buzzing. I think this is a mistake. I have visions of opposing teams making enormous flyswatters and giant cans of insecticide out of papier-mache to humiliate us during half-time programs.

I'm allergic to hornets. One sting and my skin bubbles with hives and my throat closes up.

COLD WEATHER AND BUSES

I miss the bus because I couldn't believe how dark it was when my alarm clock went off. I need a clock that will turn on a

MTV

CODE BREAKING

Hairwoman has been buying new earrings. One pair hangs all the way down to her shoulders. Another has bells in them like the pair Heather gave me at

up. Does anyone really think this guy sat down and stuck all kinds of hidden meanings into his story? It's just a story."

Hairwoman: "This is Hawthorne, one of the greatest American novelists! He didn't do anything by accident—he was a genius."

Rachel/Rachelle: "I thought we were supposed to have opinions here. My opinion is that it's kind of hard to read, but the part about how Hester gets in trouble and the preacher guy almost gets away with it, well, that's a good story. But I think you are making all this symbolism stuff up. I don't believe any of it."

Hairwoman: "Do you tell your math teacher you don't believe that three times four equals twelve? Well, Hawthorne's symbolism is just like multiplication—once you figure it out, it's as clear as day."

The bell rings. Hairwoman blocks the door to give out our assignment. A five-hundred-word essay on symbolism, how to find hidden meanings in Hawthorne. The whole class yells at Rachel/Rachelle in the hall.

That's what you get for speaking up.

STUNTED

Mr. Freeman has found a way around the authorities again. He painted the names of all his students on one wall of the

classroom, then made a column for each week left of school. Each week he evaluates our progress and makes a note on the wall. He calls it a necessary compromise.

Next to my name he's painted a question mark. My tree is frozen. A kindergartner could carve a better tree. I've stopped counting the linoleum blocks I ruined. Mr. Freeman has reserved the rest of them for me. Good thing, too. I am dying to try a different subject, something easy like designing an entire city or copying the *Mona Lisa*, but he won't budge. He suggested I try a different medium, so I used purple finger paints. The paint cooled my hands, but did nothing for my tree. Trees.

On a shelf I find a book of landscapes filled with illustrations of every stinking tree that grows: sycamore, linden, aspen, willow, fir, tulip poplar, chestnut, elm, spruce, pine. Their bark, flowers, limbs, needles, nuts. I feel like a regular forester, but I can't do what I'm supposed to. The last time Mr. Freeman had anything good to say to me was when I made that stupid turkey-bone thing.

Mr. Freeman is having his own problems. He mostly sits on his stool and stares at a new canvas. It is painted one color, so blue it's almost black. No light comes out of it or goes in, no shadows without light. Ivy asks him what it is. Mr. Freeman snaps out of his funk and looks at her like he just realized the room was full of students.

Mr. Freeman: "It is Venice at night, the color of an accountant's soul, alFreema.e

Me: "I was the only person who talked to you on the first day of school, and now you're blowing me off because I'm a little depressed? Isn't that what friends are for, to help each other out in bad times?"

Heather: "I knew you would take this the wrong way. You are just so weird sometimes."

I squint at the wall of hearts on the other side of the room. Lovers can spend five dollars to get a red or pink heart with their initials on

It's caught me by surprise. Valentine Day's was a big hairy deal in elementary school because you had to give cards to everyone in your class, even the kid who made you step in dog poop. Then the class mom brought in pink frosted cupcakes and we traded those little candy hearts that said "Hot Baby!" and "Be Mine!"

The holiday went underground in middle school. No parties. No shoe boxes with red cutout hearts for your drugstore valentines. To tell someone you liked them, you had to use layers and layers of friends, as in "Janet told me to tell you that Steven told me that Dougie said Carom was talking to April and she hinted that Sara's brother Mark has a friend named Tony who might like you. What are you going to do?"

It is easier to floss with barbed wire than admit you like someone in middle school.

I go with the flow toward m

tissue harder on my thumb to concentrate. Ms. Keen's baby bird hatches on the board. I draw a picture of Ms. Keen as a robin. David smiles. He draws a branch under her feet and slides the notebook back to me. I try to connect the branch to a tree. It looks pretty good, better than anything I have drawn so far in art. The bell rings, and David's hand brushes against mine as he picks up his books. I bolt from my seat. I'm afraid to look at him. What if he thinks I already opened his card and I hate his guts, which was why I didn't say anything? But I can't say anything because the card could be a joke, or from some other silent watcher who blends in with the blur of lockers and doors.

My locker. The card is still there, a white patch of hope with my name on it. I tear it off and open it. Something falls to my feet. The card has a picture of two cutesy teddy bears sharing a pot of honey. I open it. "Thanks for understanding. You're the sweetest!" It is signed with a purple pen. "Good Luck!!! Heather."

I

the baby due, is it my mother, a sister? If I wanted people to ask me questions, I would have gone to school. I say I have to call my father and flee.

The cafeteria is cool. Huge. Full of people wearing doctor-nurse clothes with college-degree posture and beepers. I always thought hospital people would be real health nuts, but these guys eat junk food like it's going out of style. Big piles of nachos, cheeseburgers as wide as plates, cherry pie, potato chips, all the good stuff. One lone cafeteria worker named Lola stands by the steamed-fish and onion tray. I feel bad for her, so I buy the fish platter. I also buy a plate of mashed potatoes and gravy and a yogurt. I find a seat next to a table of serious, frowning, silver-haired men who use words so long I'm surprised they don't choke. Very official. Nice to hang around people who sound like they know what they're doing.

After lunch I wander up to the fifth floor, to an adult surgery wing where waiting family members concentrate on the television. I sit where I can watch the nurses' station and, beyond that, a couple of hospital rooms. It looks like a good place to get sick. The doctors and nurses seem smart, but they smile every once in a while.

A laundry-room worker pushes an enormous basket of green hospital gowns (the kind that shows your butt if you don't hold it closed) to a storage area. I follow him. If anyone asks, I'm looking for a water fountain. No one asks. I pick up a gown. I want to put it on and crawl under the white knobbly blanket and white sheets in one of those high-off-the-ground

beds and sleep. It is getting harder to sleep at home. How long would it take for the nurses to figure out I don't belong here? Would they let me rest for a few days?

A stretcher pushed by a tall guy with muscles sweeps down the hall. One woman walks

"Why won't you say anything?" "For

Father: "I don't know where you picked up that slacker attitude, but you certainly didn't learn it at home. Probably from the bad influences up here."

G.C.: "Actually, Melinda has some very nice friends. I've seen her helping that group of girls who volunteer so much. Meg Harcutt, Emily Briggs, Siobhan Falon . . ."

Principal Principal: [Stops doodling] "Very nice girls. They all come from good families." He looks at me for the first time and tilts his head to one side. "Those are your friends?"

