

Novels by Laurie Halse Anderson

Speak

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Catalyst

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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 little latches won't move. A guy behind me unwraps his breakfast and shoots the wrapper at the back of my head. It bounces into my lap—a Ho-Ho.

We pass janitors painting over the sign in front of the high school. The school board has decided that "Merryweather

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 Trojan you don't, I guess. School colors will stay purple and gray. The board didn't want to spring for new uniforms.

Older students are allowed to roam until the bell, but ninth-graders are herded into the auditorium. We fall into clans: Jocks, Country Clubbers, Idiot Savants, Cheerleaders, Human Waste, Eurotrash, Future Fascists of America, Big Hair Chix, the Marthas, Suffering Artists, Thespians, Goths, Shredders. I am clanless. I wasted the last weeks of August watching bad cartoons. I didn't go to the mall, the lake, or the pool, or answer the phone. I have entered high school with the wrong hair, the wrong clothes, the wrong attitude. And I don't have anyone to sit with.

I am Outcast.

There is no point looking for my ex-friends. Our clan, the Plain Janes, has splintered and the pieces are being absorbed by rival factions. Nicole lounges with the Jocks, comparing scars from summer league sports. Ivy floats between the Suffering Artists on one side of the aisle and the Thespians on the other. She has enough personality to travel with two packs. Jessica has moved to Nevada. No real loss. She was mostly Ivy's friend, anyway.

The kids behind me laugh so loud I know they're laughing about me. I can't help myself. I turn around. It's Rachel, surrounded by a bunch of kids wearing clothes that most definitely did not come from the EastSide Mall. Rachel Bruin, my

ex-best friend. She stares at something above my left ear. Words climb up my throat. This was the girl who suffered through Brownies with me, who taught me how to swim, who understood about my parents, who didn't make fun of my bedroom. If there is anyone in the entire galaxy I am dying to tell what really happened, it's Rachel. My throat burns.

Her eyes meet mine for a second. "I hate you," she mouths silently. She turns her back to me and laughs with her friends. I bite my lip. I am not going to think about it. It was ugly, but it's over, and I'm not going to think about it. My lip bleeds a little. It tastes like metal. I need to sit down.

I stand in the center aisle of the auditorium, a wounded zebra in a *National Geographic* special, looking for someone, anyone, to sit next to. A predator approaches: gray jock buzz cut, whistle around a neck thicker than his head. Probably a social studies teacher, hired to coach a blood sport.

Mr. Neck: "Sit."

I grab a seat. Another wounded zebra turns and smiles at me. She's packing at least five grand worth of orthodontia, but has great shoes. "I'm Heather from Ohio," she says. "I'm new here. Are you?" I don't have time to answer. The lights dim and the indoctrination begins.

THE FIRST TEN LIES THEY TELL YOU IN HIGH SCHOOL

1. We are here to help you.
2. You will have enough time to get to your class before the bell rings.
3. The dress code will be enforced.

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 and speaking to the flag about our required reading. She wants us to write in our class journals every day, but promises not to read them. I write about how weird she is.

We have journals in social studies, too. The school must have gotten a good price on journals. We are studying American

history for the ninth time in nine years. Another review of map skills, one week of Native Americans, Christopher Columbus in time for Columbus Day, the Pilgrims in time for Thanksgiving. Every year they say we're going to get right up to the present, but we always get stuck in the Industrial Revolution. We got to World War I in seventh grade—who knew there had been a war with the whole world? We need more holidays to keep the social studies teachers on track.

My social studies teacher is Mr. Neck, the same guy who growled at me to sit down in the auditorium. He remembers me fondly. "I got my eye on you. Front row."

Nice seeing you again, too. I bet he suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. Vietnam or Iraq—one of those TV wars.

SPOTLIGHT

I find my locker after social studies. The lock sticks a little, but I open it. I dive into the stream of fourth-period lunch students and swim down the hall to the cafeteria.

