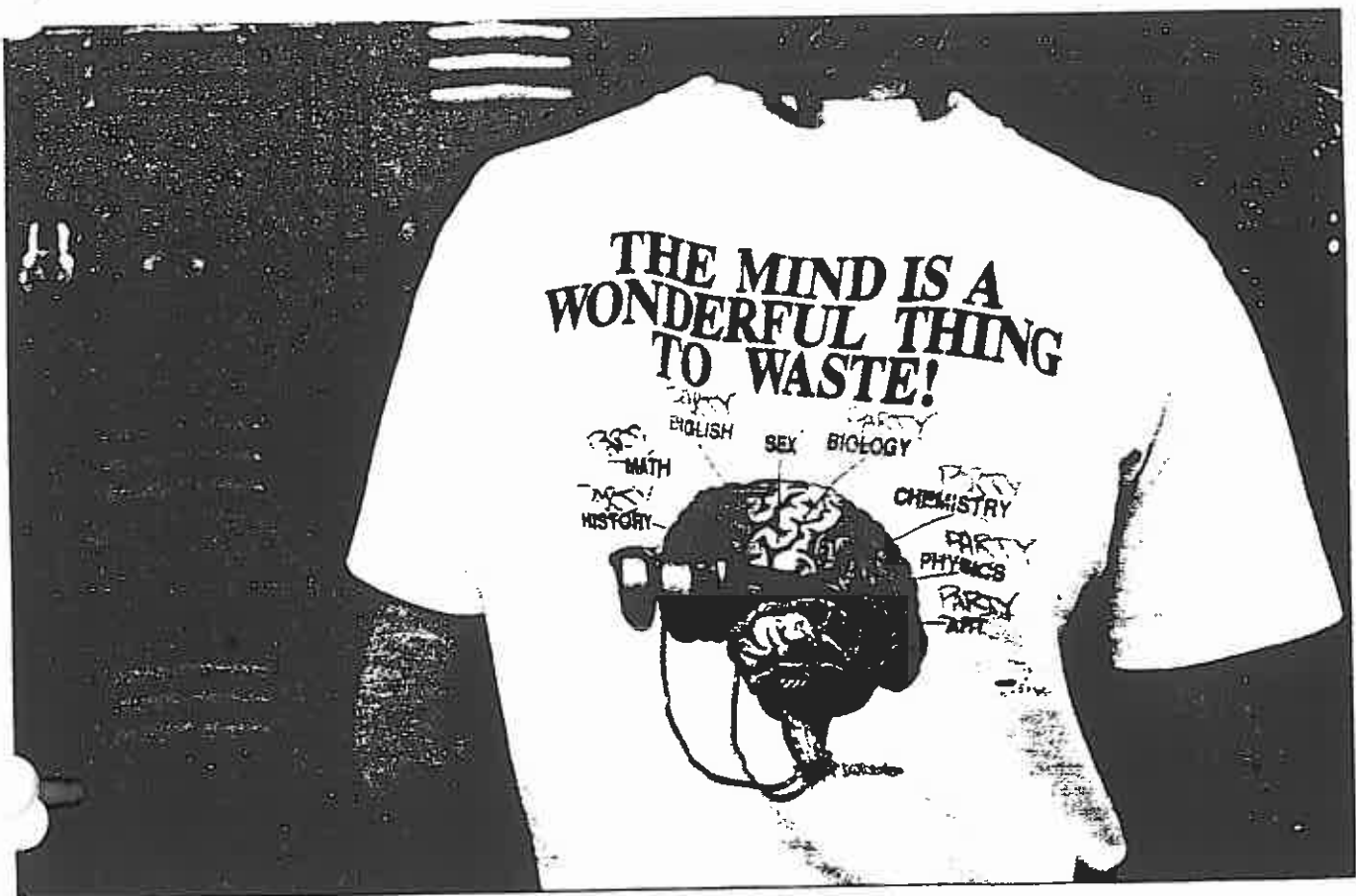


ST. PETERSBURG TIMES

SUNDAY, MAY 12, 1991

BY THOMAS FRENCH



This is the story of one year at one high school. Kids still go to pep rallies, write gushy notes and forget their locker combinations. But today, high school is also another kind of place, where kids decked out in gold jewelry have beeper numbers, where baby-faced girls talk quietly about abortions, where students resist any assignment that makes them pay attention for longer than the latest MTV video. "Do you want to work at McDonald's for the rest of your life?" someone yells in the hall at Largo High. Several voices shout the answer: "Yes!"

DAY 1

# Show & Tell

The files in the front office would have you believe the two of them go to the same school. And technically speaking, this is correct. They both walk the same long halls, weaving through the same crush of teen-age bodies. They sit in classrooms only a hundred yards from each other, trapped behind weathered desks scrawled with the same declarations of love and lust. They rail against the same mind-numbing rules, make cracks about the same principal, sneak off the same campus at lunchtime, just to escape whatever's being dished out in the cafeteria. The truth is, though, the two of them don't go to the same school at all. Even if they brushed shoulders in front of their lockers, they probably wouldn't notice each other. They are invisible to each other.

She is 17, a senior, on her way to college and a future positively brimming with possibilities. She has a nickname that sounds like a double question — YY, people call her — a permanently tangled

mess of brown hair and an alarming shortage of eyelashes, which she tends to pull on whenever her nerves get frayed, which is almost every day. The pressures that weigh upon her are immense. She is vice president of the National Honor Society; president of the Latin Club; a member of Mu Alpha Theta, better known among the masses as the math honor society; co-editor-in-chief of the school newspaper; and a starter on the school's academic quiz team, which happens to be the reigning county champ and which is counting on her once again to smother the buzzer like mousse on a prom queen.

As if that's not enough to make a girl sketch out and go psycho — and YY will be the first to admit it happens from time to time — she is also: a buffet girl at the Belleair Country Club; an older sister and part-time caretaker of three infinitely younger brothers; a flutist who performs every Sunday at her church; a free agent in the savage arena of dating — no one has asked her out for

centuries — and a high-ranking member of the most exclusive clique on campus, which can be a full-time job unto itself. Her grade-point average, meanwhile, hovers somewhere in the upper reaches of the stratosphere, where it must stay if she wants to keep the scholarship her parents are counting on for next year.

At the moment, she is sitting at the back of her Latin IV class, snacking on M&Ms — in brazen defiance of school policy — while she quietly translates, from the original Latin, an oration Cicero delivered to the Roman Senate in 63 B.C. against some poor stooge named Catiline.

"How're you doing?" asks her teacher.

She sighs. "Oh, fine. Cicero's boring."

The teacher smiles. "He is boring."

"He's very long-winded. All he says is, 'Get out of town, Catiline! And take all your followers with you!'"

Still, YY knows that Cicero is important, because she knows that eventually she will be tested

## of A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF A HIGH SCHOOL

## THE SERIES

### DAY 1 Show & Tell

■ **Today:** Teachers run into walls of hostility early in the year as they try to salvage Mike Broome, a talented 14-year-old who seems determined to relegate himself to a dead-end existence.

### DAY 2 Heathers

■ **Monday:** A young girl named Jrea Taylor steps outside the old boundaries and tries to become Largo's first black Homecoming queen. The Fearsome Foursome — the school's most powerful clique — wages guerrilla warfare against the principal.

