

Trojans  
Devils  
Wombats  
Hornets

## 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-mâché 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

300-watt bulb when it's time to get up. Either that or a rooster.

When I realize how late it is, I decide not to rush. Why bother? Mom comes downstairs and I'm reading the funnies and eating oatmeal.

Mom: "You missed the bus again."

I nod.

Mom: "You expect me to drive you again."

Another nod.

Mom: "You'll need boots. It's a long walk and it snowed again last night. I'm already late."

That is unexpected, but not harsh. The walk isn't that bad—it's not like she made me hike ten miles through a snowstorm uphill in both directions or anything. The streets are quiet and pretty. The snow covers yesterday's slush and settles on the rooftops like powdered sugar on a gingerbread town.

By the time I get to Fayette's, the town bakery, I'm hungry again. Fayette's makes wicked good jelly doughnuts and I have lunch money in my pocket. I decide to buy two doughnuts and call it brunch.

I cross the parking lot and IT comes out the door. Andy Evans with a raspberry-dripping jelly doughnut in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. I stop on a frozen puddle. Maybe he

the proverbial  
grandpa story

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won't notice me if I stand still. That's how rabbits survive; they freeze in the presence of predators.

He sets the coffee on top of his car and fumbles in his pocket for the keys. Very, very adult, this coffee/car-keys/cut-school guy. He drops the keys and swears. He isn't going to notice me. I'm not here—he can't see me standing here in my purple marshmallow jacket.

But of course my luck with this guy sucks. So he turns his head and sees me. And wolfsmiles, showing oh granny what big teeth you have.

He steps toward me, holding out the doughnut. "Want a bite?" he asks.

BunnyRabbit bolts, leaving fast tracks in the snow. Getaway getaway getaway. Why didn't I run like this before when I was a one-piece talking girl?

Running makes me feel like I am eleven years old and fast. I burn a strip up the sidewalk, melting snow and ice three feet on either side. When I stop, a brand-new thought explodes in my head:

Why go to school?

### ESCAPE

The first hour of blowing off school is great. No one to tell me what to do, what to read, what to say. It's like living in an

H-M DIRECT

MTV video—not with the stupid costumes, but wearing that butt-strutting, I-do-what-I-want additood.

I wander down Main Street. Beauty parlor, 7-Eleven, bank, card store. The rotating bank sign says it is 22 degrees. I wander up the other side. Appliance store, hardware store, parking lot, grocery store. My insides are cold from breathing in frozen air. I can feel the hairs in my nose crackle. My strut slows to a foot-dragging schlump. I even think about trudging uphill to school. At least it's heated.

I bet kids in Arizona enjoy playing hooky more than kids trapped in Central New York. No slush. No yellow snow.

I'm saved by a Centro bus. It coughs and rumbles and spits out two old women in front of the grocery store. I climb on. Destination: The Mall.

You never think about the mall being closed. It's always supposed to be there, like milk in the refrigerator or God. But it is just opening when I get off the bus. Store managers juggle key rings and extra-large coffees, then the cage gates fly up in the air. Lights wink on, the fountains jump, music plays behind the giant ferns, and the mall is open.

White-haired grandmas and grandpops powerwalk squeak-squeak, going so fast they don't even look at the window displays. I hunt spring fashions—nothing that fit last year fits now. How can I shop with Mom if I don't want to talk to her? She might love it—no arguing that way. But then I'd have to wear the clothes she picked out. Conundrum—a three-point vocab word.