I know enough not to bring lunch on the first day of high school. There is no way of telling what the acceptable fashion will be. Brown bags—humble testament to suburbia, or terminal geek gear? Insulated lunch bags—hip way to save the planet, or sign of an overinvolved mother? Buying is the only solution. And it gives me time to scan the cafeteria for a friendly face or an inconspicuous corner.

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 and let the lunch drones fill it. This eight-foot senior in front of me somehow gets three cheeseburgers, French fries, and two Ho-Hos without saying a word. Some sort of Morse code with his eyes, maybe. Must study this further. I follow the Basketball Pole into the cafeteria.

I see a few friends—people I used to think were my friends—but they look away. Think fast, think fast. There's that new girl, Heather, reading by the window. I could sit across from her. Or I could crawl behind a trash can. Or maybe I could dump my lunch straight into the trash and keep moving right on out the door.

The Basketball Pole waves to a table of friends. Of course. The basketball team. They all swear at him—a bizarre greeting practiced by athletic boys with zits. He smiles and throws a Ho-Ho. I try to scoot around him.

Thwap! A lump of potatoes and gravy hits me square in the center of my chest. All conversation stops as the entire lunchroom gawks, my face burning into their retinas. I will be forever known as "that girl who got nailed by potatoes the first day." The Basketball Pole apologizes and says something else, but four hundred people explode in laughter and I can't read lips. I ditch my tray and bolt for the door.

I motor so fast out of the lunchroom the track coach would draft me for varsity if he were around. But no, Mr. Neck has cafeteria duty. And Mr. Neck has no use for girls who can run

the one hundred in under ten seconds, unless they're willing to do it while holding on to a football.

Mr. Neck: "We meet again."

Me:

Would he listen to "I need to go home and change," or "Did you see what that bozo did"? Not a chance. I keep my mouth shut.

Mr. Neck: "Where do you think you're going?"

Me:

It is easier not to say anything. Shut your trap, button your lip, can it. All that crap you hear on TV about communication and expressing feelings is a lie. Nobody really wants to hear what you have to say.

Mr. Neck makes a note in his book. "I knew you were trouble the first time I saw you. I've taught here for twenty-four years and I can tell what's going on in a kid's head just by looking in their eyes. No more warnings. You just earned a demerit for wandering the halls without a pass."

SANCTUARY

Art follows lunch, like dream follows nightmare. The classroom is at the far end of the building and has long,

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, the walls plastered with sketches of tormented teenagers and fat puppies, the shelves crowded with clay pots. A radio plays my favorite station.

Mr. Freeman is ugly. Big old grasshopper body, like a stilt-walking circus guy. Nose like a credit card sunk between his eyes. But he smiles at us as we file into class.

He is hunched over a spinning pot, his hands muddy red. "Welcome to the only class that will teach you how to survive," he says. "Welcome to Art."

I sit at a table close to his desk. Ivy is in this class. She sits by the door. I keep staring at her, trying to make her look at me. That happens in movies—people can feel it when other people stare at them and they just have to turn around and say something. Either Ivy has a great force field, or my laser vision isn't very strong. She won't look back at me. I wish I could sit with her. She knows art.

Mr. Freeman turns off the wheel and grabs a piece of chalk without washing his hands. "SOUL," he writes on the board. The clay streaks the word like dried blood. "This is where you can find your soul, if you dare. Where you can touch that part of you that you've never dared look at before. Do not come here and ask me to show you how to draw a face. Ask me to help you find the wind."

I sneak a peek behind me. The eyebrow telegraph is flashing fast. This guy is weird. He must see it, he must know what we are thinking. He keeps on talking. He says we will graduate knowing how to read and write because we'll spend a million hours learning how to read and write. (I could argue that point.)

Mr. Freeman: "Why not spend that time on art: painting, sculpting, charcoal, pastel, oils? Are words or numbers more important than images? Who decided this? Does algebra move you to tears?" (Hands raise, thinking he wants answers.) "Can the plural possessive express the feelings in your heart? If you don't learn art now, you will never learn to breathe!!!"