### DAY 3 Mother's Milk

■ **Tuesday:** Jaimee the ghost wanders the halls, avoiding the future, forcing her mom to take desperate action. After Homecoming, Andrea takes another chance in a secret romance.

on him and because she knows that tests are not a thing to be taken lightly. Not by anyone who wants to become anything. Dutifully, without a word of prompting, she returns to the book and her notes. Her teacher, standing at the front of the room now, assures the class that what they're learning is important. They will use Latin, she says, for the rest of their lives.

**N**ot far away, in a cluster of classrooms known as the pod, a 14-year-old boy named Mike slouches through another day of earth science. He is a freshman, well on his way to failing all his classes and to relegating himself to a lifetime of diminishing possibilities. He's not stupid. If he wanted, he could do most of his work in his sleep. Occasionally he does just that. He'll sit at his desk with his head down and eyes closed, and a teacher will call on him, and he'll look up, give the correct answer to whatever's been asked, then return to his dozing. But not today. Today, like so many days, he is angry. Don't ask what he's angry about. Even if he could explain it, he probably wouldn't tell you.

He has light blue eyes that burn, a scraggly collection of chin hairs that may someday qualify as a beard, and the fervently indifferent air of someone fighting to convince himself that the world has nothing interesting left to show him. He belongs to no club or organization, except perhaps the congregation of metalheads, skateboard cowboys, Nintendo junkies and other dispossessed souls who meet every day on the auditorium steps. He wears an earring shaped like a skeleton smoking a joint. His right arm bears a homemade tattoo that shows a symbol for anarchy. His jeans are marked repeatedly, in dark black ink, with the letters "FTW." If there's any doubt about what these stand for, he'll be glad to translate.

"F—k the world," he'll say.

At this moment, he is sitting in the corner of the classroom, ignoring his teacher as she tries one more time to prod him into joining the rest of the class. She likes this kid. Beneath his anger, there is something special about him. Something promising that goes beyond the fact that he so obviously has brains. His other teachers sense it, too. They can see it when his guard is down, flickering momentarily behind his eyes. Maybe he's lost. Maybe he's been in a tailspin for so long he doesn't know how to pull out.

So the teacher keeps trying. She brings him a book and opens it for him. She finds the right page. When he still refuses to work, she says that perhaps he shouldn't come to class tomorrow.

"Mike," she tells him. "This is a waste of your time."

### DAY 4 Disappearing Acts

■ **Wednesday:** At midyear, a senior girl known as YY fights to hold on to her ambitions. Down in the pod, Mike's teachers brace to see if he will join the mass exodus of dropouts.

The boy looks at her. He could try to tell her what's wrong. He could tell her that she has no idea what his life is like. Instead he stands up.

"F—k you," he says.

The teacher is not fazed. This is not the first time these words have been hurled in her direction.

"I don't think so," she says. "What is the problem?"

"F—k this whole school. F—k the whole system. F—k everybody."

Normally, the other kids in this class would laugh. But this time they know that Mike has gone too far.

"What are you doing?" they ask him. "You don't want to get kicked out."

"Yes, I do. I want to quit this f—king school."

"You can't quit. You need to graduate."

"F—k it. I can get a job."

He tells the teacher to write him a disciplinary referral. He demands it. He takes the paper. He walks out the door.

### DAY 1 SHOW & TELL

**T**he hordes arrive at daybreak. The first bell, the warning bell for first period, rings at 7:19 a.m. Not 7:18, not 7:20, but 7:19, now and forever, or at least until the end of this school year.

**A**t Largo High, a good school, a solid school, home of the Packers, home of the Blue and Gold, where the band has been known at football games to break into the Flintstones theme just before playing the alma mater, it works like this:

The hordes arrive at daybreak. The first bell, the warning bell for first period, rings at 7:19 a.m. Not 7:18, not 7:20, but 7:19, now and forever, or at least until the end of this school year.

The yellow buses pull in, faintly glowing in the

early morning light like some radioactive wagon train. Those students who are old enough and fortunate enough to drive themselves whip into the north parking lots. Half of their cars, it seems, are decorated with stickers for Oakley sunglasses — "Thermonuclear protection," the stickers proclaim — and literally vibrate with the bass that's throbbing from their tape decks at the threshold of pain. These are the boom cars, some of which pack monster stereos with up to 1,000 watts, and what they're booming with these days is 2 Live Crew.

*Me so horny  
Me so horny  
Me love you long time*

Inevitably, there is another line of cars inching their way up to the main entrance. This a quieter, more sedate line — Barry Manilow sings from some of the car stereos in this line — because it is filled almost entirely with mothers and fathers dropping off their kids. For many parents, this is as close as they'll usually come to the interior of the school. They kiss their children, wish them luck, then watch them disappear into a swirl of exhaust fumes. The parents, of course, realize how important this place is. They know this is one of the crossroads, where lives are literally made and broken, where some embark on a career in law or accounting and others stumble into an existence sustained by menial labor. But almost none of the parents knows what this place is like nowadays. Without being here every day, how could they?

If they could step out of their cars and wander the halls for a few hours, they would begin to see it. High school, they would quickly learn, is just the same as it has always been — and totally different. It is still just as absurd and wonderful and terrible as ever. Kids are still urged to act like adults, even when they're being told what to wear, when to speak and when they can step from behind that yellow line. They still shuffle to the bizarre ceremonies known as pep rallies, where they still try, sort of, to remember the almost surrealistic words to the school song.

*Oh, we love the halls of Largo  
That surround us here today,  
and we will not forget  
tho' we be far far away.  
To the hallow'd halls of Largo  
every voice will bid farewell,  
and shimmer off in twilight  
like the old vesper bell*

If hardly any of them knows what a vesper bell is, they are still faithful to a host of other traditions. They elect student council reps, insist no one understands them, forget the combinations to their lockers, write gushy notes in which every "i" is dotted with a tiny heart. And for the most part, they still learn. Some of them learn amazingly well, especially at a school like Largo, which has a remarkable number of talented teachers, some of whom have been teaching there for decades.

Even the best teachers, however, admit that high school has also become a frightening place. It has become a place where kids decked out in gold jewelry give phone numbers for their beepers, where skinheads stride into class daring anyone to look them in the eye, where girls who still haven't lost all their baby fat talk quietly about their visits to the abortion clinic. More than anything else, it has become a place where an alarming number of students resist taking part in any assignment that requires them to pay attention for longer than the length of the latest M.C. Hammer or Wilson Phillips video.

If you searched among the throngs now milling through these hallowed halls, on their way to first period, you would find a certain blond-haired freshman girl who skips class so often that she has transformed herself into a kind of ghost. Her name is on the attendance rolls, but her teachers hardly know what she looks like. She haunts the school, floating down empty corridors, slipping up onto the bleachers inside the gym, silently watching as all the people around her move on with their lives.



YY

■ The girl with the permanently tangled hair — Christine Younskevicius, a senior known as YY — studies day and night, fighting to hold it together under a massive load of stress.

Keep looking through the crowds, and you would find a certain boy who will not go to class unless his parents pay him.

"We made this contract up," he'd tell you. "If I go to school, every day I get \$4."

You'd find another boy who celebrated the start of this new semester by joining some friends at a Back to School party. A party held on the beach, in the middle of a school day.

"It's, like, a relief day," he says.

Eventually, you would even find a senior honors student who readily admits that in his entire life he has read only one book all the way through. Namely, Robert Fulghum's *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*.

"I like his books," he says, "because the chapters are three pages long."