Do they choose to be so dense? Were they born that way? I have no friends. I have nothing. I say nothing. I am nothing. I wonder how long it takes to ride a bus to Arizona.

MISS

Merryweather In-School Suspension. This is my Consequence. It is in my contract. It's true what they tell you about not signing anything without reading it carefully. Even better, pay a lawyer to read it carefully.

The guidance counselor dreamed up the contract after our cozy get-together in the principal's office. It lists a million things I'm not supposed to do and the consequences I'll suffer if I do them. The consequences for minor offenses like being late to class or not participating were stupid—they wanted

me to write an essay—so I took another day off school and Bingo! I earned a trip to MISS.

It's a classroom painted white, with uncomfortable chairs and a lamp that buzzes like an angry hive. The inmates of MISS are commanded to sit and stare at the empty walls. It is supposed to bore us into submission or prepare us for an insane asylum.

Our guard dog today is Mr. Neck. He curls his lip and growls at me. I think this is part of his punishment for that bigoted crap he pulled in class. There are two other convicts with me. One has a cross tattooed on his shaved skull. He sits like a graniteboy waiting for a chisel so he can carve himself out of the mountainside. The other kid looks completely normal. His clothes are a little freaky maybe, but that's a misdemeanor here, not a felony. When Mr. Neck gets up to greet a late arrival, the normal-looking kid tells me he likes to start fires.

Our last companion is Andy Evans. My breakfast turns to hydrochloric acid. He grins at Mr. Neck and sits down next to me.

Mr. Neck: "Cutting again, Andy?"

Andy Beast: "No sir. One of your colleagues thinks I have an authority problem. Can you believe it?"

Mr. Neck: "No more talking."

I am BunnyRabbit again, hiding in the open. I sit like I have an egg in my mouth. One move, one word, and the egg will shatter and blow up the world.

I am getting seriously weird in the head.

When Mr. Neck isn't looking, Andy blows in my ear.

I want to kill him.

PICASSO

I can't do anything, not even in art class. Mr. Freeman, a pro at staring out the window himself, thinks he knows what's wrong. "Your imagination is paralyzed," he declares. "You need to take a trip." Ears perk up all over the classroom and someone turns down the radio. A trip? Is he planning a field trip? "You need to visit the mind of a Great One," continues Mr. Freeman. Papers flutter as the class sighs. The radio sings louder again.

He pushes my pitiful linoleum block aside and gently sets down an enormous book. "Picasso." He whispers like a priest. "Picasso. Who saw the truth. Who painted the truth, molded it, ripped from the earth with two angry hands." He pauses. "But I'm getting carried away." I nod. "See Picasso," he commands. "I can't do everything for you. You must walk alone to find your soul."

Blah, blah, yeah. Looking at pictures would be better than watching snow drift. I open the book.

Picasso sure had a thing for naked women. Why not draw them with their clothes on? Who sits around without a shirt

on, plucking a mandolin? Why not draw naked guys, just to be fair? Naked women is art, naked guys a no-no, I bet. Probably because most painters are men.

I don't like the first chapters. Besides all the naked women, he painted these blue pictures, like he ran out of red and green for a few weeks. He painted circus people and some dancers who look like they are standing in smog. He should have made them cough.

The next chapter steals my breath away. It takes me out of the room. It confuses me, while one little part of my brain jumps up and down screaming, "I get it! I get it!" Cubism. Seeing beyond what is on the surface. Moving both eyes and a nose to the side of the face. Dicing bodies and tables and guitars as if they were celery sticks, and rearranging them so that you have to really see them to see them. Amazing. What did the world look like to him?

I wish he had gone to high school at Merryweather. I bet we could have hung out. I search the whole book and never see one picture of a tree. Maybe Picasso couldn't do trees either. Why did ope7 Tw0.515 Tc(schoA0.403 Tc7 Tc(searc) (wrong)34) Tj1.8h a mels

RIDING SHOTGUN

I am a good girl. I go to every single class for a week. It feels good to know what the teachers are talking about again. My parents get the news flash from the guidance counselor. They aren't sure how to react—happy because I'm behaving, or angrier still that they have to be happy about such a minor thing as a kid who goes to class every day.

The guidance counselor convinces them I need a reward—a chew toy or something. They settle on new clothes. I'm outgrowing everything I own.

But shopping with my mother? Just shoot me and put me out of my misery. Anything but a shopping trip with Mom. She hates shopping with me. At the mall she stalks ahead, chin high, eyelids twitching because I won't try on the practical, "stylish" clothes she likes. Mother is the rock, I am the ocean. I have to pout and roll my eyes for hours until she finally wears down and crumbles into a thousand grains of beach sand. It takes a lot of energy. I don't think I have it in me.

Apparently, Mom isn't up to the drag 'n' whine mall gig either. When they announce I've earned new clothes, they add that I have to get them at Effert's, so Mom can use her discount. I'm supposed to take the bus after school and meet her at the store. In a way, I'm glad. Get in, buy, get out, like ripping off a Band-Aid.

It seems like a good idea until I'm standing at the bus stop in front of school as a blizzard rips through the county. The wind chill must be twenty below and I don't have a hat or mittens. I try keeping my back to the wind, but my rear end freezes. Facing it is impossible. The snow blows up under my eyelids and fills my ears. That's why I don't hear the car pull up next to me. When the horn blows, I nearly jump out of my skin. It's Mr. Freeman. "Need a ride?"

Mr. Freeman's car shocks me. It is a blue Volvo, a safe Swedish box. I had him figured for an old VW bus. It is clean. I had visions of art supplies, posters and rotting fruit everywhere. When I get in, classical music plays quietly. Will wonders never cease.

He says dropping me off in the city is only a little out of his way. He'd love to meet

what a "beautiful" and "natural" and "miraculous" transformation I was going through. Crap. That's what it is. She complains all the time about her hair turning gray and her butt sagging and her skin wrinkling, but I'm supposed to be grateful for a face full of zits, hair in embarrassing places, and feet that grow an inch a night. Utter crap.

No matter what I try on, I know I'll hate it. Effert's has cornered the market on completely unfashionable clothes. Clothes that grandmas buy for your birthday. It's a fashion graveyard. Just get a pair that fits, I tell myself. One pair—that's the goal. I look around. No Mom. I carry three pairs of the least offensive jeans into the dressing room. I am the only person trying anything on. The first pair is way too small—I can't even get them over my butt. I don't bother with the second pair; they are a smaller size. The third pair is huge. Exactly what I'm looking for.