There is more. For someone who questions the value of words, he sure uses a lot of them. I tune out for a while and come back when he holds up a huge globe that is missing half of the Northern Hemisphere. "Can anyone tell me what this is?" he asks. "A globe?" ventures a voice in the back. Mr. Freeman rolls his eyes. "Was it an expensive sculpture that some kid dropped and he had to pay for it out of his own money or they didn't let him graduate?" asks another.

Mr. Freeman sighs. "No imagination. What are you, thirteen? Fourteen? You've already let them beat your creativity out of you! This is an old globe I used to let my daughters kick around my studio when it was too wet to play outside. One day Jenny put her foot right through Texas, and the United States crumbled into the sea. And *voila*—an idea! This broken ball could be used to express such powerful visions—you could paint a picture of it with people fleeing from the hole,

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 the lab for computer-aided designs. But there's a catch—by the end of the year, you must figure out how to make your object say something, express an emotion, speak to every person who looks at it."

Some people groan. My stomach flutters. Can he really let us do this? It sounds like too much fun. He stops at my table. I plunge my hand into the bottom of the globe and fish out my paper. "Tree." Tree? It's too easy. I learned how to draw a tree in second grade. I reach in for another piece of paper. Mr. Freeman shakes his head. "Ah-ah-ah," he says. "You just chose your destiny, you can't change that."

He pulls a bucket of clay from under the pottery wheel, breaks off fist-sized balls, and tosses one to each of us. Then he turns up the radio and laughs. "Welcome to the journey."

ESPAÑOL

My Spanish teacher is going to try to get through the entire year without speaking English to us. This is both amusing and useful—makes it much easier to ignore her. She communicates through exaggerated gestures and playacting. It's like taking a class in charades. She says a sentence in Spanish and puts the back of her hand to her forehead. "You have a fever!" someone from class calls out. She shakes her head no, and repeats the gesture. "You feel faint!" No. She goes out to the hall, then bursts through the door, looking busy and distracted. She turns to us, acts surprised to see us, then does the bit with the back of the hand to the forehead. "You're lost!" "You're angry!" "You're in the wrong school!" "You're in the wrong country!" "You're on the wrong planet!"

She tries one more time and smacks herself so hard on the forehead she staggers a bit. Her forehead is as pink as her lipstick. The guesses continue. "You can't believe how many kids are in this class!" "You forgot how to speak Spanish!" "You have a migraine!" "You're going to have a migraine if we don't figure it out!"

In desperation, she writes a sentence in Spanish on the board: *Me sorprende que estoy tan cansada hoy*. No one knows what it says. We don't understand Spanish—that's why we're here. Finally, some brain gets out the Spanish-English dictionary. We spend the rest of the period trying to translate the sen-

tence. When the bell rings, we have gotten as far as "To exhaust the day to surprise."

HOME. WORK.

I make it through the first two weeks of school without a nuclear meltdown. Heather from Ohio sits with me at lunch and calls to talk about English homework. She can talk for hours. All I have to do is prop the phone against my ear and "uh-huh" occasionally while I surf the cable. Rachel and every other person I've known for nine years continue to ignore me. I'm getting bumped a lot in the halls. A few times my books were accidentally ripped from my arms and pitched to the floor. I try not to dwell on it. It has to go away eventually.

At first, Mom was pretty good about preparing dinners in the morning and sticking them in the fridge, but I knew it would end. I come home to a note that says, "Pizza. 555-4892. Small tip this time." Clipped to the note is a twenty-dollar bill. My family has a good system. We communicate with notes on the kitchen counter. I write when I need school supplies or a ride to the mall. They write what time they'll be home from work and if I should thaw anything. What else is there to say?

Mom is having staff problems again. My mother manages Efert's, a clothing store downtown. Her boss offered her the branch at the mall, but she didn't want it. I think she likes watching the reaction when she says she works in the city. "Aren't you afraid?" people ask. "I would never work there in

a million years." Mom loves doing the things that other people are afraid of. She could have been a snake handler.