But these are just the kinds of things a visitor can see and hear in a single day. Spend a week or a month here — spend a year — and soon you would witness the unmistakable signs of a larger disintegration. You would learn, for instance, that there are kids in this school who pass the dead time on their bus by putting cigarettes out on their arms. Kids who live under assumed names so their abusive fathers cannot find them and beat them. Kids who have been kicked out of their houses because their mothers have found new boyfriends who don't want a teen-ager hanging around. Kids who have run away and are sleeping wherever they can. In their cars, in picnic shelters, in all-night laundries. Anyplace but the place that used to be home.

Wander this school long enough, and it begins to seem as though the entire world must be crumbling.

## THE SERIES

DAY 5

### The History Lesson

■ **Sunday, May 19:** As the second semester begins, a football star named John Boyd risks his life in a neighborhood shooting. There's a miracle in the making in the pod: Mike is learning to control his anger and is soaring in class. And after months away, Jaimee the ghost returns to school.

DAY 6

### Out of the Shadows

■ **Monday, May 20:** John and Andrea finally become a couple, only to face new threats to their relationship. The Fearsome Four-some, already rattled by anonymous attacks from the outside, splits from within as two members lock wills in a battle of silence.

DAY 7

### Solitaire

■ **Tuesday, May 21:** The year is almost over, and every one — Mike, Jaimee, Andrea and John, YY and her friends — is struggling to hold it together until graduation night.

**'G**ood morning. Our thought for the day is: You have to learn the ropes in order to pull the strings."

The words waft through the school one bright weekday morning. If this message has a sinister undercurrent — exactly what strings does the voice want to pull, and why? — nobody seems to notice. It's just the morning announcements. Most people are only half-listening anyway.

It's fall. As August blurs into September and September into October, the last days of a lingering Florida summer are finally giving way to cool evenings under the glaring lights at the football games. Early in the first semester of the 1989-90 school year, Largo High has settled down for business. The campus, a sprawling collection of red-brick buildings that sits along the rush of traffic on Missouri Avenue, is relatively quiet.

Two girls cut across the visitors parking lot, on their way to class, trading tales of intrigue.

"Did you get into any trouble this weekend?"

"Of course."

Over in A wing, a boy storms past the lockers, fuming to a girl walking beside him.

"I'm gonna take a 44," he says. "I'm gonna stick it to his head. I'm gonna pull the trigger."

In a practice room behind the auditorium, a balding guitar teacher beams as he and students in a makeshift band pound through a ragged but spirited rendition of *Wipe Out*, the 1963 surfing classic that was recently re-released in a rap version. Today, though, they're doing it the old way, and the class actually seems to be getting into it. Kids are nodding their heads, tapping their feet. One boy in a tattered black T-shirt — a boy notorious at Largo because a Smurf was once supposedly found in his locker, hanging from a tiny noose — stands off to the side, bent at the waist, furiously banging his long blond hair up and down as though he were in the front row of a Megadeth concert.

A few moments later, in a breathtaking shift of pace, the students put away the electric guitars, take their seats, pick up acoustic instruments and glide through an ensemble performance of a waltz. Time slows to a gentle, almost stately pace.

"Watch your posture," says the teacher, studying them with quiet pride. "Sit up straight."

Off in another corner of the school, during a discussion on current events, kids talk about the end of the world, which they insist is imminent.

"We could die any minute," says one boy.

"There's nothing to prevent us from dying," says another.

"We could die any minute," echoes a third, picking up the rhythm, "and all these teachers worry about is homework."

Between class periods, the halls descend into the usual chaos. A haze of body heat and hair spray hangs over the lockers. Sentries stand at the door of nearly every bathroom, keeping a lookout for adults, ready to sound the warning to all the smokers assaulting their lungs inside the stalls. Roaming brigades of cheerleaders, decked out in their uniforms, plow through the crowd. In the center of it all stands one couple, jamming traffic in mid-stream as they reacquaint themselves with the contours of each other's tongues.

A bell rings and suddenly the halls are empty. Empty, that is, except for the principal, Judith B. Westfall, who at this instant is cruising through A wing, her walkie-talkie in hand. She sees two stray

girls and stops them with a deadly smile.

"Can I see your hall passes?"

The girls produce the passes.

"Do you have your honor cards?"

The principal — the kids call her Ms. Westfall to her face, Judi behind her back — has noticed that these two strays are both wearing shorts, which means they'd better have their honor cards. This year, for the first time, Largo is attempting an unusual experiment. At every other public high school in Pinellas County, shorts are forbidden. (Remember, this is the fall of 1989, long before the dress code was changed.) Exactly why shorts are forbidden is a mystery, considering that this is Florida and schools are hot and other counties let students wear them all the time. Plus, the dress code does allow girls to wear miniskirts, which show more skin than almost any pair of shorts. Still, the county school board's rulings are the law, and the law says shorts are out.

Unless, that is, you go to Largo and carry an honor card. Before the new year began, a bunch of Largo kids teamed with Ms. Westfall to persuade the board to try something new at their school. As a one-year test, the board is allowing students with good grades and solid attendance to be rewarded with a card that gives them the right to

wear shorts. To someone outside high school, the whole issue might seem trivial. But to students it is the biggest of big deals.

There's just one thing. If the experiment's going to fly, Largo students have to abide by one simple rule. Namely, those who wear shorts must carry their honor cards at all times. Or else.

Now, one of the girls squirming before Ms. Westfall admits that her card is not on her person. Not at this precise microsecond.

"Um, it's in my purse," says the girl, trying not to sound too frantic. "Want me to go get it?"

Ms. Westfall gives the girl a withering look — a look she has mastered through years of practice — then sends her on her way.

Inside the fluorescent realm of the pod, a small building just off the end of A wing where there are no windows and where most of the walls are merely temporary room dividers, the ghost freshman who wanders the halls has actually ma-

terialized in a classroom. Her name is Jaimee. She sits at a table, filling out a sheet of questions her teacher has passed out. The sheet is designed to help the students set goals and formulate strategies toward reaching those goals. It begins:

*"My goal is to*

*She reads this and writes:*  
*learn to surf*

*Question two:*

*"What skills will you need in order to accomplish your goal?"*

*She writes:*

*good balance*

*Finally:*

*"What should you be able to do that will demonstrate that you have achieved this goal?"*

*She writes:*

*surf*

## WHO'S WHO

### Amy Boyle

■ President of Largo's National Honor Society, co-editor of the school paper and a close friend of YY.

### Mike Broome

■ A freshman, talented but consumed with anger, enrolled in a dropout prevention program known as GOALS.

### Arnette DiLello

■ A math teacher working with Mike in GOALS.

### Mary O'Donnell

■ Mike's science teacher.



**Zelda Troiano**

■ YY's Latin teacher.

### Judith Westfall

■ The principal.

### Jewelene Wilson

■ Mike Broome's mother.

### Cristine "YY" Younakevicius

■ A senior who is vice president of Largo's honor society, co-editor of the school paper and a close friend of Amy Boyle.

Sitting nearby, a skinny boy named Kurt with a Mohawk on his head and tiny swastikas marked on his high-top tennis shoes fills out his sheet.