I scurry out to the three-way mirror. With an extra-large sweatshirt over the top, you can hardly tell that they are Effert's jeans. Still no Mom. I adjust the mirror so I can see reflections of reflections, miles and miles of me and my new jeans. I hook my hair behind my ears. I should have washed it. My face is dirty. I lean into the mirror. Eyes after eyes after eyes stare back at me. Am I in there somewhere? A thousand eyes blink. No makeup. Dark circles. I pull the side flaps of the mirror in closer, folding myself into the looking glass and blocking out the rest of the store.

My face becomes a Picasso sketch, my body slicing into dissecting cubes. I saw a movie once where a woman was burned

over eighty percent of her body and they had to wash all the dead skin off. They wrapped her in bandages, kept her drugged, and waited for skin grafts. They actually sewed her into a new skin.

I push my ragged mouth against the mirror. A thousand bleeding, crusted lips push back. What does it feel like to walk in a new skin? Was she completely sensitive like a baby, or numb, without nerve endings, just walking in a skin bag? I exhale and my mouth disappears in a fog. I feel like my skin has been burned off. I stumble from thornbush to thornbush—my mother and father who hate each other, Rachel who hates me, a school that gags on me like I'm a hairball. And Heather.

I just need to hang on long enough for my new skin to graft. Mr. Freeman thinks I need to find my feelings. How can I not find them? They are chewing me alive like an infestation of thoughts, shame, mistakes. I squeeze my eyes shut. Jeans that fit, that's a good start. I have to stay away from the closet, go to all my classes. I will make myself normal. Forget the rest of it.

GERMINATION

We've finished the plant unit in biology. Ms. Keen drops ten-pound hints that the test will focus on seeds. I study.

How seeds get planted: This is actually cool. Some plants spit their seeds into the wind. Others make seeds yummy enough

drink cranberry-apricot juice. Too bad I can't buy stock in the juice company—I am watching a trend in the making.

Are they talking about me? They're certainly laughing enough. I chomp my sandwich and it barfs mustard on my shirt. Maybe they're planning the next Project. They could mail snowballs to the weather-deprived children in Texas. They could knit goat-hair blankets for shorn sheep. I imagine what Heather might look like in ten years, after two children and seventy pounds. It helps a little.

Rachel/Rachelle takes a seat at the end of my table with Hana, the exchange student from Egypt. Rachel/Rachelle is now experimenting with Islam. She wears a scarf on her head and some brown-and-red gauzy harem pants. Her eyes are ringed with black eyeliner thick as crayon. I think I see her looking at me, but I'm probably wrong. Hana wears jeans and a Gap T-shirt. They eat hummus and pita and titter in French.

There is a sprinkling of losers like me scattered among the happy teenagers, prunes in the oatmeal of school. The others have the social power to sit with other losers. I'm the only one sitting alone, under the glowing neon sign which reads, "Complete and Total Loser, Not Quite Sane. Stay Away. Do Not Feed."

I go to the rest room to turn my shirt around so the mustard stain is hidden under my hair.

SNOW DAY—SCHOOL AS USUAL

We had eight inches of snow last night. In any other part of the country, that would mean a snow day. Not in Syracuse. We never get snow days. It snows an inch in South Carolina, everything shuts down and they get on the six o'clock news. In our district, they plow early and often and put chains on the bus tires.

Hairwoman tells us they canceled school for a whole week back in the seventies because of the energy crisis. It was wicked cold and would have cost too much to heat the school. She looks wistful. Wistful—one-point vocab word. She blows her nose loudly and pops another smelly green cough drop. The wind blasts a snowdrift against the window.

Our teachers need a snow day. They look unusually pale. The men aren't shaving carefully and the women never remove

snoe s^s a(i) TjrfTj

Hawthorne wanted snow to symbolize cold, that's what I think. Cold and silence. Nothing quieter than snow. The sky screams to deliver it, a hundred banshees flying on the edge of the blizzard. But once the snow covers the ground, it hushes as still as my heart.

STUPID STUPID

I sneak into my closet after school because I can't face the idea of riding home on

David doesn't bother to analyze my reluctance. If he were a girl, maybe he would have pleaded or whined more. Guys don't do that. Yes/no. Stay/go. Suit yourself. See you Monday.

I think it's some kind of psychiatric disorder when you have more than one personality more

in a blue-jeans ad, thinthinthin, big lips, big earrings, white smiles. I felt like such a little kid.

Rachel found a way to fit in, of course. She knew a lot of people because of Jimmy. I tasted a beer. It was worse than cough medicine. I gulped it down. Another beer and one more, then I worried I would throw up. I walked out of the crowd, toward the woods. The moon shone on the leaves. I could see the lights, like stars strung in the pines. Somebody giggled, hidden beyond the dark, quiet boygirl whispers. I couldn't see them.

A step behind me. A senior. And then he was talking to me, flirting with me. This gorgeous cover-model guy. His hair was way better than mine, his every inch a tanned muscle,

FOURTH MARKING PERIOD

EXTERMINATORS

The PTA has started a petition to get rid of the Hornet as our school mascot. It was the cheer that got to them. They heard it at the last basketball game.

**"WE ARE THE HORNETS,
HORNY, HORNY HORNETS!
EVERYWHERE WE GO-OH,
PEOPLE WANT TO KNO-OOW,
WHO WE ARE, SO WE TELL THEM . . .
WE ARE THE HORNETS,
HORNY, HORNY HORNETS!
(and on and on and on)**

The wiggles andcompwiggles o the an ay o an

a

are tenacious, stinging, clever. We are a hive, a community of students. Don't take away our Hornetdom. We *are* Hornets."

It won't be a real issue until football starts up again. Our baseball team always stinks.

THE WET SEASON

Spring is on the way. The winter rats—rustyt

SPRING BREAK

It is the last day of Spring Break. My house is shrinking and I feel like Alice in Wonderland. Afraid that my head might burst through the roof, I head for the mall. I have ten bucks in my pocket—what to spend it on? French fries—ten dollars' worth of french fries, ultimate fantasy. If *Alice in Wonderland* were written today, I bet she'd have a supersized order of fries that said "Eat me," instead of a small cake. On the other hand, we're rushing toward summer, which means shorts and

T-shirts and maybTm0 Tw0.518 Tc(w4.0 Tw0.362 Tc(friee4250.151 T5292.100 Tw(a) Tj4.010 Tf0.495 bat(rushin) Tj0 Tc(g) T91.781 T50.308 T

"How's the tree coming?" she asks.

I groan. "Stinks. It was a mistake to sign up for art. I just couldn't see myself taking wood shop."

"You're better than you think you are," Ivy says. She opens to an empty page in the sketchbook. "I don't know why you keep using a linoleum block. If I were you, I'd just let it out, draw. Here—try a tree."

We sit there trading pencils. I draw a trunk, Ivy adds a branch, I extend the branch, but it is too long and spindly. I start to erase it, but Ivy stops me. "It's fine the way it is, it just needs some leaves. Layer the leaves and make them slightly different sizes and it will look great. You have a great start there."