But the downtown location makes it hard to find people to work for her. Daily shoplifters, bums peeing on the front door, and the occasional armed robbery discourage job seekers. Go figure. We are now two weeks into September and she's already thinking Christmas. She has plastic snowflakes and red-felt-wearing Santas on the brain. If she can't find enough employees for September, she'll be in deep doo-doo when the holiday season hits.

I order my dinner at 3:10 and eat it on the white couch. I don't know which parent was having seizures when they bought that couch. The trick to eating on it is to turn the messy side of the cushions up. The couch has two personalities: "Melinda inhaling pepperoni and mushroom" and "No one ever eats in the family room, no ma'am." I chow and watch TV until I hear Dad's Jeep in the driveway. Flip, flip, flip—cushions reversed to show their pretty white cheeks, then bolt upstairs. By the time Dad unlocks the door, everything looks the way he wants to see it, and I have vanished.

My room belongs to an alien. It is a postcard of who I was in fifth grade. I went through a demented phase when I thought that roses should cover everything and pink was a great color. It was all Rachel's fault. She begged her mom to let her do her room over, so we all ended up with new rooms. Nicole refused to put the stupid little skirt around her nightstand and Ivy had gone way over the top, as usual. Jessica did hers in a desert 'n' cowdudes theme. My room was stuck in the middle, a bit

stolen from everyone else. The only things that were really mine were my stuffed-rabbit collection from when I was a little kid and my canopy bed. No matter how much Nicole teased me, I wouldn't take the canopy down. I'm thinking about changing the rose wallpaper, but then Mom would get involved and Dad would measure the walls and they would argue about paint color. I don't know what I want it to look like, anyway.

Homework is not an option. My bed is sending out serious nap rays. I can't help myself. The fluffy pillows and warm comforter are more powerful than I am. I have no choice but to snuggle under the covers.

I hear Dad turn on the television. Clink, clink, clink—he drops ice cubes in a heavy-bottomed glass and pours in some booze. He opens the microwave—for the pizza, I guess—slams it closed, then beep-beeps the timer. I turn on my radio so he'll know I'm home. I won't take a real nap. I have this halfway place, a rest stop on the road to sleep, where I can stay for hours. I don't even need to close my eyes, just stay safe under the covers and breathe.

Dad turns up the volume on the TV. The news-team anchor-dude bellows, "Five dead in house fire! Young girl attacked! Teens suspected in gas station holdup!" I nibble on a scab on my lower lip. Dad hops from channel to channel, watching the same stories play over and over.

I watch myself in the mirror across the room. Ugh. My hair is completely hidden under the comforter. I look for the shapes

in my face. Could I put a face in my tree, like a dryad from Greek mythology? Two muddy-circle eyes under black-dash eyebrows, piggy-nose nostrils, and a chewed-up horror of a mouth. Definitely not a dryad face. I can't stop biting my lips. It looks like my mouth belongs to someone else, someone I don't even know.

I get out of bed and take down the mirror. I put it in the back of my closet, facing the wall.

OUR FEARLESS LEADER

I'm hiding in the bathroom, waiting for the coast to clear. I peek out the door. Principal Principal spots another errant student in the hall.

Principal Principal: "Where's your late pass, mister?"

Errant Student: "I'm on my way to get one now."

PP: "But you can't be in the hall without a pass."

ES: "I know, I'm so upset. That's why I need to hurry, so I can get a pass."

Principal Principal pauses with a look on his face like Daffy Duck's when Bugs is pulling a fast one.

PP: "Well, hurry up, then, and get that pass."

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.

FIZZ ED

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 team. She doesn't mind changing her clothes in public. She even changes bras, wearing one sports bra to regular class and another to gym class. Never blushes or turns around to hide herself, just changes her clothes. Must be a jock thing. If you're that strong, you don't care if people make comments about your boobs or rear end.