His goal:

*grow my hair out*

What he'll need to do to accomplish his goal:

*shampoo it every day*

What he'll be able to do if he achieves his goal:

*put it in a ponytail*

A boy named David studies his sheet. David is older than most of the freshmen and sophomores who surround him in this class. Last year he dropped out of school, but now he has returned with a vengeance, determined to make it this time. He is the voice of maturity, an evangelist for education who now preaches to the other kids about the importance of earning a diploma.

David's goal:

*To pass all classes with at least a B*

What he'll need to do:

*Just work hard*

What he'll do if he achieves it:

*graduate!*

Here in the pod, another experiment is under way. Here, in the section of the school that other kids sometimes refer to as the Twilight Zone, approximately 200 of Largo's most difficult students — the unmotivated, the hostile, some of the most hopeless of the hopeless cases — are taking part in a special program that might be their last chance at making something of their lives. The program is called GOALS. The acronym stands for Graduation Options: Alternatives to Leaving School, which is a fancy way of saying that this is a place where teachers try to keep kids from walking out the door and never coming back. One of many such programs spreading around the state, GOALS is a last-ditch attempt to reach students who have spent years trying to prove that they are unreachable. It is the front line in the battle against dropouts.

Each year, tens of thousands of students disappear from Florida high schools. Depending on whose figures you believe — the federal and state governments argue about the exact numbers — roughly 25 to 40 percent of this state's high school students ultimately drop out. Largo, for instance, has about 1,900 students. At least, that's how many there were in August, at the beginning of the year. Even now, barely into the first semester, the exodus has begun. By the end of the year, who knows how many will be gone?

This is where GOALS comes in. The idea behind the program is simple. Take a bunch of kids who should be making it but aren't. Kids whose standardized test scores show they've got the brains, but whose behavior and grades and family histories make it clear that they're on the way to dropping out. Put them in smaller classrooms — no more than 18 kids per instructor, which is half of the ratio you'll find in many regular classrooms — and stick them with specially trained teachers who'll be tough enough and creative enough to figure out a way to pierce the students' armor of indifference and anger.

Here, in the section of the school that other kids sometimes refer to as the Twilight Zone, approximately 200 of Largo's most difficult students are taking part in a special program that might be their last chance at making something of their lives.



### The Pod

■ Inside the yellow walls of the pod, teachers in the GOALS program fight a last-ditch battle to keep kids from walking out the door and never coming back.

Still, there are no guarantees. Especially with these kids.

"Do you want to work at McDonald's for the rest of your life?" someone yells out now in the pod's one and only hallway.

Instantaneously, several voices shout the same answer.

"Yes!"

At the opposite end of the universe from the Twilight Zone, in a room near the middle of C wing, Mrs. Troiano stands in front of her fourth-period Latin class. They're staring at a sentence in their books.

*Hostibus pulsus, tamen disciplinam nostram non remitemus*

Oh boy.

One of the girls dives in first. "Ablative absolute," she says. "The enemy, having been . . ."

She pauses.

" . . . driven out," says a boy nearby.

"Defeated," says Mrs. Troiano.

"The enemy, having been defeated . . ."

Another pause.

"Nevertheless," says someone else.

"... nevertheless, we will not . . ."

They do it together, leapfrogging from one word to the next until finally they've reached the far side of the sentence.

*The enemy having been defeated, nevertheless we will not relax our military training*

Zelda Troiano rewards them with a smile and a nod. She's short and tanned, with wavy brown hair and a playful glint in her eye. The kids, eager to please, work hard to give her something to laugh about. They rag her about her first name, going on and on about "The Legend of Zelda," which happens to be the name of a Nintendo game, which makes it all the funnier to them.

At the back of the room, paying almost no attention whatsoever, sits YY, the girl with the permanently tangled hair and the alarming shortage of eyelashes, who is still winding her way through the Cicero text. She's the only fourth-year Latin student in the room, which means she usually works independently while the others struggle through lessons she mastered long ago. YY is intimately familiar with Cicero. She has learned, she says — quietly, so she won't disturb the rest of the class — everything the man ever did. She knows what year he delivered his first oration. What country he first visited as a young man. Where he was at the moment of his first sneeze.

She's only kidding. She doesn't really know where the man first sneezed. But a few seconds after making the joke, she explodes — almost on cue — with a little sneeze of her own.

"Excuse me."

Her real name is Christine Younskevicius. But almost everyone finds it easier to stick with YY rather than trying to negotiate the swamp of diphthongs that makes up her Lithuanian last name. The nickname, bestowed upon her eons ago by another teacher, fits her perfectly. Somehow it captures the manic quality of her entire life.

"*Tempus fugit*," she tells her friends — the ones in that most exclusive and powerful clique — when she wants to drive them to the brink. *Time flies*. And nobody knows it better than YY. For her, time flies supersonic. It has to, just to keep up with her after-midnight sessions with the books and the

honors classes early the next morning and the deadlines at the school paper and of course the overriding imperative, which is that she must continually confirm that she is one of the best and brightest to ever roam these halls.

YY's not a saint or anything. She's a regular on the circuit of A-list parties, a veteran of countless blowouts where the young and the restless and even the academically inclined have been known to incur major damage to their systems. But she is also a top student, number six in her class to be exact, who knows when it's time to get wild and when it's time to get on task. Even more remarkable, she is one of the few teen-agers remaining on the planet who loves to read; sometimes, when she's not busy with homework, she'll reread her favorite sections of Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*. Not for class. For fun.

She loves mythology. She can tell you which of the gods sent the two big snakes to kill Baby Hercules, and which god disguised himself as a swan — that's right, a swan — so he could put the moves on this earth girl named Leda, and how one of the love children conceived by said Leda and said swan was none other than Helen of Troy, aka the Face that Launched a Thousand Ships.

"A real wench," YY says of the fair Helen. "She was hatched from an egg, which is *really* strange."

Mythology was how YY got into Latin in the first place. That's how lots of kids get into it. Either that, or through the history, which can be pretty wild as well. Cicero may be boring, but there's still the big bad lions snacking on Christians in the Coliseum; Caligula, the mad emperor, supposedly sleeping with his sister and then ripping the fetus from her womb; Cleopatra and Caesar getting horizontal among the pyramids. Say what you will about the Romans, but they certainly knew how to get a teen-ager's attention.

Mrs. Troiano, no fool, uses this stuff for all it's worth. Back when these kids were just starting Latin, she had each of them pick a character from the myths or the history and then take it as their own to be used during class. One kid picked Narcissus and then insisted the Homecoming Queen was in love with him. Another kid, a strange boy who always wore a black raincoat, picked Caligula and did his best to live down to it. One of the girls still refers to herself as Circe the sorceress.

"I turn men into swine," she says happily one afternoon, throwing up her hands at the nearest male, as though she's casting a spell on him. "Poof!"

"They don't *need* to be turned into swine," says YY. "They already are."

As for YY, she had a bit of a challenge figuring out who she wanted to be. She hates all those passive women characters in the myths. (Myths obviously written by men, she notes.) She can't stand all those simpering fair-skinned maidens who are continually getting turned into heifers and being watched over by some giant with a hundred eyes and so forth, all because they dallied with the wrong deity. YY's not the dallying type. Which is why she picked Juno, queen of heaven, protectress of women, the top chick on Olympus.

So now here Juno sits at the back of Mrs. Troiano's classroom, deigning to appear in the form of this slightly tousled girl. She munches on the forbidden M&Ms, toys with her hair, directs the beams of her eyes to the Cicero text and tries to focus once more on the ramblings of possibly the most long-winded mortal to ever draw a breath. Without saying a word, she resigns herself to the fact that even those who wish to live among the clouds must dedicate themselves almost daily to the dreariest of tasks.