She's right.

GENETICS

The last unit of the year in biology is genetics. It's impossible to listen to Ms. Keen. Her voice sounds like a cold engine that won't turn over. The lecture starts with some priest named Greg who studied vegetables, and ends up with an argument about blue eyes. I think I missed something—how did we leap from veggies to eye color? I'll copy David's notes.

I flip ahead in the textbook. There's an interesting chapter about acid rain. Nothing about sex. We aren't scheduled to learn about that until eleventh grade.

David draws a chart in his notebook. I snap my pencil point and walk to the front of the room to sharpen it. I figure the walk will do me good. Ms. Keen sputters on. We get half our genes from our mother and half from our father. I thought my jeans came from Effert's. Ha-ha, biology joke.

Mom says I take after Dad's side of the family. They're mostly cops and insurance salesmen who bet on football games and smoke disgusting cigars. Dad says I take after Mom's side of the family. They're farmers who grow rocks and poison ivy. They don't say much, visit dentists, or read.

When I was a little kid, I used to pretend I was a princess who had been adopted when my kingdom was overrun by bad guys. Any day my real parents, Mr. King and Mrs. Queen, would send the royal limo to pick me up. I just about had a seven-year-old heart attack when my dad took a limo to the airport the first time. I thought they had really come to take me away and I didn't want to go. Dad took taxis after that.

I look out the window. No limos. No chariots or carriages. Now, when I really want to leave, no one will give me a ride.

I sketch a willow tree drooping into the water. I won't show it to Mr. Freeman. This one is for my closet. I've been taping some of my drawings on the walls. Any more classes as boring as this one and I'll be ready to move back in there full-time. My leaves are good, natural. The trick is to make them different sizes, and then crowd them one on top of another. Ivy was right.

Ms. Keen writes "Dominant/Recessive" on the board. I look at David's notes. He's drawing a family tree. David got his hair gene from his dad and his eye gene from his mom. I draw a family tree. A family stump. There aren't that many of us. I can barely remember their names. Uncle Jim, Uncle Thomas, Aunt Mary, Aunt Kathy—there's another aunt, she is very recessive. She recessed herself all the way to Peru. I think I have her eyes. I got my "I don't want to know about it" gene from my dad and my "I'll think about it tomorrow" gene from my mom.

Ms. Keen says we'll have a quiz the next day. I wish I had paid attention during class. I wish I were adopted. I wish David would quit sighing when I ask to copy his notes.

TEN MORE LIES THEY TELL YOU IN HIGH SCHOOL

1. You will use algebra in your adult lives.
2. Driving to school is a privilege that can be taken away.
3. Students must stay on campus for lunch.
4. The new textbooks will arrive any day now.
5. Colleges care about more than your SAT scores.
6. We are enforcing the dress code.
7. We will figure out how to turn off the heat soon.
8. Our bus drivers are highly trained professionals.
9. There is nothing wrong with summer school.
10. We want to hear what you have to say.

MY LIFE AS A SPY

Rachel/Rachelle has lost her mind. She has flipped. She went to the movies with Andy Beast and her exchange friends and

now she follows after him, panting like a bichon frise. 1 |fl wears her buddy Greta-Ingrid draped around his neck like a white scarf. When he spits, I bet Rachel/Rachelle catches it in a cup and saves it.

Rachel/Rachelle and some other twit natter about the movie date before Mr. Stetman starts class. I want to puke. Rachel/Rachelle is just "Andythis" and "Andythat." Could she be more obvious? I close my ears to her stupid asthmatic laugh and work on the homework that was due yesterday.

It is usually easy to do homework in class because Mr. Stetman's voice creates a gentle, white-noise sound barrier. I can't do it today, I can't escape the arguments circling my head. Why worry about Rachel/Rachelle? (He'll hurt her.) Had she done a single decent thing for me the whole year? (She was my best friend through middle school, that counts for something.) No, she's a witch and a traitor. (She didn't see what happened.) Let her lust after the Beast; I hope he breaks her heart. (What if he breaks something else?)

When class is over, I slide into the middle of the pack pushing out the door before Mr. Stetman can bust me for the homework. Rachel/Rachelle shoves past me to where Greta-Ingrid and a short kid from Belgium are waiting. I tail them, always keeping two bodies between us like the detectives on television. They're on their way to the foreign-language wing. That's no surprise. The foreign kids are always there, like they need to breathe air scented with their native language a couple times a day or they'll choke to death on too much American.

Andy Beast swoops over their heads, folds his wings, and sets himself between the girls as they start up the stairs. He tries to kiss Greta-Ingrid's cheek, but she turns away. He kisses Rachel/Rachelle's cheek and she giggles. He does not kiss the cheek of the short Belgian. The Belgian and the Swede wave "ciao" at the office of the Foreign Language Department. Rumor has it that there is an espresso maker in there.

The friendly momentum keeps Rachel/Rachelle and Andy walking all the way to the end of the hall. I face a corner and pretend to study algebra. I figure that's enough to make me unrecognizable. They sit on the floor, Rachel/Rachelle in a full lotus. Andy steals Rachel/Rachelle's notebook. She whines like a baby and throws herself across his lap to get it back. I shiver with goose bumps. He tosses the notebook from one hand to the other, always keeping it just out of her reach. Then he says something to her. I can't hear it. The hall sounds like a packed football stadium. His lips move poison and she smiles and then she kisses him wet. Not a Girl Scout kiss. He gives her the notebook. His lips move. Lava spills

through a forest fire or a blight. I'm getting better. Don't know what to call this phase yet. All these drawings make the closet seem smaller. Maybe I should bribe a janitor to haul all this stuff to my house, make my bedroom more like this, more like home.

Maya taps me on the shoulder. I'm not listening. I know I know, I don't want to hear it. I need to do something about Rachel, something for her. Maya tells me without saying anything. I stall. Rachel will hate me. (She already hates me.) She won't listen. (I have to try.) I groan and rip out a piece of notebook paper. I write her a note, a left-handed note, so she won't know it's from me.

"Andy Evans will use you. He is not what he pretends to be. I heard he attacked a ninth-grader. Be very, very careful. A Friend. RS. Tell Greta-Ingrid, too."

I didn't want the Swedish supermodel on my conscience either.

GROWING PAINS

Mr. Freeman is a jerk. Instead of leaving me alone to "find my muse" (a real quote, I swear), he lands on the stool next to me and starts criticizing. What is wrong with my tree? He overflows with words describing how bad it sucks. It's stiff, unnatural, it doesn't flow. It is an insult to trees everywhere.