It's late September and we're starting our field hockey unit. Field hockey is a mud sport, played only on wet, cloudy days

when it feels like snow. Who dreamed up this one? Nicole is unstoppable at field hockey. She motors downfield so fast she creates a wake of flowing mud that washes over anyone who gets in her way. She does something with her wrist, then the ball is in the goal. She smiles and jogs back to the center circle.

Nicole can do anything that involves a ball and a whistle. Basketball, softball, lacrosse, football, soccer, rugby. Anything. And she makes it look easy. Boys watch her to learn how to play better. It doesn't hurt that she's cute. She chipped her tooth this past summer at some kind of jock camp. Makes her look even cuter.

The gym teachers have a special place in their hearts for Nicole. She shows Potential. They look at her and see future State Championships. Pay raises. One day she scored 35 goals before my team threatened to walk off the field. The gym teacher made her the referee. Not only did my team lose, but four girls went to the nurse with injuries. Nicole doesn't believe in the concept of fouling. She comes from the "play till death or maiming" school of athletics.

It it weren't for her attitude, it would be easier to deal with all this. The crappy locker I have, Heather geeking around me like a moth, cold mornings in the mud watching Nicole, **Warrior** Princess, listening to the coaches praise her—I could just accept it and move on. But Nicole is so friendly. She even talks **to** Heather from Ohio. She told Heather where to buy a mouth guard so her braces wouldn't cut up her lips if she got **lin** with a ball. Heather now wants to buy a sports bra. Nicole

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 low's it going." I try to put in my contact, and poke ins .(II III 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 to side to admire the black mess that looks like goose poop across her cheekbones] "*Pas mal.*"

She puts a candy cigarette between her lips. Rachelle wants desperately to smoke, but she has asthma. She has started a new Thing, unheard of in a ninth-grader. Candy cigarettes. The exchange students love it. Next thing you know, she'll be drinking black coffee and reading books without pictures.

An exchange student flushes and comes out of the stall. This one looks like a supermodel with a name like Greta or Ingrid. Is America the only country with dumpy teenagers? She says something foreign and Rachelle laughs. Right, like she understood

Me:

Rachelle blows a candy cigarette smoke ring at my face. Blows me off. I have been dropped like a hot Pop Tart on a cold kitchen floor. Rachelle and Greta-Ingrid glide out of the bath-

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 accessory. 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 question, 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 tell that no Right Person would set foot in there.

When we get to Heather's house, her mother meets us at the door. She wants to hear all about our day, how long I've lived in town, and asks little sideways questions about my parents, so she can figure out if I'm the kind of friend she wants for her daughter. I don't mind. I think it's nice that she cares.

We can't go in Heather's room because the decorators aren't finished. Armed with a bowl of orange popcorn and diet sodas, we retreat to the basement. The decorators finished that

first. You can hardly tell it's a basement. It's covered in carpeting nicer than we have in our living room. A monster TV glows in a corner, and there's a pool table and exercise equipment. It doesn't even smell like a basement.

Heather hops on the treadmill and resumes scheming. She isn't finished with her survey of Merryweather's social scene, but she thinks the International Club and the Select Chorus will be a good place to start. Maybe we can try out for the musical. I turn on the television and eat her popcorn.

Heather: "What should we do? What do you want to join? Maybe we should tutor at the elementary school." She increases the speed of the treadmill. "What about your friends from last year? Don't you know Nicole? But she does all those sports, doesn't she? I could never do sports. I fall down too easy. What do you want to do?"

Me: "Nothing. The clubs are stupid. Want some popcorn?"

She edges up the treadmill speed and breaks into a sprint. The treadmill is so loud I can hardly hear the television. Heather wags her finger at me. Hanging back is a common mistake most ninth-graders make, she says. I shouldn't be intimidated. I have to get involved, become a part of the school. That's what all the popular people do. She turns down the treadmill and wipes her brow with a thick towel that hangs off the side of the machine. After a few minutes of cooling down, she hops off. "A hundred calories," she crows. "Want to try?"