Over by the auditorium is a sign.  
Please  
No smoking, drinks or food

The boy with the blue eyes that burn and FTW written on his jeans sits on some steps a few feet away, smoking a Marlboro.

There are half a dozen reasons why smoking is the last thing Mike Broome should be doing. For one thing, he has asthma — and a deep, rattling cough to prove it — and the cigarettes only make that worse. For another, he has already been

caught smoking once this year, and it he gets caught again, he wins an automatic five-day suspension. Finally, he is a GOALS student, and GOALS students are supposed to be resurrecting their academic careers, not trashing them.

So why is Mike out here in broad daylight, in what is possibly the most visible spot on the entire campus, cigarette in hand? Maybe he will be able to explain it someday. But ask him now why he does such things and he'll just shrug and look away.

"I don't know. School's boring."

Almost everything is boring to Mike. He's never heard of Leda or the Swan or their daughter, Helen, the wench who hatched from an egg. The notion of reading a book on mythology or history is completely foreign to him; he doesn't see the point. He isn't even sure he sees the point of finishing high school. Some days, he insists he's ready to quit right now. One morning, after he has been slapped with another in a long line of suspensions — a suspension he almost invited, but which now enrages him — he storms into the GOALS office down in the pod.

"I'm not coming back," he tells Ruth Riel, the dropout prevention specialist who heads the school's GOALS program.

Miss Riel reminds him that legally he can't quit until he hits his 16th birthday, which is more than a year away.

"They'll come to your door," she says.

"I won't open the door."

On other days, on the days when things go well, Mike insists he wants to stay in school. He says he wants to get through the next four years and then graduate and then join the Air Force, just like his oldest brother, Greg. There is a framed picture of Greg, in his uniform, on a table in the living room at Mike's house. At night, when Mike stretches out on the floor, staring at the TV — his mother sitting to the left in her chair, his stepfather to the right in his chair — Greg's picture looks at them all, reminding them of what a Broome boy can accomplish. During the day, when Mike is in class, he makes paper airplanes. He sits quietly at his desk, folding one blank sheet

of paper after another, driving his teachers crazy.

More and more, it's looking as though this may be as close as Mike ever gets to working with a plane. He knows the Air Force won't take anyone without a high school diploma, and if he gets caught smoking again — if he gets into any more trouble, period — a diploma is going to be that much further out of reach. But that's too far away to worry about. Besides, his mother smokes. His stepfather smokes. So does Wade, Mike's other brother, who's a couple of years older and who's also going to Largo. It was Wade who gave Mike his first cigarette when he was 12.

So now here's Mike, perched outside the auditorium with some friends, puffing away. They gather on these steps almost every day, decked out in their standard uniforms of torn jeans and Metallica shirts. The head-banging kid in the guitar class, the Smurf killer, hangs out here; so does the kid whose parents pay him to come to school. They share cigarettes, keep an eye open for adults, practice kickflips on their skateboards, trade imitations of their least favorite administrators. They talk about girlfriends, about Nintendo triumphs, about the latest ridiculous thing uttered



by their parents, about which of the women teachers they think are hot.

Sometimes they don't say much at all. Sometimes Mike and the others sit without saying a word, wearing their silence like a uniform. They stare into the distance, watching other kids cruise along the sidewalks, listening to the school's flagpole clinking in the wind, hearing the warning bells and the final bells and ignoring them all.

**D**own in the pod, in Mrs. O'Donnell's science class, show and tell is under way.

A girl named Shannon passes around a picture of her dead dog.

"Her name was Whiskey," she explains. "We got her at 3 weeks old. And my mother's ex-boyfriend got mad at her."



It is a terrible story. The mother's ex-boyfriend, it seems, was mad enough at Whiskey to open a door and send her traipsing outside, where she was promptly captured by animal control and hauled away to the pound. Before it would release her, the pound allegedly sent a letter to the family, demanding \$450, which was more than the ex-boyfriend had any intention of paying and more than the mother could scrounge up on her own.

"Ten days," says Shannon. "They gave us ten days. And we got the letter on the tenth day."

She is trying to fight back the tears.

"And she died," she says.

Mrs. O'Donnell, a tall, slender woman with dark brown eyes, sits nearby, listening intently.

"Who's next?"

A girl who almost never speaks a word in class — a girl with stringy hair and bad acne and not much money for new clothes, a girl the other kids like to make fun of — shows a tattered bird's nest she has lovingly saved and protected. A boy tells about the first time he killed a deer. A girl shows a ring on her finger. The ring is formed into the letters O-Z-Z-Y, as in Ozzy Osbourne, the heavy metal star.

#### The Step Kids

■ Every school day, a congregation of metalheads, skateboard cowboys and other dispossessed souls gathers on the steps in front of the auditorium, with a no-smoking sign in the background. Mike Broome (center) takes a puff on a friend's cigarette.



## ABOUT THE SERIES

■ This series, based on the 1989-90 school year, is the result of two years of reporting. Times Staff Writer Thomas French began wandering the halls of Largo High in the fall of 1989. Largo was selected because of its dropout prevention program and the diversity of its student body. With official permission, French visited Largo through the school year, interviewing more than 100 students, parents, teachers and administrators. Interviews continued after the school year. The most prominent figures — the students written about in most detail, such as Mike Broome and Christine "YY" Younskevicius — were profiled with their permission and that of their parents. Many quotes are taken from the reporter's notes; others are based on people's recollections. The Times thanks the students and their parents, as well as the faculty and administration of Largo High, for their cooperation.

### Photography

■ Staff Photographer Maurice Rivenbark took the photos, except where noted. Most photos were taken during the 1989-90 school year, but a few were taken since.

"Isn't he the guy who ate the bat?" says Mrs. O'Donnell.

"He didn't eat the bat," says someone else, rushing to Ozzy's defense. "He spit the head out."

A boy plugs in a cassette player and plays a song by the Circle Jerks.

"What's a circle jerk?" asks Mrs. O'Donnell.

The boy successfully evades this question and lets the song run its course. Mrs. O'Donnell doesn't really care for this music — it's too loud, and she can't understand the words, which may be just as well — but she doesn't stop the other kids from enjoying it.

"Feel free to get up and dance," she says.

This is the whole point of show and tell. Normally, Mary O'Donnell would be teaching these kids biology or earth science. But once in a while, she lets them put away their books and bring in something that's important to them. Maybe it's an heirloom their grandmother gave them. Or a T-shirt they've decorated with the name of a metal band. If they don't want to bring anything, they can share a story about their lives. As unorthodox as it may sound, Mrs. O'Donnell has found that show and tell is a remarkably efficient way of cracking the tough exterior of her GOALS students, of getting them to show how they think and what they care about. If she can understand them, then maybe she can make contact with them. If she can do that, then maybe they'll stay in school.

She turns now to Kurt, the skinny boy with the Mohawk on his head and the swastikas on his shoes. Kurt tells her he has nothing to share and nothing to say. Not to be deterred, she fishes for anything to get him talking.

"What possessed you to get that haircut?" she asks him.

He looks at her as though she's insane. "Nothing possessed me. . . I just did it."

"What do your parents think of it?"

"They don't."

"Don't you spike it sometimes?"

A nod.

"What kind of mousse do you use?"