I agree. My tree is hopeless. It isn't art; it's an excuse not to take sewing class. I don't belong in Mr. Freeman's room any

more than I belong in the Marthas or in my little-girl pink iK'iroom. This is where the real artists belong, like Ivy. I i.iny the linoleum block to the garbage can and throw it in hard enough to make everyone look at me. Ivy frowns through her wire sculpture. I sit back down and lay my head on the table. Mr. Freeman retrieves the block from the gar-Mge. He brings back the Kleenex box, too. How could he tell I was crying?

Mr. Freeman: "You are getting better at this, but it's not good enough. This looks like a tree, but it is an average, ordinary, everyday, boring tree. Breathe life into it. Make it bend—trees are flexible, so they don't snap. Scar it, give it a twisted branch—perfect trees don't exist. Nothing is perfect. Flaws are interesting. Be the tree."

He has this ice-cream voice like a kindergarten teacher. If he thinks I can do it, then I'll try one more time. My fingers tip-tip over to the linoleum knife. Mr. Freeman pats my shoulder once, then turns to make someone else miserable. I wait until he isn't watching, then try to carve life into my flat linoleum square.

Maybe I could carve off all the linoleum and call it "Empty Block." If a famous person did that, it would probably be really popular and sell for a fortune. If I do it, I'll flunk. "Be the tree." What kind of advice is that? Mr. Freeman has been hanging out with too many New Age weirdos. I was a tree in the second-grade play because I made a bad sheep. I stood there with my arms outstretched like branches and my head drooping in the breeze. It gave me sore arms. I doubt trees are ever told to "be the screwed-up ninth-grader."

GAG ORDER

David Petrakis's lawyer had a meeting with Mr. Neck and some kind of teacher lawyer. Guess who won. I bet David could skip class the rest of the year if he wanted and still get an A. Which he would never do. But you better believe that whenever David raises his hand, Mr. Neck lets him talk as much as he wants. David, quiet David, is full of long, drawn-out, rambling opinions about social studies. The rest of the class is grateful. We bow down to the Almighty David, Who Keeps the Neck Off Our Backs.

Unfortunately, Mr. Neck still gives tests, and most of us fail them. Mr. Neck makes an announcement: anyone who is flunking can write an extra-credit report on a Cultural Influence at the Turn of the Century. (He skipped the Industrial Revolution so he could drag our class past the year 1900.) He does not want all of us in summer school.

I don't want to see him in summer school either. I write about the suffragettes. Before the suffragettes came along, women were treated like dogs.

*Women could not vote

*W6men could not own property

* Women were not allowed in many schools

They were dolls, with no thoughts, or opinions, or voices of their own. Then the suffragettes marched in, full of loud,

in-your-face ideas. They got arrested and thrown in jail, but nothing shut them up. They fought and fought until they earned the rights they should have had all along.

I write the best report ever. Anything I copy from a book, I put in quotes and footnotes (feetnote?). I use books, magazine articles, and a videotape. I think about looking for an old suffragette in a nursing home, but they are probably all dead.

I even hand it in on time. Mr. Neck scowls. He looks down on me and says, "To get credit for the report, you have to deliver it orally. Tomorrow. At the beginning of class."

Me:

NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE

There is no way I'm reading my suffragette report in front of the class. That wasn't part of the original assignment. Mr. Neck changed it at the very last second because he wants to flunk me or hates me or something. But I've written a really good report and I'm not going to let an idiot teacher jerk me around like this. I ask David Petrakis for advice. We come up with a Plan.

I get to class early, when Mr. Neck is still in the lounge. I write what I need to on the board and cover the words with a suffragette protest sign. My box from the copy shop is on the floor. Mr. Neck walks in. He grumbles that I can go first. I s wa0.4i5 Tw0.4Tj0

I'm caught in a tornado. My toes curl inside my sneakers, trying to grip the floor so I won't get sucked out the window.

Mr. Neck nods at me. I pick up my report as if I'm going to read it out loud. I stand there, papers trembling as if a breeze is blowing through the closed door. I turn around and rip my poster off the blackboard.

**THE SUFFRAGETTES FOUGHT FOR THE RIGHT TO SPEAK.
THEY WERE ATTACKED, ARRESTED, AND THROWN IN JAIL
FOR DARING TO DO WHAT THEY WANTED. LIKE THEY WERE,
I AM WILLING TO STAND UP FOR WHAT I BELIEVE. NO ONE
SHOULD BE FORCED TO GIVE SPEECHES. I CHOOSE TO STAY
SILENT.**

The class reads slowly, some of them moving their lips. Mr. Neck turns around to see what everyone is staring at. I nod at David. He joins me at the front of the room and I hand him my box.

David: "Melinda has to deliver her report to the class as part of the assignment. She made copies everyone can read."

He passes out the copies. They cost me \$6.72 at the office-supply store. I was going to make a cover page and color it, but I haven't gotten much allowance recently, so I just put the title at the top of the first page.

My plan is to stand in front of the class for the five minutes I was given for my presentation. The suffragettes must have

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The boy with the lime-colored hair

ing nightmares where you keep falling but

THE BEAST PROWLs

I stay after school to work on tree sketches. Mr. Freeman helps me for a while. He gives me a roll of brown paper and a piece of white chalk and shows me how to draw a tree in three sweeping lines. He doesn't care how many mistakes I make, just one-two-three, "like a waltz," he says. Over and over. I use up a mile of the paper, but he doesn't care. This may be the root of his budget problem with the school board.

God crackles over the intercom and tells Mr. Freeman he's late for a faculty meeting. Mr. Freeman says the kind of words you don't usually hear from teachers. He gives me a new piece of chalk and tells me to draw roots. You can't grow a decent tree without roots.

The art room is one of the places I feel safe. I hum and don't worry about looking stupid. Roots. Ugh. But I try. One-two-three, one-two-three. I don't worry about the next day or minute. One-two-three.

Somebody flicks the lights off. My head snaps up. IT is there. Andy Beast. Little rabbit heart leaps out of my chest and scampers across the paper, leaving bloody footprints on my roots. He turns the lights back on.

I smell him. Have to find out where he gets that cologne. I think it's called Fear. This is turning into one of those repeat-

ripping my paper, scattering bits of chalk. Ivy walks through the door, bumping Rachel accidentally. She hesitates—she has to feel that something is going on—then she takes her sculpture off the shelf and sits at the table next to me. Rachel looks at me, but she doesn't say anything. She must have gotten my note—I mailed it over a week ago. I stand up. Rachel gives us a half wave and says "Ciao." Andy puts his arm around her waist and pulls her close to his body as they float out the door.

Ivy is talking to me, but it takes a while before I can hear her. "What a jerk," she says. She pinches the clay. "I can't believe she's going out with him. Can you? It's like I don't know her anymore. And he's trouble." She slaps a hunk of clay on the table. "Believe me, that creep is trouble with a capital T."