I shudder and hold out the popcorn bowl to her. She reaches right past me and takes a pen topped with a Merryweather

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 through the cafeteria, demanding my "Twenty Ways the Iroquois Survived in the Forest" homework. I pretend that I don't see him. I cut through the lunch line, loop around a couple making out by the door, and start down a hall. Mr. Neck stops to break up the PDA. I head for the Seniors' Wing.

I am in foreign territory where No Freshman Ffas Gone Before. I don't have time to worry about the looks I'm getting. I can hear Mr. Neck. I turn a corner, open a door, and step into darkness. I hold the doorknob, but Mr. Neck doesn't touch it. I hear his footsteps lumber down the hall. I feel the wall next to the door until I find a light switch. I haven't stumbled into a classroom; it is an old janitor's closet that smells like sour sponges.

The back wall has built-in shelves filled with dusty textbooks and a few bottles of bleach. A stained armchair and an old-fashioned desk peek from behind a collection of mops and brooms. A cracked mirror tilts over a sink littered with dead

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.

Heather moves to pat my pom-pom, but pulls her hand back. For a minute she looks like she'll defend me. No, no, she won't. It might interfere with her Plan. I close my eyes. Breathe breathe breathe. Don't say anything. Breathe.

The cheerleaders cartwheel into the gym and bellow. The crowd stomps the bleachers and roars back. I put my head in my hands and scream to let out the animal noise and some of that night. No one hears. They are all quite spirited.

The band staggers through a song and the cheerleaders bounce. The Blue Devil mascot earns a standing ovation by back-flipping right into the principal. Principal Principal smiles and awshucks us. It has only been six weeks since the beginning of school. He still has a sense of humor.

Finally, our own Devils hulk into the gym. The same boys who got detention in elementary school for beating the crap

out of people are now rewarded for it. They call it football. The coach introduces the team. I can't tell them apart. Coach Disaster holds the microphone too close to his lips, so all we hear is the sound of his spitting and breathing.

The girl behind me jams her knees into my back. They are as sharp as her fingernails. I inch forward in my seat and stare intently at the team. The girl with the arrested brother leans forward. As Heather shakes her pom-poms, the girl yanks my hair. I almost climb up the back of the kid in front of me. He turns and gives me a dirty look.

The coach finally hands the wet microphone back to the principal, who introduces us to our very own cheerleaders. They slide into synchronized splits and the crowd goes nuts. Our cheerleaders are much better at scoring than the football team is.

CHEERLEADERS

There are twelve of them: Jennie, Jen, Jenna, Ashley, Aubrey, Amber, Colleen, Kaitlin, Marcie, Donner, Blitzen, and Raven. Raven is the captain. Blondest of the blondes.

My parents didn't raise me to be religious. The closest we come to worship is the Trinity of Visa, MasterCard, and American Express. I think the Merryweather cheerleaders confuse me because I missed out on Sunday School. It has to be a miracle. There is no other explanation. How else could they sleep with the football team on Saturday night and be reincarnated as virginal goddesses on Monday? It's as if they

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! Please turn your attention to the bookshelves." We dutifully turn and stare. Books. This is art class. Why do we need books? "If you are stumped, you may take some time to study the masters." He pulls out an armful. "Kahlo, Monet, O'Keeffe. Pollock, Picasso, Dali. They did not complain about subject, they mined every subject for the root of its meaning. Of course, they didn't have a school board forcing them to paint with both hands tied behind their backs, they had patrons who understood the need to pay for basic things such as paper and paint..."

We groan. He's off on the school-board thing again. The school board has cut his supply budget, telling him to make do with the stuff left over from last year. No new paint, no extra paper. He'll rant for the rest of the period, forty-three minutes. The room is warm, filled with sun and paint fumes. Three kids fall dead asleep, eye twitches, snores, and everything.

I stay awake. I take out a page of notebook paper and a pen and doodle a tree, my second-grade version. Hopeless. I crumple it into a ball and take out another sheet. How hard can it be to put a tree on a piece of paper? Two vertical lines for the trunk. Maybe some thick branches, a bunch of thinner branches, and plenty of leaves to hide the mistakes. I draw a horizontal line for the ground and a daisy popping up next to the tree. Somehow I don't think Mr. Freeman is going to find much emotion in it. I don't find any. He started out as such a cool teacher. Is he going to make us thrash around with this ridiculous assignment without helping us?