"I don't know."

The biggest presentation of the day comes from Mickey. His real name is Steve, but he won't let anyone call him that. For as long as the kids in the pod can remember, he has always wanted to be known by the name of his hero, Mickey Mouse. This is not a joke. Mickey has a sense of humor about it, but underneath, he is dead serious.

He shows the others his Mickey Mouse harmonica. And his Mickey Mouse cap. And his Mickey Mouse doll, and his Mickey Mouse toothbrush container, and his Mickey Mouse fishing bobber.

"No way," says another kid, staring at the bobber. "Where would you get that?"

Mickey smiles.

"I don't reveal my sources," he says.

Mrs. O'Donnell asks him how the fascination began. It started a while back, Mickey says, when he had quit school for a time and was at home by himself. He was depressed. He was lonely. He felt like a failure. Then he found Mickey Mouse.

"I couldn't make friends or nothing," he says, "and it's, like, this was my friend, who would never tell me I was a loser. . . He never argues back."

A girl nearby raises her hand. "He can never talk to you, either," she says. "Have you thought of that?"

"I don't care," says Mickey. "He never tells me that I'm wrong."

Last spring, when she started teaching in GOALS, Mrs. O'Donnell might have been surprised to hear such a story. She came to Largo from an affluent school outside Chicago. Here, teaching in classes filled with kids living on the edge, she has seen and heard things she never could have imagined before.

**A**s unorthodox as it may sound, show and tell is a remarkably efficient way of cracking the tough exteriors of Mrs. O'Donnell's students. If she can understand them, then maybe she can make contact with them. If she can do that, then maybe they'll stay in school.

"I couldn't see having a father," a boy says one day. "It would just blow my mind."

This is a common sentiment in the pod. Many kids have barely met or never seen their fathers. As it happens, the father of this particular boy left the family shortly before the boy was born. Now the boy lives with his mother, who still harbors a general resentment toward men. Sometimes, she

tells her son she wishes she'd had him aborted.

"I don't think she really means it," the boy says, looking away.

In one show and tell session, a girl tells a story about the day this strange man came to visit.

"Someone was at the door," the girl says, "and it was, like, my dad, and I didn't even know who it was. . . He only stayed for, like, a half an hour because he was getting ready to go to the airport."

"Do you look like him?" someone asks.

"I don't know."

Mrs. O'Donnell asks the kids in the class how many still live with both of their original parents. Three of them raise their hands. Two, however, obviously have not understood the question because they now explain that they're living with their mothers and stepfathers. The third says his parents are still together but are filing for divorce.

"They keep arguing about who's going to pay for the lawyer," he says.

Many kids talk openly about how their parents are alcoholics. Some of the kids themselves confess that they are struggling with their own drinking problems or other drug addictions. Some started their habits with the aid of their parents. In the middle of one show and tell, a girl talks about a birthday party she went to where the

birthday girl and her mother celebrated by snorting a line of cocaine together.

One morning a boy walks up to Mrs. O'Donnell, obviously upset. She knows something is wrong — he's been seething quietly for days.

"Is there a problem?" she asks him.

"There is a problem."

"What is it? Is it something at home?"

"It's just everything."

Some of them write it down. On the outsides of their folders, they write things that give Mrs. O'Donnell a glimpse into their rage, despair and feelings of powerlessness. Sometimes it's swastikas, drawn over and over. Sometimes it's the titles of their favorite songs. Sometimes Mrs. O'Donnell isn't sure what she's reading.

A few examples:

*So far so good so what  
Keep America white  
Megadeth  
Cro mags  
Satan's den  
Under the influence  
Suicidal tendencies  
Moon stomp  
Slap of reality  
Into the pit  
South of heaven*

There is a girl in Mrs. O'Donnell's sixth-period class — a pretty girl, with long blond hair and an angelic face — who has apparently convinced herself that she is a witch. Sometimes she casts spells on her teachers; when they stumble over their words or make a mistake in front of the class, she claims her magic is responsible.

"I made her say that," she tells the other kids.

This might be funny if it weren't for the other things this girl has been doing. She talks to herself about the devil, she tells other kids she can read their minds. Recently she completed a drawing, one that graces the outside of her folder in another class, of a naked man with a large erect penis.

There is another student who without warning will suddenly scream in the middle of class and who often tries to unnerve his teachers by touching himself in front of them. He's a scrawny little kid, just a baby really, but the teachers have heard that he recently ran away from home and was living in a picnic shelter. Now he's back with his family, but he has begun making ominous statements about not caring if he dies.

Down the hall, in another classroom, there's a pale, sickly looking girl. She's a heavy girl, with a serious weight problem that stands as a metaphor for her inability to control anything in her life. She's waiting for an intestinal bypass operation that's supposed to make her thin and solve all her

"Don't do that."

He ignores her. She takes out a disciplinary referral form and puts it in plain sight on her desk. He sees her and stops. A few minutes later, he gets out another piece of paper and slowly begins folding it into another plane. He waits until Mrs. McGraw looks at him, then crumples the paper into

to a ball. She looks away, and he does it again.

Barbara McGraw likes Mike. As much of a pain as he can be, she too is convinced that there's a nice boy hiding somewhere inside him. She knows there is, because she's seen it. One day someone brought a baby down to the pod, and the teachers watched with astonishment as Mike gently held the child and played with her. Suddenly all the hostility vanished. He was just this sweet kid, lost in the wonderment of holding someone even more vulnerable than him.

Now, as he taunts Mrs. McGraw with his growing fleet of aircraft, she tries to ignore him, hoping he'll stop. But at 2:28 p.m., two minutes before the bell rings and he's free to go, Mike walks up to her desk. He is strangely angry. Clearly he does not understand why she has refused to play her role in the drama he has been staging.

He picks up the referral.

"You can shove this up your ass," he says.

Mrs. McGraw sighs, gets out her pen and gives him what he wants.

What she would like to know — what all of Mike's teachers in the pod would like to know — is how he got so angry in the first place.

Wade, Mike's older brother, who is also in GOALS, does not really offer any clues. Wade is softer and friendlier than his little brother. He's the class clown, the type who's usually busy cracking up the kids around him, telling jokes under his breath, grinning maniacally at his teachers as though he has gazed into the future and glimpsed something wonderfully embarrassing about to befall them at any second.

Mike is not much for maniacal grins. Mike is not much for grinning, period. He can work himself up into a rage and hold onto it for weeks. Of course, the teachers know that finding the source of this animosity is the key. If they could get him to open up and reveal the secret well that feeds his rage, they might have a chance to get through to him. But Mike will not open up. Any effort they make to understand him, he resists.

"If you could have whatever you wanted," someone asks him one afternoon, "what would it be?"

"I don't know."

"What do you do when you're upset or mad?"

"Sit in my room, listening to the stereo."

"What do you do when you're happy?"

"Sit in my room, listening to the stereo."

"What do you care about?"

"Nothing."

"What's important to you?"

He shakes his head, laughs. "Nothing."

Mike is not a total loner. He has friends, kids he meets on the auditorium steps or in the neighborhood, kids who shoot hoops with him, who practice kickflips on their skateboards with him, who go roller skating with him on Friday nights at Rainbow Roller Land. But they bristle with their own alienation — he's not the



#### Show & Tell

■ During one session, Alan Moore (left) displays his spiked skull ring and Shawn Pearsall (above) holds his skateboard.

