

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 wastecase. 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 downshifts⁷ 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