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*My first morning of school, I was scared. I had no idea what would result, who would be my subjects of study. Suddenly it didn't matter that I'd been writing about adolescent issues for years. This was different. I felt like a kid myself, nervous, wondering if I'd fit in, be able to pull it off. I wasn't even sure what to wear—a professional-looking pants suit, blue jeans like the kids, something arty like a writer. I decided on chinos and a black T-shirt with funky jewelry—a combination of all three. I grabbed my briefcase and ran out the door, afraid to be late my first day.*

*I walked into Langston Hughes Middle School along with busloads of students. Entering the doors, I was assaulted by a wall of sound and activity. It was madness: kids whizzing past me, teachers helplessly trying to slow them down, noisy caverns between the lockers bellowing with voices. I spent the morning going to classes, my map of the school clutched in my hand as I struggled to get to the rooms on time.*

*At lunchtime I switched to South Lakes High School. What a relief to be out in the fresh air walking from one school to the other! The break was too short. Inside South Lakes the inhabitants were larger, the male voices deeper—all making me feel smaller. I got hopelessly lost trying to find my way around. It was bigger and even more confusing than Hughes.*

*For a few weeks I was overwhelmed. This wasn't a mere classroom*

visit or parent-teacher meeting like I was used to—stay for a short period of time and leave. Waking up and going to school for an entire school day, day after day, was exhausting. Like an explorer from the courts of Europe entering the wilds of the New World, I experienced culture shock. My head swam in the swarms of young people, the mass of color, style, activity, noise, posturing, movement in so many directions that it often made me want to flee to the solitary quiet and control of my office. Even in an orderly classroom or assembly, the variety of kids and styles, the buzz of adolescent energy felt impossible to grab, let alone decipher and explain. I had to learn to be patient, to suffer the self-consciousness and isolation, to resist the urge to run and bond with the adults. I tried to focus on the individuals in the throng that swirled around me each day. I was in the middle of a story not yet revealed. I had to stick it out believing that eventually my vision would clear and I would be able to really see and connect with this alien world.

So it went for weeks. Each day I would check in at the school main office and pick up the requisite Visitor sticker. I might as well have been wearing a cap that said "I'm an Outsider. Stare at me!" I didn't work in the schools, I seemed to be everywhere rather than in one place, so both teachers and kids wanted to know what I was doing there all the time. It was so uncomfortable at the beginning. I purposely had no game plan. I wanted my direction to emerge from the situation.

Sometimes kids would ask me what I was doing there but then they wouldn't hang around for a long explanation. Kids I already knew might say hi but not stop and talk. As stupid as it sounds, I'd feel a little hurt. But I was a stranger in the middle of the adolescent tribe. I knew it would take time to earn their respect. By the time the final bell rang those first days, I would have the most splitting headache. Sometimes, especially that first month, I wished I could be back at Forest Edge Elementary School where I had begun my research the spring before. There I was received warmly, I knew my place. Now I was sounding like a brand-new seventh grader myself.

I was also uncomfortable finding myself revisiting my own feelings about school, emotions that seldom surface in my usual role as a mother at a PTA meeting or Open House. I had to deal with those old sensations of feeling caged in middle school, the rawness of everything about it. In the high school I found myself wanting to share my old excitement about learning, which too often seemed ab-

sent. Sometimes I just wanted to put down my head and doze in classes so boring and even stupid that I couldn't keep my eyes open. I tried taking a pop quiz with the kids and recalled the same cold fear of being unprepared. I found myself resentful of the way some teachers treated their students with disrespect. I became mesmerized all over again with the way school clocks always jump backwards before moving forward.

Little by little things changed. I took over classes and talked about writing. The kids perked up. Most kids found it hard to believe that I was willing to take so much time with them. They began to understand that my constant presence was me learning about them, not making judgments. One told another I was an okay person. They could talk to me and I'd listen. We started on neutral ground, talking about school.

In Part One I am observer, stepping inside their world with an idea and an intention that would hinge on relationships that as yet did not exist. Chapters 1 through 6 are a combination of what I saw and what my newly identified characters said about it. I didn't know the kids well, nor did they know me. We were getting acquainted. They liked my asking them to talk about school from their perspective. What matters to them, bothers them, and touches them are often surprising. I observed the visceral fears Chris and his classmates had about middle school, and Jessica's total annoyance with it. Brendon, Courtney, and Charles's unique experiences of the same grade quickly separated the horde of students into individuals. The ethics seminar Jonathan attended not only highlighted this generation's view of ethics but also illustrated the reverberations of his Vision Quest in his daily life. Ann and Joan's relationship to the school paper and to each other hinted at much bigger stories about their lives that I was still in the dark about. Their experiences in journalism class also revealed the magic chemistry of a good teacher in kids' lives.

Certain aspects of school struck me too. I was amazed at the significance of the leap from sixth to seventh grade, how out-of-sync middle school seemed to be with early adolescent needs. My three high school freshmen revealed the emptiness of old traditions and the power of the new adolescent subculture. I was struck by the newspaper as an expression of today's adolescent world and the insights it could give into their spin on the big issues.

This first part of the book begins the journey into the world of

*today's kids by stepping inside the schools, domains designed by and theoretically under the control of adults for the education of a nation's children. Inside, they are interactive arenas where education often takes second place to the personal dramas of growing up played out against the backdrop of all the issues of modern society.*

*The saga begins in sixth grade.*

*On the Brink*

In a cozy rambler set on a heavily treed lot on a quiet cul de sac, an alarm clock rings and eleven-year-old Chris Hughes rolls out of bed almost fully dressed. It is a trick he came up with the year before to save time. He showers at night and puts on his shirt and underwear for the next day. If it were cold, he'd put his pants on too. The hardest part is keeping his head straight on the pillow when he lies down so that his hair won't dry weirdly. If it does, he has to wet it under the faucet in the morning. His father thinks this is hilarious and teases him when he comes in to kiss him good night. In fact, his father gives him a hard time about his crew cut. But Chris has grown up hating his naturally curly hair. As soon as he had a choice, he'd had those curls shorn and now he watches for the little turning over of the ends that means it is time for a new buzz cut.

Chris is a no-nonsense young man. He does his homework right after he comes home from school. He makes sure his mom or dad signs any forms from school immediately. He packs his backpack at night and lays it on the floor by his bed. In the morning, his mom always has the same lunch, packed in a brown paper bag, waiting on the kitchen table: smooth peanut butter and grape jelly on wheat bread, a boxed drink, a small bag of raisins, and dessert. He likes things that way. Dependable.

Seven-thirty, right on the button, he walks through the kitchen

door wearing his favorite short-sleeved Buffalo Bills T-shirt (which, in the style of the season, hangs down to his knees), gray sweatpants, white Reebok pump basketball shoes worn permanently untied (although, unlike many kids, he actually leaves the laces in them) over scrunched white tube socks. Short-sleeved shirts worn year-round are de rigueur for a fashionable sixth-grade boy, and Chris has a collection reflecting all the major sports. He stops to pet the dogs now jumping up and down to get his attention, and absentmindedly hugs his mom good morning. She's in her usual seat with her customary cup of coffee. Most days he likes this private time with his mom after his brother Jim has left for high school. It is a comforting routine even when they hardly talk. But not today.

He'd like to tell his mom he isn't hungry, but then he'd have to hear the breakfast-is-the-most-important-meal-of-the-day lecture. So he rummages through the cereal cabinet and spreads the thinnest possible layer of Crispy Wheats and Raisins in the bottom of his bowl, splashes in some milk, pours himself a glass of orange juice, and sits down at the table hardly paying any attention to his favorite morning rituals: watching G.I. Joe cartoons and reading the sports section of *The Washington Post*.

His blue eyes stare into space as he pushes his cereal around. He thinks he has a stomachache, he tells his mom. She knows what this is about: today his sixth-grade class is visiting Langston Hughes Middle School.