ACTING

We get a day off for Columbus Day. I go to Heather's house. I wanted to sleep in, but Heather "really, really, really" wanted me to come over. There's nothing on television, anyway. Heather's mom acts very excited to see me. She makes us mugs of hot chocolate to take upstairs and tries to convince Heather to invite a whole group for a sleepover. "Maybe Mel-lie could bring some of her friends." I don't mention the possibility that Rachel would slit my throat on her new carpet. I show my teeth like a good girl. Her mother pats my cheek. I am getting better at smiling when people expect it.

Heather's room is finished and ready for viewing. It does not look like a fifth-grader's. Or a ninth-grader's. It looks like a commercial for vacuum cleaners, all fresh paint and vacuum-cleaner lines in the carpet. The lilac walls have a few artsy

prints on them. Her bookcase has glass doors. She has a television and a phone, and her homework is neatly laid out on her desk. Her closet is opened just a tad. I open it farther with my foot. All her clothes wait patiently on hangers, organized by type—skirts together, pants hanging by their cuffs, her sweaters stacked in plastic bags on shelves. The room screams Heather. Why can't I figure out how to do that? Not that I want my room screaming "Heather!"—that would be too creepy. But a little whisper of "Melinda" would be nice. I sit on the floor flipping through her CDs. Heather paints her nails on her desk blotter and blathers. She is determined to sign up for the musical. The Music Wingers are a hard clan to break into. Heather doesn't have talent or connections—I tell her she is wasting her time to even think of it. She thinks we should try out together. I think she has been breathing too much hairspray. My job is to nod or shake my head, to say "I know what you mean," when I don't, and "That is so unfair," when it isn't.

The musical would be easy for me. I am a good actor. I have a whole range of smiles. I use the shy, look-up-through-the-bangs smile for staff members, and the crinkly-eye smile with a quick shake of my head if a teacher asks me for an answer. If my parents want to know how school went, I flash my eyebrows upward and shrug my shoulders. When people point at me or whisper as I walk past, I wave to imaginary friends down the hall and hurry to meet them. If I drop out of high school, I could be a mime.

Heather asks why I don't think they would let us in the musical. I sip my hot chocolate. It burns the roof of my mouth.

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 know what to do. I try to soak up the nail polish, but I make the stain bigger. It looks like algae. Heather wipes her nose on the bear's plaid scarf. I slip out to the bathroom and come back with another box of tissues and a bottle of nail-polish remover.

Heather: "I am so sorry, Mellie. I can't believe I said those things to you. It's PMS, don't pay any attention to me. You have been so sweet to me. You are the only person I can trust." She blows her nose loudly and wipes her eyes on her

sleeve. "Look at you. You're just like my mom. She says 'No use crying, just get on with your life.' I know what we'll do. First, we'll work our way into a good group. We'll make them like us. By next year, the Music Wingers will be begging us to be in the musical."

It is the most hopeless idea I have ever heard, but I nod and pour the remover on the carpet. It lightens the polish to a bright vomit green and bleaches the carpet surrounding it. When Heather sees what I have done, she bursts into tears again, sobbing that it isn't my fault. My stomach is killing me. Her room isn't big enough for this much emotion. I leave without saying goodbye.

DINNER THEATER

The Parents are making threatening noises, turning dinner into performance art, with Dad doing his Arnold Schwarzenegger imitation and Mom playing Glenn Close in one of her psycho roles. I am the Victim.

Mom: [creepy smile] "Thought you could put one over on us, did you, Melinda? Big high school student now, don't need to show your homework to your parents, don't need to show any failing test grades?"

Dad: [Bangs table, silverware jumps] "Cut the crap. She knows what's up. The interim reports came today. Listen to me, young lady. I'm only going to say this once. You get those