I'd love to stay and chat, but my feet won't let me. I walk home instead of taking the bus. I unlock the front door and walk straight up to my room, across the rug, and into my closet without even taking off my backpack. When I close the closet door behind me, I bury my face into the clothes on the left side of the rack, clothes that haven't fit for years. I stuff my mouth with old fabric and scream until there are no sounds left under my skin.

HOME SICK

It is time for a mental-health day. I need a day in pajamas, eating ice cream from the carton, painting my toenails, and

enjoying TrashTV. You have to plan ahead for a mental-health day. I learned this from a conversation my mom had with her friend Kim. Mom always starts acting sick forty-eight hours ahead of time. She and Kim take mental-health days together. They buy shoes and go to the movies. Cutting-edge adult delinquency. What is the world coming to?

I don't eat any dinner or dessert, and I cough so much during the news my dad tells me to take some cough medicine. In the morning, I smear some mascara under my eyes so it looks like I haven't slept at all. Mom takes my temperature—turns out I have a fever. Surprises even me. Her hand is cool, an island on my forehead.

The words tumble out before I can stop them.

Me: "I don't feel well."

Mom pats my back.

Mom: "You must be sick. You're talking."

Even she can hear how bitchy that sounds. She clears her throat and tries again.

Mom: "I'm sorry. It's nice to hear your voice. Go back to bed. I'll bring up a tray before I leave. Do you want some ginger ale?"

I nod.

OPRAH, SALLY JESSY, JERRY, AND ME

My fever is 102.2. Sounds like a radio station. Mom calls to remind me to drink a lot of fluids. I say "Thank you," even though it hurts my throat. It's nice of her to call me. She promises to bring home Popsicles. I hang up and snuggle into my couch nest with the remote. Click. Click. Click.

If my life were a TV show, what would it be? If it were an After-School Special, I would speak in front of an auditorium of my peers on How Not to Lose Your Virginity. Or, Why Seniors Should Be Locked Up. Or, My Summer Vacation: A Drunken Party, Lies, and Rape.

Was I raped?

Oprah: "Let's explore that. You said no. He covered your mouth with his hand. You were thirteen years old. It doesn't matter that you were drunk. Honey, you were raped. What a horrible, horrible thing for you to live through. Didn't you ever think of telling anyone? You can't keep this inside forever. Can someone get her a tissue?"

Sally Jessy: "I want this boy held responsible. He is to blame for this attack. You do know it was an attack, don't you? It was not your fault. I want you to listen to me, listen to me, listen to me. It was not your fault. This boy was an animal."

Jerry: "Was it love? No. Was it lust? No. Was it tenderness, sweetness, the First Time they talk about in magazines? No, **no**, no, no, no! Speak up, Meatilda, ah, Melinda, I can't hear you!"

My head is killing me, my throat is killing me, my stomach bubbles with toxic waste. I just want to sleep. A coma would be nice. Or amnesia. Anything, just to get rid of this, these thoughts, whispers in my mind. Did he rape my head, too?

I take two Tylenol and eat a bowl of pudding. Then I watch *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* and fall asleep. A trip to the Neighborhood of Make-Believe would be nice. Maybe I could stay with Daniel Striped Tiger in his tree house.

REAL SPRING

May is finally here and it has stopped raining. Good thing, too—the mayor of Syracuse was about to put out a call for a guy named Noah. The sun appears butter-yellow and so warm it coaxes tulips out of the crusty mud. A miracle.

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unearth a rake from the back of the garage. I start on the leaves suffocating the bushes. I bet Dad hasn't cleaned them out for years. They look harmless and dry on top, but under that top layer they're wet and slimy. White mold snakes from one leaf to the next. The leaves stick together like floppy pages in a decomposing book. I rake a mountain into the front yard and there are still more, like the earth pukes up leaf gunk when I'm not looking. I have to fight the bushes. They snag the tines of the rake and hold them—they don't like me cleaning out all that rot.

It takes an hour. Finally, the rake scrapes its metal fingernails along damp brown dirt. I get down on my knees to reach behind and drag out the last leaves. Ms. Keen would be proud of me. I observe. Worms caught in the sun squirm for cover. Pale green shoots of something alive have been struggling under the leaves. As I watch, they straighten to face the sun. I swear I can see them grow.

The garage door opens and Dad backs out the Jeep. He stops in the driveway when he sees me. He turns off the engine and gets out. I stand up and brush the dirt off my jeans. My palms are blistered and my arms are already sore from the raking. I can't tell if he's angry or not. Maybe he likes the front of his house looking like crap.

Dad: "That's a lot of work."

Me:

Dad: "I'll get some leaf bags at the store."

Me:

We both stand there with our arms crossed, staring at the little baby plants trying to grow in the shade of the house-eating bushes. The sun goes behind a cloud and I shiver. I should have worn a sweatshirt. The wind rustles dead leaves still clinging to the oak branches by the street. All I can think of is that the rest of the leaves are going to drop and I'll have to keep raking.

Dad: "Looks a lot better. Cleaned out like that, I mean."

The wind blows again. The leaves tremble.

Dad: "I suppose I should trim back the bushes. Of course, then you'd see the shutters and they need paint. And if I paint these shutters, I'll have to paint all the shutters, and the trim needs work, too. And the front door."

Me:

Tree: "Hush rustle chitachita shhhh . . ."

Dad turns to listen to the tree. I'm not sure what to do.

Dad: "And that tree is sick. See how the branches on the left don't have any buds? I should call someone to take a look at it. Don't want it crashing into your room during a storm."

Thanks, Dad. Like I'm not already having a hard time sleeping. Worry #64: flying tree limbs. I shouldn't have raked any-

thing. Look what I started. I shouldn't have tried something new. I should have stayed in the house. Watched cartoons with a double-sized bowl of Cheerios. Should have stayed in my room. Stayed in my head.

Dad: "I guess I'm going to the hardware store. Want to come?"

The hardware store. Seven acres of unshaven men and bright-eyed women in search of the perfect screwdriver, weed killer, volcanic gas grills. Noise. Lights. Kids running down the aisle with hatchets and axes and saw blades. People fighting about the right color to paint the bathroom. No thank you.

I shake my head.

ing agency calling your house any day now. Snub Todd and
you'll look like a trailer-park refugee having a bad hair day.

If I ran a high school, I would include stu

I swing open the door with a flourish. "Ta-da!" I point to my handiwork.

Ivy grins.

maladjusted daughter! I pry Heather out of Mom's claws and we retreat to my room. My stuffed rabbits crawl out of their burrows, noses awiggling, pink bunny, purple bunny, a

PROM PREPARATION

The climax of mating season is nearly upon us—the Senior Prom. They should cancel school this week. The only things we're learning are who is going with who (whom? must ask Hairwoman), who bought a dress in Manhattan, which limo company won't tell if you drink, the most expensive tux place, and on and on and on. The gossip energy alone could power the building's electricity for the rest of the marking period. The teachers are pissed. Kids aren't handing in homework because they have appointments at the tanning salon.