It's just a visit, he tells himself. It isn't like he is going to stay there. But who's he kidding? The Real Thing—seventh grade—will happen soon enough.

He just realized the other day that he's spent his whole life at Forest Edge Elementary. He could walk around it in his sleep he'd been there so long. The teachers are nice, and recess is always fun.

It is the best being in sixth grade. You have all the power. He can look at the little kids and realize how grown-up he's become. Chris, a "school patrol" since fourth grade, is now a "bus patrol," which is "the coolest because you can sort of arrest people" if they don't follow the rules. In fact, with his friends Brad, Tony, Jeff, Gene, and a few others all volunteering for this position, there are almost as many enforcement officials on Chris's bus as riders. He has a great bunch of friends, most of whom he's known forever. Even if they aren't in each other's classes each year, they always get together at lunch and on the playground. They are wildly competitive in the

classroom and on the playing field, all striving for excellence. They have challenged each other in soccer, football, and basketball since they were little boys. They try to write longer stories than each other, get more As, win more awards, but all in good humor. They've competed on Atari, Nintendo, and now Sega Genesis. That's how long they've been friends. Chris looks forward to meeting new people—but what if he gets into classes without any of his old buddies?

The panic is rising. He has been told tales of Sevey-Bip Day, a one-day free-for-all in which the eighth graders hit the seventh graders at will in a sort of middle school initiation rite. Seventh graders he knows this year have already been giving ominous warnings. His mom tries to reassure him that the event will be forbidden by the school administration. But parents don't know what happens in the school. The kids do it, he has heard, when teachers are not looking.

His teachers keep making a big deal about how his class is the first to have "middle school" within the elementary school. The sixth graders have been moved to an isolated corner of Forest Edge so that they feel a bit separate from the younger kids. It's set up in three homerooms, and the classes move among the teachers for science, social studies, math, and language arts. Volunteers have come into the school to allow the students brief forays into electives like photography, computers, and creative writing, although this part fizzled when not enough volunteers could be found. Forest Edge, like schools everywhere, has found that the always dependable stream of volunteers has slowed to a trickle as most parents work, and other demands take precedence.

Chris doesn't know it, but his class represents the leading edge of a nationwide movement to restructure the education of early adolescents, which was first outlined in *Turning Points*, the study by the Carnegie Council for Adolescent Development. The idea is that a team of teachers, teaching their specific subjects, will have shared responsibility for a group of youngsters, and that this will allow ongoing communication among the teachers, collaborative teaching projects, and a community feeling that has been missing in anonymous junior high schools. "Junior high" is out and "middle school" is in, in recognition that early adolescence is a particularly vulnerable time for developing at-risk behaviors, and that youngsters need greater support and nurturing than junior high schools traditionally have given them.

Chris's class was one of the first in Fairfax County to institute the



change that will combine sixth through eighth grades in separate middle schools over a period of several years. The principal of Forest Edge, Frank Bensinger, is impressed. "We found that with the middle school model, discipline went down a ton," he says. "It made an incredible difference because in sixth grade, kids' eyes are beginning to open up. They are beginning to look at that movement out of the neighborhood as a grown-up thing. There was an elevation of self-esteem—'We are not being looked at as little kids'—and the school was recognizing that. The adults knew they were only changing classes in a tiny little sixth-grade area, but that little piece made the kids feel bigger. We decided to let them all go to lunch at the same time and you would have thought we set them free!"

Yeah, yeah, yeah, thinks Chris. He'd heard the middle school spiel. It was definitely cool at Forest Edge. But who are they kidding? Next year is Big Time.

At 8:15, Chris leaves his house to wait for the bus. It is so dumb to have to ride to school when he lives less than a quarter mile away. In fact, for most of his years at Forest Edge he walked. Reston, designed with pedestrians in mind, links each elementary school to the surrounding neighborhood by a labyrinth of paths and underpasses that keep walkers off the main intersections. On the way to Forest Edge, Chris used to stroll along a small creek and through a wooded area adjacent to the school. A kid could daydream on such walks, crunch leaves in the fall, stomp footprints in the snow, watch bugs. If your best friend lived nearby, you could share morning secrets. Often big brothers and sisters were seen with younger siblings in tow. Now only those across the street from the school walk daily, and for the rest, the battalion of county school buses, the vans from child care centers, and a growing fleet of parents' minivans safely deliver the children of Reston to their respective schools. This is one of the subtle changes eroding this family-oriented community. The buses for elementary school kids living less than one mile from the school had been added because of some "incidents"—nothing horrible, but definitely frightening for young children intimidated by older kids out earlier from the middle and high schools, or by strangers on paths in the mornings. The official explanation was that it was just as easy for buses traveling back to school to pick up more kids.

When his brothers were little, Chris's mom and dad thought nothing about their walking to school alone. Not only did it give the boys a great feeling of being on their own, but it also harkened back

to the parents' memories of growing up—the walk to school, the bike ride to the candy store, an afternoon movie alone with friends. In those times, there was a cadence to the process of growing up, a socially agreed-upon sequence of age-appropriate behaviors that have now been replaced by a developmental free-for-all with great unsupervised leaps of freedom counterpoised with tight new restraints.

In a jolting generational flip-flop, the fabric of growing up has been altered. It is no longer a matter of parents recalling, "When I was your age . . ." Instead, a compressed history is lived out within one set of siblings, where one brother shakes his head in disbelief at the changes affecting the life of another only a few years younger. Not that Chris and his peers recognize anything different. This is, after all, their "normal" world. They take for granted the scene of young teens smoking and drinking in the woods after school. They shrug with an air of resignation when they hear that the weekly movies shown at neighborhood pools in the summer are canceled because of rowdy behavior by teens. They do not seem to notice that the underpass near school, once decorated by Chris's older brother's day camp group with brightly colored dinosaur murals, is now desecrated with gang graffiti. Above the words I LOVE JEN D. are spray-painted X-PLICIT CRIPZ and SUCK MY DICK.

Chris remembers his brothers having lots of friends around, but accepts the fact that even though his mom and dad work at home, he cannot easily go to many of his friends' houses after school because they are alone, and they can't come to his house because they must care for younger siblings. The heady freedom to play in groups after school is now curtailed as parents tell their latchkey kids to stay inside until they come home from work. So even though Chris can go outside to play, even though his folks could drive him anywhere, he often gets stuck alone in front of the television, just as his friends are glued to theirs.

The school has changed too, as have many others in Fairfax County. Forest Edge is fighting for funds as Fairfax County becomes increasingly the home of families without children. Such voters make the passage of school bonds more difficult, precisely at the same time that more immigrants, often with large families, are moving into the area. The D.C. suburbs have always been cosmopolitan, easily incorporating many cultures. But the immigration stream is less from the educated middle class and more from the poor fleeing areas affected by war and political turmoil, people who have received little or no

schooling in their native lands. Between 1987 and the present, the English as a Second Language program has more than doubled to accommodate immigrants from over 150 countries representing 75 languages.

Forest Edge, built in 1969 as a school on the leading edge of innovation, illustrates the wild swings of educational theory within a brief span of a generation: the elementary school lives of the Hughes children. Oldest brother Mark began kindergarten in 1976 in a setting of open classrooms; Jim barely got there and the walls went back up; and by the time Chris arrived in 1985, there was a hard-line return to basic, more traditional education. In Mark and Jim's days, there were no "Drug Free Zone" signs, no visitor passes, no permanent necklace IDs for personnel, no walkie talkies. "Self-esteem" was the buzzword, not "literacy testing."