Not everyone in GOALS is consumed with such frustration. Many of the kids are remarkably upbeat about their lives. In the hall outside Mrs. O'Donnell's classroom, a glass case will soon be going up, filled with the photos of more than a dozen GOALS students who are expected to graduate this coming June. Their photos show them standing proudly in bright blue caps and gowns, squinting into the sun, smiling uncertainly, as though they can hardly believe it themselves.

Still, the teachers know that no matter how hard they try, many of their students will indeed drop out. It hurts to say it, but it's true. Even with the smaller classes in GOALS, there's no way to reach every kid who walks through the door. Some of the students who wander the pod are struggling with problems so overwhelming — problems that clearly began long ago, maybe even before they made it to kindergarten — that it's hard to imagine anything saving them.

problems. She has been told that the surgery is both expensive and risky. She insists she does not care.

"If I die soon," she says, "then at least I'll be happy."

And then, of course, there is Mike Broome. Always, there is Mike Broome.

**H**e is constantly inventing new ways to self-destruct.

A few weeks into the school year, he is already a legend around the pod. He gets in fights with other students, smokes in the restrooms, terrorizes substitute teachers. Day after day, he tests the limits of his teachers' patience and good will.

"Mike, don't do that."

It's seventh period, the last period in the day. He sits at his desk in Mrs. McGraw's class, making another paper airplane.



only one attracted to the letters "FTW" — and are just as disconnected as he is. Mike doesn't hang out at the mall, like almost every other teen-ager does, because he's broke and says he doesn't see the point. And even though he lives within walking distance of the campus, he doesn't go to football games either, or the lip syncs, or any of the dozens of other after-school gatherings, most of which are free or close to it. Every day, when the final bell rings, he is gone.

Usually he stays close to home, which for him is a three-bedroom rental house with peeling white paint and faded shingles and a little front step where he sits in the afternoons, smoking his Marlboros and watching the traffic roll by on Belleair Road. He likes to play Nintendo sometimes — there are two Nintendo rigs in the house, one in Wade's room and one in his mom's room — but the real fan of the game is his stepfather, Jerry, who has been known to play for hours at a stretch when he comes home from his construction job. Usually Mike prefers to lie alone in his room, strumming on his guitar, listening to his mother in the kitchen as she pours herself another glass of milk for her ulcer.

#### Mike's room

■ "What do you care about?" someone asks Mike Broome. He answers: "Nothing."

His mother's name is Jewelene Wilson. It used to be Jewelene Broome, but then she married Jerry. Even so, anybody could see that Mike's her son. She has the same complexion and the same eyes; when she gets mad, they burn with the same fire as Mike's. Mostly, though, Mrs. Wilson just looks worn-out. She has a good sense of humor — she's the one who gave Wade that grin — but over the years, she's struggled through more than her share of hard times. Twelve years ago, when she was still married to Mike's father, living in Tallahassee, doctors discovered a tumor in the bone of her left hip. So a surgeon went in and removed her hip socket. She was still in the hospital, recovering from the operation, when her marriage broke up. Her husband, she says, called her and told her he didn't want her around anymore; he says it wasn't quite that simple, that the two of them had been having problems long before the cancer and that her relatives were hostile to him.

Either way, the Broomes were divorced, and Jewelene and the boys moved to Pinellas County, where her family lived. It was a rough stretch for all of them. Mike, who was just turning 2, had always been his daddy's boy, always clamoring to ride beside him whenever he was running out on some errand. Then his father was gone, and Mike began to wonder if his mother was going to leave as well. All of the boys were scared. One day, when she had to go to the hospital for a checkup, the three of them clung to her so hard she could barely get out the door. They just kept asking her the same question over and over.

"Are you coming back?"



#### Mike Broome

■ At an early Christmas.



■ In an elementary school photo.



■ And in a photo from middle school. (Photos courtesy of Mike's family)

Somehow they made it through those days. Jewelene had to stay in bed for a time, but the boys took good care of her. They ran errands, took turns rubbing her leg, showered her with affection in the guileless way of the young. Soon she was on her feet, and in the years that followed, she remarried and found a job in a factory, sewing

children's clothes. She couldn't work at the factory for long, though, because her hip began hurting badly. Today, more than a decade later, she still walks with a slight limp, still feels the pain in her leg, still gets worked up every time she talks about her ex-husband.

"I'd like to string him up from the highest tree over a canyon," she says.

She sits in her chair in the living room, smoking and watching the soaps and worrying about what's going to happen if her two youngest sons don't make it through school. The odds are piling up against Mike and Wade. Especially Mike. He never was the greatest student. He never liked reading, and Jewelene didn't push it, figuring it wouldn't do any good. But he was always smart enough to get by. Then he hit middle school, and everything fell apart. He had to repeat sixth grade; he kept getting in trouble. Now he's in ninth grade, and it's only becoming worse. Now, every time Mrs. Wilson turns around, someone from GOALS is calling, saying Mike's been suspended again. She's starting to grit her teeth whenever the phone rings.

"Do you want to dig ditches all your life?" she asks him. "Do you want to be a bum and live on skid row?"

"I don't care."

Mike didn't used to be like this. In his old photos, there is no trace of the anger. There's just this happy kid, mugging with a toy guitar, holding a white kitten, standing in his pajamas on some distant Christmas morning. It is clearly the same person. But he looks completely different. His face is bright and open; he has a tiny galaxy of freckles stretching across his nose; his short brown hair juts up in a cowlick. And he's smiling.

Mike's father still lives in North Florida. He's remarried and works as the manager of a Swifty convenience store. He keeps in touch with his sons, but there is a kind of descending order to the relationships. He is closest to Greg, who was the first and whom he knew the best; he is the most distant from Mike, who was just learning to talk when they separated. Now they hardly talk at all. Sometimes Mr. Broome calls on Mike's birthday; more often, says Mrs. Wilson, he does not. Her ex-husband says it's not that simple. He does try to stay in contact with Mike, he says; he insists he remembers the boy's birthday and points out that last year Mike came to live with him for a month or so but left because he missed his mother and because he bridled at the way his father set rules.

Whatever the case, Mike feels a deep detachment from his father. He says it doesn't bother him. But when the subject comes up, it's easy to see the lie in his face.

This is the secret his teachers have been longing to learn. At least, it is part of the secret. But he does not speak of these matters. Instead, he offers his curses and his rage and every ounce of resistance he can gather. Repeatedly, he threatens to quit. When he wants to taunt them in a different way, he shows them how easy it would be to breeze through their silly courses. He comes back from one of his suspensions and makes a

perfect score on one of Ms. DiLello's math tests.

Annette DiLello can't get over it. One day she is looking through her grade book when she sees an odd brown stain on one of the pages. She stares at it, trying to figure out where it has come from. Then it hits her: This is Mike Broome's blood. He was in a fight with another kid the other day, and

his nose was bloodied, and this stain is all that's left of that ugly little scene.

It is a sign. Maybe not from heaven, but definitely a sign. Mike has been bleeding in her classroom. He has been bleeding all over the pod ever since he came here. He has been demanding that each and every one of them watch as he tears apart his future.

Well, Ms. DiLello is tired of it. All his teachers are tired of it. And one way or the other, they are determined to put an end to it. It's not too late. If they can find a way through the wall he's built around him, they can reach him.

Mike himself has proved it is possible.