Andy Beast asked Rachel to go with him. I can't believe her mother is letting her go, but maybe she agreed because they're going to double with Rachel's brother and his date. Rachel is one of the rare ninth-graders invited to the Senior Prom; her social stock has soared. She must not have gotten my note, or maybe she decided to ignore it. Maybe she showed it to Andy and they had a good laugh. Maybe she won't get in the trouble I did, maybe he'll listen to her. Maybe I had better stop thinking about it before I go nuts.

Heather has come bellycrawling for help. My mother can't believe it: a living, breathing friend on the front porch for her

She completely ignores the fact that I was never in, and that she dumped me, banished me from even the shadows of Martha glory. I feel like any minute a guy in a lavender suit will burst into the room with a microphone and bellow, "Another alternate-reality moment brought to you by Adolescence!"

I still can't figure out why she's here. She licks a crumb off her cookie and gets to the point. She and the other Junior Marthas are required to decorate the Route 11 Holiday Inn ballroom for the prom. Meg 'n' Emily 'n' Siobhan can't assist, of course; they have to get their nails painted and their teeth whitened. The privileged, the few, the Junior Marthas have been laid waste by mononucleosis, leaving Heather all by herself. She is desperate.

Me: "You have to decorate the whole thing? By Saturday night?"

Heather: "Actually, we can't start until three o'clock Saturday afternoon because of some stupid meeting of Chrysler salesmen. But I know we can do it. I'm asking other kids, too. Do you know anyone who could help?"

Frankly, no I don't, but I chew and try to look thoughtful. Heather takes this to mean that yes, I'd be happy to help her. She bounces out of the chair.

Heather: "I knew you would help. You're great. Tell you what. I owe you, I owe you a big one. How about next week I come over and help you redecorate?"

Me:

Heather: "Didn't you tell me once how much you hated **yom** room? Well, now I see why. It would be so depressing just to wake up here every morning. We'll clear out all this junk." She kicks a chenille bunny who was sleeping in my robe on the floor. "And get rid of those curtains. Maybe you could go shopping with me—can you get your mom's American Express?" She yanks my curtains to one side. "Let's not forget to wash those windows. Sea-foam green and sage, that's what you should look for, classic and feminine."

Me: "No."

Heather: "You want something richer, like an eggplant, or cobalt?"

Me: "No, I haven't decided on colors yet. That's not what I mean, I mean no, I won't help you."

She collapses into the chair again. "You have to help me."

Me: "No, I don't."

Heather: "But, whiii—iiiiy?"

I bite my lip. Does she want to know the truth, that she's self-centered and cold? That I hope all the seniors yell at her? That I hate sea-foam green, and besides, it's none of her business if my windows are dirty? I feel tiny button noses against m

Me: "I have plans. The tree guy is coming to work on the oak out front, I have to dig in my garden, and besides, I know what I want to do in here and it doesn't include eggplant."

Most of it is half true, half planned. Heather scowls. I open the dirty window to let in fresh air. It brushes my hair back off my face. I tell Heather she has to leave. I need to clean. She crams her cookie in her mouth and does not say goodbye to my Heather. What a snob.

COMMUNICATION 101

I'm on a roll. I'm rocking. I don't know what it is; standing up to Heather, planting marigold seeds, or maybe the look on Mom's face when I asked if she would let me redecorate my room. The time has come to arm-wrestle

Give me a break.

Me: "You've been going out for, like, what—two weeks? Three?"

A cold front blows across the library. She straightens up and snaps shut the cover of her notebook.

Rachel: "What do you want, anyway?"

Before I can answer, the librarian pounces. We are welcome to continue our conversation in the principal's office, or we can stay and be quiet. Our choice. I take out my notebook and write to Rachel.

It's nice to talk to you again. I'm sorry we couldn't be friends this year. I pass the notebook to her. She melts a bit around the edges and writes back.

Yeah, I know. So, who do you like?

No one, really. My lab partner is kinda nice, but like a friend-friend, not a boyfriend or anything.

Rachel nods

Does your mom know?

I shake my head. Tears pop up from some hidden spring.
Damn. I sniff and wipe my eyes on my sleeve.

Did you get pregnant? Did he have a disease?

What's the name of that drug they give perverts so they can't get it up?

Diprosomething.

He should get it every morning in his orange juice. I went out with him to the movies—he tried to get his hands down my pants during the PREVIEWS!!

There's more. Different pens, different handwriting, conversations between some writers, arrows to longer paragraphs. It's better than taking out a billboard.

I feel like I can fly.

PRUNING

I wake the next morning, Saturday, to the sound of a chain saw, the noise biting right through my ears and splintering my plans of sleeping in. I peer out the window. The arborists, the tree guys Dad called to trim the oak's dead branches, stand at the base of the tree, one guy revving up the chain saw like it's a sports car, the other giving the tree the once-over. I go downstairs for breakfast.

Watching cartoons is out of the question. I make a cup of tea and join Dad and a group of neighborhood kids watching the show from the driveway. One arborist monkeys his way into the pale green canopy, then hauls up the chain saw (turned

off) at the end of a thick rope. He sets to work pruning the deadwood like a sculptor. "Brrrrr-rrrowww." The chain saw gnaws through the oak, branches crashing to the ground.

The air swirls with sawdust. Sap oozes from the open sores on the trunk. He is killing the tree. He'll only leave a stump. The tree is dying. There's nothing to do or say. We watch in silence as the tree crashes piece by piece to the damp ground.

The chain-saw murderer swings down with a grin. He doesn't even care. A little kid asks my father why that man is chopping down the tree.

Dad: "He's not chopping it down. He's saving it. Those branches were long dead from disease. All plants are like that. By cutting off the damage, you make it possible for the tree to grow again. You watch—by the end of summer, this tree will be the strongest on the block."

I hate it when my father pretends to know more than he does. He sells insurance. He is not a forest ranger, wise in the way of the woods. The arborist fires up the mulcher at the back of their truck. I've seen enough. I grab my bike and take off.

The first stop is the gas station, to pump up my tires. I can't remember the last time I rode. The morning is warm, a lazy, slow Saturday. The parking lot at the grocery store is full. A couple of softball games are being played behind the elementary school, but I don't stop to watch. I ride up the hill past Rachel's house, past the high school. The down side is a fast, easy coast. I dare myself to lift my hands off the handlebars.