Things are tougher at school for Chris and his peers. Yet at the same time a hard line is instituted on elevating standards to compete in the age of technology, the school faces erosion from within—frustrated teachers who are not compensated adequately, overworked parents who lack time to be involved in their children's education, and a host of cultural problems now played out in the classroom. By Chris's sixth-grade year, Forest Edge had become a school of 57 percent ESL students—a proportion taxing the efforts of classroom teachers and special services in a time of decreasing funds. All this in what is considered one of the nation's finest school systems.

As the bright red front doors of the school swing open on this cool, gray March morning in 1992, the feeling is sunny. The high-pitched sounds of children's voices fill the air. There are hugs and kisses from parents in jogging suits and business suits who drop their youngsters at the door. Mr. Bensinger is there to dispense kind personal words to students. A comforting throwback, he is everyone's favorite principal, portly and bespectacled, in rumpled suit and tie slightly askew. A genuinely warm smile lifts his whisk-broom mustache. In a testament to how schoolchildren are part of their parents' commuter society, a "Kiss and Ride" sign directs parents to the spot for dropping off their kids. This being a year or two before teacher molestation hit the media, the teachers of Forest Edge often give a hug or squeeze hello, something needed and always appreciated by the children.

Inside the school the walls are lined everywhere with art, poetry, and other student work—a colorful, explosive celebration of the

unique expression of each child. Now Black History Month has been joined by celebration of Hispanic, Asian, and Indian cultures, highlighted by an International Celebration devoted to the cuisine and culture of the international community. A brightly colored mural along the main hall shows children of many races and nationalities, a reminder that the children are part of a global village. The melting pot has new meaning for this generation; their life stories, woven with war, famine, injustice, loss, separate them, yet merge them in new ways. The schools are where it is happening, and Chris and his friends are at the vanguard of multicultural harmony, looking like a Benetton advertisement with an Anglo, a biracial American, a Vietnamese, a Chinese, an African American, an African, and a Latino bonded closely. The beauty of these friendships is the naturalness of boys growing up together sharing more similarities than differences, so that race becomes essentially irrelevant. But the change within just a few years is striking.

The morning routines continue. There is a long line at the school store, right before the morning bell rings, with youngsters buying "cool pencils" of football teams, graphic designs in metallic and fluorescent colors, as well as other supplies. Children scurry into the cafeteria to hang out with friends before classes begin.

But none of this matters to Chris and the other sixth graders as they await the moment when they will board the waiting buses to Langston Hughes. Even though it is only March, today they begin their journey to the future.

Mary Frances Musgrave, director of guidance at Langston Hughes, is waiting for the Forest Edge students as the buses pull up. Dressed impeccably in a two-piece pink knit suit, she is a tall, soft-spoken woman with a smile that puts everybody immediately at ease. There is something comforting about her conservative pastel look that conjures up visions of *Leave It to Beaver*, familiar to the kids through reruns. Her blond hair, soft white skin, and clear-rimmed glasses complete the fifties look. She greets the students warmly, as she will welcome, over the next two weeks, the students of the other six elementary schools in Reston that feed into Hughes.

The usually boisterous sixth graders walk quietly, almost deferentially, as they file into the Little Theater, a small windowless auditorium with carpeted steps that serve as bleacher seats. A half hour ago they felt big and grown-up, but now sitting in this gigantic strange school they feel like ants. As they filed in there were snickers among

the seventh and eighth graders near the door—just loud enough so the teachers didn't hear the sixth graders being called "the Little People."

The welcomes and introductions over, Musgrave gets right to the first Big Question on everybody's mind: "In P.E. classes showers are not required. If you want to take one, there are six private stalls with curtains. Don't give a second thought to people staring at you. There are only four minutes between activities and when the bell rings, everyone is in a hurry." A hundred tense faces begin to relax.

More information than can possibly be processed is delivered in rapid-fire order: School begins at 7:30 A.M. and ends at 2:30 P.M. There are seven periods. Kids are organized in teams of about 125 students who share English, social studies, science, and math teachers, resource teachers, and a counselor. They can choose two electives per semester, like art, journalism, creative writing, chorus, or band. The audience begins to squirm and whisper.

Then the bell rings for change of periods. They can't see anything in this windowless room, but the noise is incredible. Approximately 1,100 adolescents—the entire school—simultaneously erupt from their classrooms and burst forth with crashing, slamming, banging, rushing, laughing sounds, a rolling river of noise that washes around them everywhere. Then, when the bell rings for the next class, it ceases abruptly. Wow. That is something, Chris thinks to himself.

Picking up after the disruption, Musgrave tells them there are twelve hundred lockers in the main lobby of the school, and they will each be assigned their own. The audience gasps at the number. Musgrave looks at them with exaggerated seriousness and tells them they must "never tell anybody their locker combination. Not even your parents." It is as if the importance of lockers and secrecy cannot be emphasized enough. There has been a lot of stealing, she is sorry to say. You must make sure you tuck your entire jacket into the locker so nobody can pull it out. Don't ever bring anything valuable to school.

"Every nine weeks we have locker clean-outs," Musgrave goes on. "You're allowed to tape pictures on your locker, get a mirror, make it uniquely yours—as long as there is nothing with drug or alcohol connotations." This is noted by the sixth graders, who are still proud to wear their "Just Say No" club shirts and who have been indoctrinated with antidrug messages for years. She informs them there will be a locker dropped off in their school in June so they can practice

opening the lock, and encourages them to practice with a combination lock over the summer. And then a final ominous note: The lockers assigned to them are theirs and the adults of the school "won't search them without a good reason."

The locker etiquette is interesting but not the main thing on everybody's mind. When a panel of seventh graders, formerly Forest Edge students, comes in to answer questions, the very first is predictable: "Has anyone ever been locked in a locker?" Musgrave turns the question over to a young man who lets his listeners know that it is impossible, "because there is a shelf and no seventh grader is that small." But then he points out, much to the chagrin of teachers, that kids have sometimes been stuffed in trash cans by other kids.

The sixth graders come to life when able to chat with their peers, now veterans of this mysterious place. They find out: "Art is cool because you are allowed to eat stuff and listen to music." "Innovations and Inventions" (which their parents knew as shop) and "Teen Living" (which parents knew as home economics) are also good choices, because "You can make neat things and talk to friends." They are warned they have no time to hang out between classes and "mousse their hair," that they need to develop strategies so they don't need to return to their lockers between every period. If they are late too often, they can get detention or even fail a class. One girl says, "When I first came to this school I thought I would die because the rules were so strict," but you get used to them. They learn that the acronym for in-school suspension is TLC (Temporary Learning Center, a small room where you sit with a monitor and do your work); that detention is the next worst thing and can take place during lunch or after school; and expulsion is being thrown out of school for "really being bad, like having a weapon or something." There is no place to "skip" except the bathroom. These are all new dimensions of school entirely—skipping, detention, fights, stuffing students in trash cans. It is as if some mysterious evil comes over regular kids, something bad happens to you in middle school. But nobody asks about this. Finally, someone brings up showers again. The answer is unequivocal: "Nobody is embarrassed about PE because nobody ever takes showers."

They finally get a tour of the school, which Musgrave had described as "the capital beltway." Built on one floor with classrooms in a circle, with the hub shared by lockers smack in the middle, a gymnasium on one side, and the media/resource center on the other, it is

totally confusing. The sixth graders are so overwhelmed that they are either stunned or slaphappy. They wander in and out of classrooms with what seem like thousands of Big Kids all staring and joking at their expense in a wildly complicated maze of hallways that go around and around.

Orientation is disorienting. For sixth graders used to their little nurturing world, where they enjoyed seniority for several years, Hughes feels big, anonymous, and confusing and hints of dangers. When asked what he remembered from this event, Chris recalled: "I noticed the gym. That's what I liked. It had a rubber floor and everybody started jumping up and down. I noticed the locker rooms were pretty dirty." The rest was overload.

Spring is filled with thoughts of endings and the meaning of next year. After spring break, teachers notice a change, an increase in "attitude," a growing interest in the opposite sex, but especially an exuberance and boisterousness that becomes harder to contain. There are wildly competitive kick ball tournaments during recess. One day in early June, Mrs. Downes's room serves as a portrait of early adolescence: one table is surrounded by three boys and three girls—two of the girls sitting provocatively with their legs crossed, and the boys casually macho—all absorbed in conversation and giggles. In the middle of the room, several boys and girls concentrate on wiring a working bell. Others combine in same-sex groups, drawing, talking, or playing board games. At the mirror hung in a corner of the room, Chris, Gene, and his friend Mike are making faces and trying to outdo each other in ugly mugs. The beauty of the classroom setup is that it offers the youngsters a variety of comfortable places to be themselves.

The pace picks up as the school year comes closer to an end. Class selections are made for next year. Plans are worked out for an end-of-year celebration. The kids, hard to contain, have developed, according to their teachers, "a short-timers' attitude."

In early June, Langston Hughes principal Ed Thacker comes for a visit, bringing an actual locker. In a final testament to elementary school, the youngsters sit on the floor and in small chairs in the school library to listen to him. Much is reiteration of the spring visit to Hughes, only this time Chris gets up the courage to ask his question: "Even though you say we can't get stuck in a locker, if we were to, how would we get out?" He is simply told it won't happen—which does not make him very happy.

The kids are informed there will be no Sevey-Bip Day, that their

lockers are their "home away from home" and if they forget their locker combination their second-period teacher will have it. Mr. Thacker emphasizes that it is "okay to get good grades" and they should not be scared of anything because there are always receptive adults to help them. But the same unsettling message comes through again when he relays the three cardinal rules for keeping safe and out of trouble in middle school:

1. Control your hands (keep them to yourself);
2. Control your feet—no running, no tripping, and get to class on time;
3. Control your mouth—don't say "ugly things," because they just feed the rumor mill.

This talk is foreign and unsettling to kids like Chris and his friends, who have gone through elementary school competing for excellence. It is not lost on them that this authority figure, the principal of their new school, feels it necessary to tell them it is okay to get good grades, and that they need to control themselves. "It's like in elementary school you are special but in middle school, you'd better behave," says Chris. Again, it registers in the minds of the listeners that there are dangers ahead, not only around them but *in* them.

Finally, in a confusing about-face, a quick change of tone that will plague the world of adolescents from hence forward, Thacker warmly concludes: "You are not going to be Forest Edge Eagles anymore. You are going to be Hughes Panthers for a few years." There is silence as this sinks in. Then smiles all around.

This seventh-grade business has unleashed a roller coaster of emotions in the sixth graders. A sense of big changes impending has them excited, confused, and scared. They share class schedules with friends, hoping to have a buddy to share the adventure. They wonder if they will be on the same bus route, if they will still be friends if on different teams. They are less worried about the routine of changing classes because of the "middle school" within Forest Edge this year. They have learned what it is like to experience different teaching styles. But what is clear is that their academic confidence doesn't touch the notion that changing schools symbolizes the true beginning of adolescence: "Like when you are in elementary school people think you are a kid. But when you get to seventh grade they think you are an adolescent," says one boy.



Back in their classrooms, the sixth graders are invited to speak openly about how they imagine seventh grade. In a written survey the week before, the question "In seventh grade I will . . ." had elicited a consistent reply among over one hundred kids: "feel like I'm growing up," "be a young adult," "feel more like a teenager," "have more privileges." They grasp for the words to explain the meaning: they imagine feeling more pressure, more responsibility as life and school get more serious. In the peer setting they worry about having "less power," as Chris's friend Jeff explains, "because we're the smaller bunch and they are the bigger bunch." But they also see a quantum leap in freedom represented by getting to choose their electives, deciding to stay after school if they want and taking the late bus home, going to their locker or not, deciding their own bed-times, staying out with friends as late as they want to. In their minds, these choices are all equivalent.

The girls seem to have a great deal to say on social life. "Seventh graders should get to go places without their parents. If their parents say they are too young, we just say they should trust us." That's right, says this girl's friend. "They should see how it goes the first time and if the kids are irresponsible or something happens, then maybe they have to wait until eighth grade." The girls think they should be able to go to the mall, to 7-Eleven, to fast-food restaurants within walking distance, to the Reston Town Center, to movies, to parties. All the kids, well versed in Just Say No programs, are aware that parties harbor the potential dangers of alcohol, drugs, and fights, but nobody has much to say about that.

The boys seem much more interested in potential trouble and protection: "There is only one thing I'm scared of if you stay out all by yourself until late or with your friends, some older kids at the mall might start messing with you and you won't know what to do and what if your friends all run away?" This unleashes a barrage of stories about times these kids have been scared even early in the evening by older groups hanging out. There is a darkness they are fighting to illuminate in the recesses of their young minds, a darkness almost unthinkable in this pleasant suburb. It's a mixture of what they see on TV, what they experience, and how they extrapolate their lessons.

"If you are staying out late at night, I think you should be allowed to have protection if you need it. Not Mace. I know Mace works but you might be so scared you wouldn't use it," says an eleven-year-old

boy with big brown eyes and long bangs that he keeps brushing off his face. "When you are in high school, I think you should be able to buy a gun." His classmates get into a huge argument among themselves about whether this is a good idea—but if they get a gun, they should have an Uzi or a Glock, not a Saturday Night Special. As they continue arguing about ammunition, a soft-spoken boy interjects his thoughts: "I think you have a point but I think that maybe you shouldn't have a gun but a little knife for protection because teenagers might get out of control." His classmates clap. The teachers stand around listening, stunned at what they are hearing.

A week later at the farewell bagel breakfast all is forgotten. An army of parents has worked together to create an elegant, embracing celebration of this important passage in their children's lives. There are real white tablecloths, balloons, programs, commemorative place cards, and loving, proud parents all around—serving, smiling, hugging, and taking pictures. An original song-and-piano medley, "Memories of Forest Edge," is played. There are a few speeches. Chris is called up for a host of awards, and finally his diploma. His parents take "a million pictures," and to his chagrin, his mom cries. She isn't the only one. Tearful parents freeze-frame the moment of innocence and togetherness. Everything wonderful about the school and the community surrounds these children at this moment and everybody knows from this point forward it will be more complicated.

The next night is the official sixth-grade party at a nearby community center with an Olympic-sized pool. Chris makes his parents promise to drop him off and not stay, and his mom has to practically beg for permission to come and watch for a few minutes toward the end. It is a scene of childhood in full bloom. A huge red-and-white-spotted inflatable dog float is the focal point of roughhousing, macho posturing, flirting, and wholesome friendly exuberance from a group of kids who for the most part have known each other for more than half their lives. Mr. Dog provides a friendly invitation to be children, and the kids splash, jump, and dive from the canine raft, squealing and laughing with delight. Outside the pool, bodies that range from prepubescent to provocative move easily without the burden of inordinate self-consciousness. Parents watch through glass windows, smiling at the scene. Chris leaves reluctantly.

Summer comes. Chris goes to Reston Day Camp as he has done every year since he was five, as his brothers had before. He loves the freedom and fun, and especially the counselors, a group of teenagers

and college students selected for their enthusiasm in working with kids. One of his favorites is Jonathan Tompkins. Chris learns how to weave friendship bracelets. He delights in creeking—a muddy free-for-all in a nearby nature area—and the sleepover in nearby Lake Fairfax Park, a coveted event every session with hot dogs, s'mores, and barely any sleep. On the last day, always sad for him, he wears his counselor's T-shirt, given to him as a gift, and by the end of the day it is fully autographed by kids and counselors alike. Like others he had collected previous years, this will be saved in its natural form, never to be washed.