As long as

Up and down, across and diagonal, I pedal my sore legs through the streets of a suburb mostly sleeping. Some late-night TVs flicker from bedroom windows. A few cars are parked in front of the grocery store. I imagine people mopping the floors, restacking loaves of bread. I coast by the houses of people I used to know: Heather,

don't want to hang out in my little hidy-hole anymore. I look behind me, half expecting to see a sniggering back-row guy who beaned me with an eraser. Nope—the back row is struggling to stay awake. It was definitely an idea that hit me. I don't feel like hiding anymore. A breeze from the open window blows my hair back and tickles my shoulders. This is the first day warm enough for a sleeveless shirt. Feels like summer.

After class, I trail behind Rachel. Andy is waiting for her. She won't even look at him. The kid from Portugal is now Rachel's numero uno. HA! Double HA! Serves you right, you scum. Kids stare at Andy, but nobody stops to talk. He follows Greta-Ingrid and Rachel down the hall. I am a few steps behind him. Greta-Ingrid spins around and tells Andy exactly what he should do to himself. Impressive. Her language skills have really improved this year. I'm ready to do a victory dance.

I head for my closet after school. I want to take the poster of Maya Angelou home, and I'd like to keep some of my tree pictures and my turkey-bone sculpture. The rest of the stuff can stay, as long as it doesn't have my name on it. Who knows, some other kids may need a safe place to run to next year.

Haven't been able to get rid of the smell. I leave the door cracked open a bit so I can breathe. It's hard to get the tree pictures off the walls without tearing them. The day is getting ~~hotter and there's no circulation~~ in here. I open the door wider—who's going to come by now? By this point in the year, teachers take off faster than students when the final bell rings. The only people left are a few teams scattered on the practice fields.

I don't know what to do with the comforter. It's really too ratty to take home. I should have gone to my locker first and gotten my backpack—I forgot about the books that are in here. I fold the comforter and set it on the floor, turn out the light, and head out the door for my locker. Somebody slams into my chest and knocks me back into the closet. The light flicks on and the door closeTw0.118 Tc(lef) Tj Tc(k) Tj1.474 Tw0.41j0 Tc(Tw

"You are one strange bitch, know that? A freak. I can't believe anyone listened to you." He grabs my wrists. I try to pull them back and he squeezes so tight it feels like my bones are splintering. He pins me against the closed door. Maya Angelou looks at me. She tells me to make some noise. I open my mouth and take a deep breath.

Beast: "You're not going to scream. You didn't scream before. You liked it. You're jealous that I took out your friend and not you. I think I know what you want."

His mouth is on my face. I twist my head. His lips are wet, his teeth knock against my cheekbone. I pull my arms again and he slams his body against mine. I have no legs. My heart wobbles. His teeth are on my neck. The only sound I can make is a whimper. He fumbles to hold both my wrists in one hand. He wants a free hand. I remember I remember. Metal hands, hot knife hands.

No.

A sound explodes from me.

"NNNOOO!!!"

I follow the sound, pushing off the wall, pushing Andy Evans off-balance, stumbling into the broken sink. He curses and turns, his fist coming, coming. An explosion in my head and blood in my mouth. He hit me. I scream, scream. Why aren't the walls falling? I'm screaming loud enough to make the whole school crumble. I grab for anything, my potpourri

bowl—I throw it at him, it bounces to the floor. My books. He swears again. The door is locked the door is locked. He grabs me, pulls me away from the

FINAL CUT

Mr. Freeman is refusing to hand his grades in on time. They should have been in four days before the end of school, but he didn't see the sense in that. So I'm staying after school on the very, very last day for one last try at getting my tree right.

Mr. Freeman is covering the grade wall with a mural. He hasn't touched the line with my name, but he eliminated everything else with a roller brush and fast-drying white paint. He hums as he mixes colors on his palette. He wants to paint a sunrise.

Summer-vacation voices bubble through the open window. School is nearly over. The hall echoes with slamming lockers and shrieks of "I'm gonna miss you—got my number?" I turn up the radio.

My tree is definitely breathing; little shallow breaths like it just shot up through the ground this morning. This one is not perfectly symmetrical. The bark is rough. I try to make it look as if initials had been carved in it a long time ago. One of the lower branches is sick. If this tree really lives someplace, that branch better drop soon, so it doesn't kill the whole thing. Roots knob out of the ground and the crown reaches for the sun, tall and healthy. The new growth is the best part.

Lilac flows through the open windows with a few lazy bees. I carve and Mr. Freeman mixes orange and red to get the right

shade of sunrise. Tires squeal out of the parking lot, another sober student farewell. I'm staring summer school in the face, so there's no real hurry. But I want to finish this tree.

A couple of seniors stroll in. Mr. Freeman hugs them carefully, either because of the paint on him or because teachers hugging students can make for big trouble. I shake my bangs down in front of my face and watch through my hair. They chat about New York City, where the girls are going to college. Mr. Freeman writes down some phone numbers and names of restaurants. He says he has plenty of friends in Manhattan and that they should meet for brunch some Sunday. The girls—the women—hop up and down and squeal, "I can't believe it's really happening!" One of them is Amber Cheerleader. Go figure.

The seniors look my way before they leave. One girl, not the cheerleader, nods her head, and says, "Way to go. I hope you're OK." With hours left in the school year, I have suddenly become popular. Thanks to the big mouths on the lacrosse team, everybody knew what happened before sundown. Mom took me to the hospital to stitch up the cut on my hand. When we got home, there was a message on the machine from Rachel. She wants me to call her.

My tree needs something. I walk over to the desk and take a piece of brown paper and a finger of chalk. Mr. Freeman talks about art galleries and I practice birds—little dashes of color on paper. It's awkward with the bandage on my hand, but I keep trying. I draw them without thinking—flight, flight, feather, wing. Water drips on the paper and the birds bloom in the light, their feathers expanding promise.

IT happened. There is no avoiding it, no forgetting. No running away, or flying, or burying, or hiding. Andy Evans raped me in August when I was drunk and too young to know what was happening. It wasn't my fault. He hurt me. It wasn't my fault. And I'm not going to let it kill me. I can grow.

I look at my homely sketch. It doesn't need anything. Even through the river in my eyes I can see that. It isn't perfect and that makes it just right.

The last bell rings. Mr. Freeman comes to my table.

Mr. Freeman: "Time's up, Melinda. Are you ready?"

I hand over the picture. He takes it in his hands and studies it. I sniff again and wipe my eyes on my arm. The bruises are vivid, but they will fade.

Mr. Freeman: "No crying in my studio. It ruins the supplies. Salt, you know, saline. Etches like acid." He sits on the stool next to me and hands back my tree. "You get an A+. You worked hard at this." He hands me the box of tissues. "You've been through a lot, haven't you?"

The tears dissolve the last block of ice in my throat. I feel the frozen stillness melt down through the inside of me, dripping shards of ice that vanish in a puddle of sunlight on the stained floor. Words float up.

Me: "Let me tell you about it."