In the evening, he often goes down to the tennis courts and plays tennis with his dad and his dad's partners, who all have grown children and have adopted Chris as their surrogate child. Summer nights, Chris camps out in front of the television and watches baseball or a movie. But all the time, he feels the pressure of the upcoming Big Change. He and his best friend Brad discuss it endlessly. But they know there are no answers until September comes. He and his mom go to visit Hughes to walk around again and study how it is laid out. As he practices his combination lock over the summer, he can never quite get over the gnawing in his stomach. What would it be like in middle school? Would he be okay? What was it going to be like to be a Real Adolescent? When would he feel like one?

August rolls around and he starts Reston Youth League football. He has his mother measure him to see if he's grown. He and his buddies compare muscles and football bruises and the scratches on their helmets signifying collisions they have withstood. His practices, held on the fields of Langston Hughes, have new meaning for him. There it is. His school. His new world. And across the way, the high school. He can see the South Lakes team practicing. Last summer he didn't think much about it, but this summer his future is in front of him. His dreams are closer. He hopes in two years he will be there in that high school stadium on the team. But first, in two weeks, it will be him in this middle school. He tells his mom he doesn't want too many new clothes until he checks out what the kids are wearing. He and Brad decide after much deliberation to buy Converse shoes. Although his mom has him fully equipped school supply-wise, he chooses to put only the bare minimum in his new backpack so as not to look too prepared, too eager for work.

The day of school finally arrives and Chris wakes up fully dressed. He pets his dogs and goes into the kitchen to hug his mom. No

breakfast today—how about a vitamin pill and a glass of milk? He goes back into his room and watches the tube for a few minutes until it is time to leave. His mom embraces him a little longer and then secretly watches from the window as Chris goes out to stand with the other adolescents as they wait for the bus to take them to Langston Hughes and South Lakes.

Two miles across Reston, he will step over a great divide. He knows it. His parents know it. The community knows it. The end of childhood, the official beginning of adolescence. Chris and his peers are about to enter a time of life that can be understood, according to one South Lakes High School senior looking back, as “a long dark tunnel with many twists and turns and a narrow exit.”

*Speaking Out/ Acting Out*

Thirteen-year-old Jessica Jones sashays into her bedroom balancing a glass of milk and a plate with a bologna sandwich on top of an open notebook, pausing at the door to fling back her blond shoulder-length hair. Once at her desk, she sweeps a stack of books to the floor with her elbow and puts down her snack. Then she flops on her belly on her bed, nestling herself among the pillows edged in lace, the soft white angora stuffed cat with a bell on its tail, the well-worn *Curious George*, and the Xerox copies of magazine articles on teen pregnancy. She stretches out her arm to turn on her boom box for the sounds of Boyz II Men, and settles in to work.

Her mother has finally stopped lecturing her on how she ought to use her desk for homework. In fact, the desktop could be the start of an archaeological dig for the totems of young female adolescents circa 1992. The bologna sandwich and glass of milk sit surrounded by a four-inch stack of photo packets containing snapshots of her best friend Annie's birthday party last spring, the excursion with five girlfriends to Kings Dominion over the summer, mock modeling poses taken by her friend Mitch, the family trip to Newport, and at the bottom of the pile, pictures of ice skating at Town Center last winter. There is a hodgepodge of schoolbooks, teen novels, school papers, letters, cups of pencils, baskets of barrettes and bobby pins. Dirty laundry is draped over the chair back and seat awaiting the free moment or the dire necessity that would inspire Jessica to do

her own wash—a recently acquired responsibility. On the floor lie *Seventeen*, *Allure*, and some notes from her friends. There definitely is no chance that she will do homework on this desk.

The fresh white wallpaper sprinkled with tiny pink rosebuds, the pink trim, the crisp white eyelet bedspread with matching pillows and bed ruffle are merely backdrop to Jessica's personal decorating scheme. Posters above her desk display a sleek black panther and one of the eight remaining white tigers in the world. Reggae artist Bob Marley and the rap group Digital Underground are prominent among numerous clipped magazine advertisements pinned to the walls near her bed and across the top of the closet. Pubescent sexuality is expressed boldly on the wall beside her pillow: a couple of big posters of "incredibly hot hunks"—two men stripped to the waist, one labeled "Breakfast in Bed" and the other, wearing jeans with a prominent unbuttoned fly, "A Hard Man Is Good to Find." There are photos stuck everywhere—school photos, mug shots of friends hamming it up, family pictures, some from when she was a little girl. Her softball mitt hangs over her bat in the corner, her closet is bursting with clothes ranging from overalls to a slinky red strapless dress. Like a giant collage of early adolescence, her room displays her memories, her present jumble of hopes, expectations, and loves. It is sweet and sexy, playful and passionate, exploring and exhibitionistic, a statement of Jessica Jones at thirteen years and three months, up-front, in your face, full of life and contradictions. And most important, it is a private space where she can see what matters to her.

It is her room, her choice how to live in it. And since she almost always gets As, who can complain about her homework style? "I plan to be a good student. I really care about my grades and that's my future. I know what I want to do in life," she states with customary stubbornness. She wants a ring in her navel, to be a high school football player (not a cheerleader), to get straight As, to be a marine biologist, to be an actress, to take care of her friends. She wants cooler clothes but needs more money, she wishes math were easier, that Reston had an ocean, and that she could be tan all year.

Actually, the only advantage to working at a desk instead of on her bed might be that it wouldn't be as easy to fall asleep. She often dozes when doing homework and then has to stay up even later. It isn't her fault. The hours of school are so outrageous. Anybody with any sense knows that teenagers cannot function for classes that start at 7:35 in the morning when they rarely get to sleep before 11:00.

But today she is buzzed. The assignment given to her civics class is truly cool. All the kids have to write a political speech on an important topic the candidates in the 1992 election have not addressed. And then, the best thing, a bunch of speeches will actually be delivered in a special assembly to which representatives of both parties are invited. So cool! It is a real-life opportunity for her classmates' opinions to be heard. Jessica loves being center stage. She'd been torn between writing about rape or teen pregnancy. She discussed it with Annie, who is in her class. Annie thought Jessica should write about teenage pregnancy, and Jessica agreed: "I thought it was a good idea because I actually had it happening to someone close to me."

This is one of the best assignments her teacher, Mrs. Nance, ever gave in civics, Jessica thinks as she props herself up on her elbows, tucks a curl behind her ear, and begins to write. The words tumble out: "Some of you are probably thinking this doesn't apply to you, so you don't have to listen. Let me tell you now, you should listen. Maybe it doesn't apply to you now but it hits us all at one point. Someone's sister, girlfriend, friend, relative, or even your brother getting a girl pregnant—believe me, it hits you. You think it can never happen to you but it can." Jessica knows. This was her seventeen-year-old sister Kelly's room until just a short time ago when she moved out with her new baby to live in an apartment with her boyfriend.

Jessica still thinks a lot about the night her parents told her: "In the winter, Kelly and Matt went into my parents' room and shut the door and I was like, Oh my God, something must be going on because that's what happens when we have big talks in my family. You go in there and shut the door." A few weeks later, when she'd forgotten the incident, her parents called her in. "I'll never forget this ever in my life—there was this somber kind of attitude when I walked in. I lay down at the bottom of the bed like I always do when we talk, but I was scared. They both were sitting at the top, and they didn't say anything at first, like they were searching for the right words. Then my dad said, 'There is no easy way to tell you this, Jessica,' and I thought someone had died because that is what usually happens. Then my dad said, 'Kelly's pregnant.' At first, I was kind of happy because nobody had died and I always kind of wanted a little brother or sister. But I was mad that they told my big brother first. All this had been going on and I was the last to know!" Her happiness was short-lived.

The baby was born in early September, she writes, and it was really hard. "When I found out that my sister was pregnant, people told me it would be cute and so fun, but they didn't know that having a baby means taking my sister's time so that she can't be with me anymore. I wish I could take my sister's pregnancy back. It's really hard for me to talk about this because in the last couple of months my life has changed so radically." She stops and reaches for her private "grieving box," a shoebox she keeps tucked beside her bed filled with photos of her sister and her together all through their lives until the baby was born. She looks at them, feeling the loss strongly, then goes back to writing.

She is so absorbed in her task that she is startled when her mom calls her to dinner. She'd been working for almost two hours! She bounds down the stairs into the kitchen eager to read the speech to her parents.

The Jones family loves to hang out in the kitchen. The big oak table is the gathering spot for conversations, the place where the kids have done their school projects, where the family wraps Christmas gifts for the poor. After school, Jessica likes to have a snack with her mom and talk about the school day. The bay window, framed by mint-green-and-peach colonial print café curtains, looks out on a large front yard filled with dozens of trees. In the window hangs a wreath of twigs that encircles a shamrock of stained glass, and Jessica loves this symbol of the family's Irish ancestry. The Jones kids have grown up here, and some days the table seems too huge for just Jessica and her mom and dad now that her brother is at college and Kelly has moved out. But the family is present in pictures on the wall, school calendars, and schedules posted on the refrigerator.

This evening, as always, there is a filling meal in pots on the stove, but the routine is strictly 1990s: help-yourself. The Joneses hardly ever eat together during the week anymore—too many demands and activities. There are church groups, sports in season, flute lessons, exercise, errands, friends, and now, of course, baby-sitting. The Jones house is warm and hospitable and often friends and extended family come by. There's always plenty on the stove for them too.

Jessica's parents are still reeling from the shock of their middle child's pregnancy, and found only a modicum of solace at a recent church function where they sat at a table with no less than four other couples, good involved parents like themselves, whose kids were pregnant or already parents. But they are people of faith,



deeply committed to unconditionally loving their children and standing by them. It is a matter of perspective. In the past two years, they have suffered many of the tragedies of contemporary life: Jessica's dad had a brother die of AIDS, her mom had a mentally ill brother die in an accident, and the daughter of her dad's longtime secretary was murdered on the streets of D.C. That's why Jessica was so scared she was going to find out someone had died again, and why, in the whole scheme of things, her parents were relieved Kelly's pregnancy was about life and not death. They supported Kelly by listening without getting hysterical, by encouraging the young couple to get counseling, even to consider abortion although it was antithetical to their Catholic faith. So many things had happened in their family that the fact that Matt was black did not concern them except so far as the world might be more difficult for a biracial child. Fortunately, the two kids had been dating for several years, and having them live together seemed like a good trial run for the wedding they planned in July. It certainly was not the scenario anybody in the Jones household had imagined. Jessica's mom thought her heart would break when she helped Kelly and the baby move out, but the baby was now a part of all of them.

While all this was going on, Jessica felt displaced and overlooked, so she is pleased to have her parents' full attention again. She can tell as she reads that her mom and dad really like the speech. They praise her research and her honesty. Her dad offers to type it up before he goes to bed.

In the morning, as usual, her dad has breakfast with her before he goes downtown. Her mom goes to her job in Reston early so she can be back for Jessica after school. After breakfast, her dad gives her the typed speech and reiterates his pride in her work. She thanks him, tucks the pages in her backpack, gives him a kiss and a hug, and dashes out the door to meet her bus.

Squeals greet Jessica as she walks in the school doors. Her friends Annie, Susan, and Rachel envelop her with chatter as they walk in unison to her locker. It is the end of October and Langston Hughes Middle School is in full swing. While seventh graders like Chris Hughes still walk around in a daze, the eighth graders are full of themselves. They feel catapulted to the top of a progression from Little Kid to Big Kid. Just look at them: from the chrysalis of the summer months they have emerged as new beings. Some of the boys

have grown as much as four inches, and now lope around in vastly different bodies anchored by gargantuan shoes. Many of the girls—who generally achieve their growth spurts earlier—have become more womanly, a look exaggerated in many cases through the use of dramatic makeup and stylized attire. Their self-consciousness about the changes in their bodies makes even more sweet the opportunity to exult in being “the Bosses of the School.”

A large banner hangs inside the front doors of Hughes: *IMAGE IS EVERYTHING*. The school is saturated with the aura of self-conscious posing among middle school students. They walk around hyperalert to what is cool and what is not, who to be like, who is or is not one's friend, what to wear, what to do, how to act. Students are in a state of constant vigilance not always conducive to learning.

While Chris Hughes and his classmates step gingerly into the maelstrom that is middle school, cautious about doing the “right” thing as defined by their peers, the eighth graders are cocky. They are the trendsetters, top dogs at the school with high school still ten months away—something you can brag about being close to without worrying that you have to go there soon! They bask in the comfort of their return to Hughes. Last year they were worried little seventh graders, recalls Jessica. No problem this year—they have seen the eighth-grade menace and it is them.

Beyond the bravado, however, is a more serious undercurrent. The exaggerated self-confidence, the arrogance of eighth graders covers an awareness of the moment as fleeting, because, says Jessica, “Next year everything counts.” Kids have heard forever that high school is the beginning of the Great Divide. What you do, what you achieve from the minute you enter ninth grade determines your future: what college, if college at all, what money you will be able to make, whether you can achieve happiness in life. The message is hammered into them until many honestly believe their lives will be determined by how they perform in school starting at approximately age fourteen. Eighth graders know in their own ways of understanding that this is their last year to be a Real Kid. At the same time, “eighth grade is the turning point,” explains Katy. “It is the point where you go upward or downward or straight up the middle. I came into eighth grade thinking, Wow! I rule the school. The high schoolers aren't making fun of me anymore. Now I feel that this is the year when you choose where you are going.” Sometimes all this leaves eighth

graders feeling they're in suspended animation. For many, the lesson derived is have a hell of a time in eighth grade before you have to get *really* serious.

The Eighth Grade Attitude is immediately obvious on entering Beverly Nance's fourth-period civics class. There is an atmosphere of good-natured defiance, an unspoken challenge to the teacher to win the students' attention. Girls huddle together in secret conferences, furtively looking around to make sure no one is eavesdropping. A couple in the corner sneaks a quick squeeze of their hands. One girl runs a brush through her hair. Three boys loudly squabble about why Mark Rypien is or is not a quarterback worth having on the Redskins; one ends up tipping his chair and falling with a thud on the floor. Laughter. At the very moment the tardy bell rings, Jessica and Annie collapse theatrically in their seats, still chattering and with a final wave to a friend in the hall. The bell stops ringing and still nobody pays attention. Annie is rummaging through her backpack for her speech. Jessica is freshening her lipstick.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" says Mrs. Nance above the din. "Could we please take our seats!" She looks straight at Jessica, who dramatically flings her hair off her face. Nance can be irritable, but Jessica clearly has an attitude this year that the teachers are trying to corral. On several occasions during their daily meetings, the teachers of the Silver Streak team have discussed her sister's baby and how the whole situation upstages Jessica, but there is only so much slack they can cut when she acts sassy, something that is occurring with regularity.

The third time Nance says it, the class very slowly settles down. A few chatterboxes persist, but finally there is quiet.

"Today, ladies and gentlemen," Mrs. Nance announces, "we will continue with our political speeches. Each one of you will get a chance to read your speech in front of the class. We will all critique it to help you make it forceful and clear. Some of you will be selected to read in our assembly later this week. Remember, this is your opportunity to address the issues you think are important that are being overlooked by Bush, Clinton, and Perot."

Election fever has hit Langston Hughes. The school is ablaze with red, white, and blue. Political cartoons, essays on democracy and the use of statistics in elections, posters, buttons, stickers, and critiques on the debates are woven throughout the curriculum and displayed on bulletin boards in classrooms, and in the library, cafeteria, and main lobby. This is the middle school team concept at its best: each

team's core teachers in math, English, social studies, and science coordinate activities around the central election theme. This affords students a great learning opportunity and creates involvement and excitement about a major national event that will reach a crescendo when the Hughes students cast their ballots the day before the national election.

In Mrs. Nance's room, two walls of bulletin boards display colorful posters that exhort the unseeing adult world: "Choose or Lose! The Choice Is Yours" and "Vote! It's a Privilege!" "Discover the Power of the Vote!" and their adolescent spin on the election of 1992, "Don't drink then vote!" Posters for Clinton, Bush, and Perot excite arguments as the kids support their stands. Many delight in being of the opposite party from their parents—a superb opportunity to disagree in a whole new area. This all serves as backdrop to the main event: their political speeches.

The students like this assignment. Everybody is prepared. Remarkably, some students bring in two speeches, having done *twice* the homework assigned. Nance is counting on Jessica's gifted and talented class to provide the best speeches to showcase in the upcoming assembly for parents and two representatives from the Democratic and Republican Parties of Fairfax County. Nance begins the day with a freckle-faced, cherubic young man who argues passionately that the voting age should be lowered to sixteen: "Why should children who have good ideas, are good citizens, and are interested in the elections not be allowed to vote because of their age? The new president will be trying to help the deficit that will affect us, solve problems that will affect us, and create jobs that will affect us, the children. So if you have good ideas for the government, you should be able to give your ideas, not be prevented because of your age." More radical is his classmate who feels thirteen-year-olds capable of passing an eligibility test that proves adequate knowledge of current events and politics should be allowed to vote. "It's not right," protests the next speaker, a bright, opinionated young woman, "that guns—such a powerful tool—are sold so easily. When I watch the news and hear reports about accidental shootings, I wonder why it is that people sell these weapons to such irresponsible people. Why is it that kids have access to such powerful weapons?" The kids all know there are guns around, and two incidents last spring, one at South Lakes and one at Hughes, brought the message frighteningly close to these students.

This is a side rarely seen. One after another, the students transform

from chatty, oppositional, silly, blasé eighth graders to serious, concerned citizens. Developmentally their speeches reflect their increased ability to tackle issues logically and with higher abstract-thinking skills. Emotionally both the speeches and the students' reactions to them give insight into issues of concern to them that go well beyond customary perceptions of adolescents as self-absorbed.

These youngsters on the Silver Streak Team worry about their environment, AIDS, homelessness, gun control, the justice system, and budget cuts in their schools. Probably few adults had considered that the school budget controversy swirling around students matters to them, but several speakers focus on how students are as much the victims as teachers. They talk about how supplies and textbooks are rationed, how teachers are less inclined to take on after-school activities. They think it is wrong for teachers to be underpaid and that devaluing teachers not only devalues their school experience but also gives students a mixed message about the importance of education. They exhibit a sense of fairness: "Teachers teach the world. They teach people how to read and write. They teach doctors to be doctors and lawyers to be lawyers. Then the doctors and the lawyers go off to excellent-paying jobs and teachers don't even get recognized." They resent the debates to cut nonessential academics: "Math, science, English, and history are the building blocks of the educational process, but home economics, art, music, and shop *should not* be ignored. They are the mortar that holds it all together. They help kids experience life better." Dan Quayle had just made his attack on Murphy Brown, inspiring the speech of a girl who admits that Murphy Brown may glamorize single motherhood, but: "Get real. Does she really make it seem glamorous? Being a single parent is a tough job. You must do double duty, which sometimes means working two jobs just to support your child. A family isn't defined by how many parents there are but by how much love and support there is." In a school where approximately half the students come from single-parent families, Quayle's remarks sting.

In between speeches, the talking and horsing around continue. But the assignment has power and interest. The students listen; they argue; they applaud each other. Adolescents no longer live in a protected sphere. They read newspapers for current events, watch the news. The woes of the world belong to them too.

When they talk about homelessness or budget cuts or health care, Mrs. Nance looks proud. But when they take on the issues of their

adolescent world, Mrs. Nance and the administrators freak. The paradox of the middle school concept is that it derives from an understanding of early adolescence as a time of special vulnerability, especially in a world where young people face unprecedented choices and pressures. Middle school is designed to meet the specific developmental, emotional, and educational needs of young adolescents, to nurture them and prevent the proliferation of risky behaviors related to sex, substances, absenteeism, and violence. "This is the age when young people begin to wonder about and want to understand great themes such as power, justice, beauty, compassion, courage and faith," writes psychologist Peter Scales in *Boxed in and Bored*, the Search Institute's latest study on middle schools. "They can be deeply engaged by discussions of sex, race, gender, wealth and poverty, prejudice and privilege, and any number of moral and ethical issues found in current events." But as the speeches in Mrs. Nance's class reveal, there is a tug-of-war between the nitty-gritty of what young adolescents deal with and the readiness of the schools and larger society to deal with kids directly.

One issue looming large for them is drugs. One fourth of Jessica's class, for example, prepared speeches on kids and drugs, and of those, several focused on substance abuse in school. In this area where adults and adolescents desperately need a dialogue, the response is less than embracing. Mrs. Nance is nervous.

She'd already had quite a bit of fallout from Susan's speech in her first-period class. The speech, "Looking Beneath the Surface," carefully detailed the use of substances in middle school, which Susan felt "teachers fail to address." "I know you're saying, kids can't drink and not get caught. Oh yes they can. How? Most of the kids in Reston have parents that drink, who have bars in the basement, or have wine cellars in the home." With a generous supply available, carrying liquor to school is easy. "All they have to do is take some rum and put it in a water bottle and add some soda. Or maybe mix some vodka and orange juice. The teachers think they are having breakfast." Susan warned that the drinkers may not be obvious—"Many are A or B students."

By the time she got to drugs, the adults in the classroom were practically apoplectic. "Last year, there was selling of drugs in the locker commons, outside and even during classes. Lots of kids know exactly how much it will cost, and when they can get things cheaper because a dealer is having a bad day." She even addressed how some

kids get drugs from their parents who also do drugs: "It is not that such parents *give* the drugs to their kids. The kids just steal it from Mom and Dad, and they know they won't be asked or accused because the parents don't want their kids to know that they do drugs." Even though a lot of kids think it is really dumb to do cocaine or crack, they think pot is okay—that it's just a little worse than cigarettes. Sometimes kids who leave class to smoke are smoking pot.

But the teachers don't put it all together, Susan said. "I know you are asking yourself: How can kids use drugs, drink, and smoke at school without getting caught? They are smarter than you think. They watch teachers and see when they're going to certain places, and at what time. Or they steal office passes and say they had to talk to a teacher, and when they come in later, they don't get into trouble."

Susan ended with a plea that would be repeated over and over in conversations with adolescents, a plea that asks for boundaries and the structure that comes from being known: "Just remember, that quiet girl in the back of the class may not be what she appears. That boy that never talks to anyone and loves to read in his spare time may be extremely out-of-control on Friday nights. You adults need to give us more attention. We are not as innocent as you may think. . . . You need to talk to us and watch us and be alert. . . . It is very easy to fool you. It is very easy to lie to you. Teachers and parents need to be smarter about us and stop denying what is really going on."

Within an hour of this speech, it was all over the school. The students are astounded at her frankness and admire her for it. Many students openly concur with what she said. Jessica and Katy talk about the speech during a break in their class. "Almost every single party you go to has a bottle of vodka," confides Katy. Jessica is exasperated that no grownup at Hughes seems inclined to pay serious attention to her friend's speech: "I'm sorry, the teachers have to be stupid or something not to know that kids are coming to school on drugs."

The kids' eagerness to share what they know is surprising to teachers swept into conversation, but the teachers are clearly reluctant to get too involved because, as one confides off the record, "It sets into motion a whole line of reporting responsibilities." Another adult reaction is to focus solely on Susan and believe that the problems she described are her own, or are wildly exaggerated. Yet an informal survey done later of all the classes on the team corroborated

the contents of the speech. Students were asked to write anonymously three things that they "absolutely, positively knew, saw, or experienced concerning drugs and alcohol among kids in Reston," and only two could not think of any.

Ironically, at precisely the same time as Susan's speech there is a big move among adults in the school to convene drug discussion groups at parents' homes, since every time the school or PTA has called an adult meeting on the topic, few showed up. The October *Parents' Bulletin* states: "Reducing alcohol, drug and tobacco use among public school students is a priority to school officials, parents and community members." It exhorts parents to sign the Parent's Pledge for Drug Free Youth. The Fairfax County Public Schools biennial substance abuse survey is conducted in classrooms all over the county the same month, and it yields the information that the most dramatic increase in "gateway drugs"—cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana—occurs between seventh and eighth grades and that one third of all middle school students consume beer. National figures corroborate the story in Reston.

Yet nobody wanted to listen to the kids. Copies of Susan's speech and a compilation of the classroom survey were never circulated to an adult audience even while teachers, administrators, and parents professed to grapple with the problem. When the school convened its home meetings on drugs and youth, hardly anybody came.

Jessica, who has been in a huff over how Susan was doubted and ignored, is having her own problems as well. She and her buddy Annie have waited two days for their turn to deliver their speeches. Every time Mrs. Nance asks for volunteers, they wave their hands. By now everybody in the class knows what they want to talk about and there is a movement in the classroom to move them up to the dais.

Katy is angry too. When she was told point-blank no speeches about abortion, she fired one back on freedom of speech. "This speech was going to be on abortion but the school outlawed the topic and decided a student couldn't talk about it. So I am going to talk instead about freedom of speech. When my class was given this assignment we were told to talk about what was on our minds. But how can we talk about what is on our minds when they limit the issues that we can talk about? . . . When you are a teenager, you are supposed to be finding out about who you are, but if opinions are outlawed, how will you find out how you *feel*?"

Finally, Annie gets her chance. She is a willowy young woman of



Caribbean parentage, and her smooth dark skin accents large brown eyes that look directly at her audience. When she begins by posing the question of what is the line between harmless flirtation and harassment, there is a lot of squirming, nervous laughter, and rolling of eyes among some of the boys, which comes to a quick halt with emphatic *Shhhhhhhhs* from the girls, who lean forward to hear every word. "My opinion is that if someone says or does something sexually related that makes you uncomfortable and this has been communicated to the person, if the treatment persists then they have crossed the line between flirtation and harassment. 'Sexual harassment' may seem like a strong phrase for a little grabbing or a few words, but think about what it can lead to. If you let such treatment continue, you are putting yourself in danger. In most cases of harassment, the less you say, the more rights the harasser will think they have. Then by the time that the harassment gets violent and crosses over the line of assault, it is usually too late. This is the exact reason why you should make your expectations for a relationship or even a date clear from the start. Our grandparents and even our parents were taught to be coy with each other. . . . Nowadays we can't afford to confuse each other. 'No!' doesn't mean yes or try harder or maybe you can convince me, it means 'No!' "

The audience bursts into discussion among themselves, interrupted by Nance calling for quiet. She critiques Annie's language as too strong. Annie erupts: "It happens to everybody! You hear girls talking and its, 'Oh yeah, her too, me too,' and nothing is being done!" Katy chimes in: "They talk about your body parts, they cop a feel, they drop pencils to try and look up your dress. It's like mildly raping someone." But unless an authority sees it happening, nothing is done.

Annie can't understand why she is told that the topic is inappropriate for the assembly. "Lots of guys don't know this. Maybe some of those people who do it would learn something." Although she does not reveal it, Annie had recently been at a small gathering of friends where the line was crossed with her.

In June of 1993, the American Association of University Women had released *Hostile Hallways: The AAUW Survey on Sexual Harassment in America's Schools* to a blaze of publicity. The report stated that four of five eighth through eleventh graders had experienced some form of sexual harassment in their school life—85 percent of girls and 75 percent of boys. The National School Safety

Center News Service called sexual harassment the most "overlooked and underreported offense today." But Annie and her classmates are not allowed to discuss it.

Three days after Jessica bounded down the stairs to read her parents her speech, she is at last allowed to read it in class. It is a whole new spin on teen pregnancy. You can see in the students' faces that they had never considered how a teen pregnancy could change an entire family. They relate to Jessica's loneliness for her sister. Her words are not the usual harangue against teen sex but an explanation of possible consequences that touches their hearts. When Jessica finishes, several students spontaneously get up and hug her. Her teacher says the speech is moving but, of course, it cannot be part of the assembly. Maybe Jessica could deliver it in a sex education class if the assistant principal gives permission.

The three girls, Jessica, Annie, and Katy, denied what they consider their rightful due, march directly up to Mrs. Nance's desk after class and demand their rights vehemently but politely. They refer to the First Amendment, hint at discrimination, and openly plead that they be allowed to present their speeches based on the need their peers have to know about these things.

Mrs. Nance and the colleague assisting her answer in precise and condescending tones. "This is a real eye-opener," says Mrs. Nance, choosing her words carefully. "We are already getting the administration in on it so we can have meetings after school if people so desire to discuss these topics."

"We want to hear your observations, girls," adds the colleague. "You do have a voice and you have a right to say it but once you come onto school property you are in an organization that represents our society and we have an obligation to reflect our society and be constrained by its rules."

Amazingly, the girls do not interrupt as Mrs. Nance continues: "You'll never accomplish what you want by being bulls in a china shop. If you feel that children should be more informed at an earlier age, you have to figure out a way to do it. You don't just do it by jumping the gun. All I can tell you is continue with your writing, continue with what you believe in, but don't be pushy and not use insight. Thank you, ladies."

Jessica marches out of the room. "I was really upset. I went to the assistant principal and said I want to read my speech. She said, 'Jessica, your speech brought tears to my eyes but I can't let you read it

because it would stir up so much controversy.' Then she said I could say it in sex ed class. When I later asked for a date, she reneged and told me, 'I'm sorry, I forgot we have to run everything through the Board and it takes like five years.' They were just trying to shut me up."

The day of the assembly arrives and representatives of the Silver Streak Team deliver their speeches on "approved" topics like health care policy, education, homelessness, unemployment, crime, and the national debt. The official representatives of the two political parties respond, and the meeting is open for discussion from the floor.

Without missing a nanosecond, Katy asks their opinion on abortion, Jessica on teen pregnancy. Over their "mealy-mouthed answers" Katy shrieks: "Why aren't you addressing these issues and why don't you care about what we care about?" The kids scream in wild approval, while teachers try uselessly to hush them. Jessica tries to get the adults to acknowledge the ties between teenage pregnancy and abortion, homelessness, and censorship. "The reason so many girls are getting pregnant is because they need to be informed," she insists. Pretty soon the kids have taken charge, to the teachers' chagrin. They want answers on drugs, on juvenile crime, on issues that directly concern them. When the bell rings for the next class, they keep talking and asking questions, ignoring their teachers. They are insistent and want answers from these adults who represent the political parties. They follow the speakers out of the auditorium until finally they agree to come into their classroom for the remaining minutes between periods.

That night Jessica recalls the incident in a discussion with her parents: "I was so pissed off. They say, 'We want to hear what your opinions are,' but the things that apply to us most they won't let us talk about." Then her face lights up as she realizes she actually did win something in the assembly. "They had to answer us, at least for a little while. That was cool."

With that, she gives each of her parents a hug, goes up to her bedroom, flops on her bed, and calls up Annie. They don't mention the speeches anymore, but they talk for over an hour about boys and clothes, their favorite drama class and how they will become famous actresses—important stuff to a girl thirteen years and three months old. At least at that moment.