It happens late one afternoon. Once more he is in trouble. He has been up at the office, getting another suspension, and now he is an open wound, walking through the halls. Ms. DiLello and Mrs. O'Donnell pull him into an empty classroom.

"We want to talk to you for a minute."

Mike is beside himself. He stands by a desk up front and pours out his frustrations. Everyone is against him, he says. None of the teachers understand him. None of the kids do, either.

Ms. DiLello and Mrs. O'Donnell listen, and then they tell him that they do understand, that they are on his side, that they are ready to do whatever they can for him. Looking into his eyes, Ms. DiLello puts her arm around him.

"You know, Mike, everybody likes you. We want you to stay here in school. We care about you."

It is then, at this moment, that Mike does what they will remember and talk about for so long afterward. It is then, when Ms. DiLello has made this simplest of connections, when she has broken the barrier between them with the touch of her hand and with a few kind words that tell him what should have been obvious all along, that Mike shows them a glimmer of hope.

Tears well in his eyes. He stands between them, not angry anymore, just another scared 14-year-old kid, crying in a quiet room.

**A**s the semester rolls forward, other lives are turning in unexpected directions.

Out in the halls, Jaimee the ghost still roams. And though it hardly seemed possible, she has begun to slip even further out of control. Already she has become so insubstantial, so ethereal, that she seems scarcely more than a shadow. With every passing day, she fades further out of sight. Unless something happens, unless something takes hold of her, soon she may vaporize completely.

In another part of the school, a senior named Andrea — a beautiful girl, determined to thrive in a society that has programed her to fail — suddenly finds herself in the running for Homecoming Queen. Her friends scoff. They tell her not to get her hopes up. In the 75 years of Largo High's exis-

tence, no girl with her color of skin has ever been awarded that honor; the ruling class, say Andrea's friends, is not about to let it happen now. They're already comforting her, telling her not to feel too bad when she hears someone else's name ring out over the football field.

"It doesn't matter," they tell her.

David, the dropout who returned to school so full of sermons about the importance of sticking it out, empties his locker one day and goes to the front office to turn in a new set of withdrawal papers. He's leaving again. Only a few weeks after announcing how determined he was to graduate, his name is added to the list of others who are already beginning to vanish from the classrooms.

But there is more. Something unbelievable has occurred.

Up in the most rarified regions of Largo's academic hierarchy, YY has run seriously afoul of her principal, Judith B. Westfall. A fundamental law of the universe has been violated. Top students, especially ones who translate Cicero and run the newspaper and smother buzzers for the quiz team, do not typically find themselves in deep with the authorities. But that is exactly where YY finds herself. Both she and a second student — sweet little Amy Boyle, president of the National Honor Society, the other editor who runs the newspaper and one of YY's closest pals — are now in deeper than deep.

The problem comes from two editorials that appear in the year's first issue of the school newspaper, the *Packer Press*. Down in the front office, they have struck a major nerve.

In one of the editorials, Amy has attacked that perennial problem of high school, the lack of spirit. According to Amy, spirit is dismally low at Largo, much lower than in the old days before the current regime took over.

As if this is not enough, YY has taken aim in her editorial at Ms. Westfall's pride and joy, the shorts experiment. The program, YY has argued, is a good idea gone bad. It dumps too much paperwork on teachers, it embarrasses kids whose grades aren't good enough to qualify, it forces other students to jump through all sorts of hoops just so they can wear what they already should be free to wear. The program should be dropped, YY says, and kids should be treated like adults and allowed to slip into shorts whenever they want.

Now, as copies of the newspaper's first issue circulate around the school, Ms. Westfall is outraged. She is indignant to the nth degree. She is sketched beyond belief.

And YY and Amy are strongly encouraged to join her in the front office. Now.

ST. PETERSBURG TIMES

MONDAY, MAY 13, 1991

of

## A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF A HIGH SCHOOL

A 7-PART FLORIDIAN SPECIAL SERIES

**T**hey call themselves the Fearsome Foursome. All seniors, all heavy hitters in the ruling elite, they radiate an aura of untamed invincibility. But beneath their flawless smiles, they're fighting to hold it together under a massive stress overload. Meanwhile, in another part of the school, a daring senior who has spent years tearing down the walls of racial stereotypes at Largo High is taking her biggest chance yet. She wants to become the school's first black Homecoming Queen.

DAY 2

# Heathers



### The Fearsome Foursome

■ The most powerful clique at Largo High takes inspiration from *Heathers*, a movie that shows kids talking like they really talk and acting like they really act. For the Fearsome Foursome (from left, Meridith Tucker, Christine "YY" Yunskevicius, Karin Upmeyer and Amy Boyle), the film is a revelation.



n another day, under less disastrous circumstances, the office of Largo High's principal would be a surprisingly pleasant place to visit. It's a nice room, warm and friendly, filled with antique furniture and antique dolls and embroidered sayings and a general aura of benevolence. Not to mention the midget pigs. They're everywhere. Little pig figurines, little pig knickknacks, all of them placed around the office in honor of the school's official animal symbol, a wild and hairy razorback hog.

Normally, when they saw all these tiny porkers, Christine Younskevicius — better known as YY, or sometimes even the Wild and Wonderful YY — and her pal Amy Boyle might have permitted themselves a giggle. But at this particular moment, shortly after noon on Friday, Oct. 6, a little more than one month into the 1989-90 school year, giggling is not advisable. Because the principal, Judith B. Westfall, is venting upon these two girls the full measure of her fury. It is Ms. Westfall's fervent opinion that YY and Amy, the co-editors of the school paper, have taken cheap shots in the editorials they wrote for the year's first issue. They have been irresponsible, she tells them.

"As far as I'm concerned," she says, holding up the *Packer Press*, "this newspaper should go in the trash."

Amy starts to cry. YY tries to defend herself, saying she has a right to voice her opinion.

"Well, if you have your right to voice your opinion to

the students," says Ms. Westfall, "then I have my right to voice my opinion to you."

She says she believes YY's editorial does not represent YY's opinion at all, but the opinion of a consultant — a woman reporter at the *St. Petersburg Times* — who sometimes works with the staff. It is Ms. Westfall's belief that this consultant encouraged YY to target the shorts policy.

"It wasn't like that," says YY.

"I think it was like that. I know what's going on at this school. I talk to the kids."

Ms. Westfall just keeps going. She keeps saying she can't believe such negativity.

"This is the worst thing," she says, "that's happened to me all year."

When YY hears this, she wants to say, well, Judi, if this is the worst that's happened, then you're having a pretty good year. But YY does not say that. This is my principal, she reminds herself. She can suspend me.

So YY silently endures the rest of the lecture. Ten minutes or so later, when she and Amy stagger back to the newspaper room, they're both sobbing. Amy, who does not know any reality but the reality of being a model student, is devastated. But YY is made of tougher fiber. She is Juno. She is the queen of heaven. And underneath her tears, she is shaking with her own terrible fury.

This means war.



**Things Are Looking Up**

■ Andrea Taylor's success, in school and in dance class (above), is rooted in her mother's positive attitude.

## THE STORY SO FAR

■ Early in the first semester of the 1989-90 school year, the teachers in the pod — a special section of Largo High that houses a dropout prevention program known as GOALS — are fighting against indifference and hostility as they try to help their students turn around and stay in school. Several of the teachers are working especially hard to salvage Mike Broome, a talented 14-year-old freshman so consumed with rage that he continually explodes in class. In another part of the school, two of Largo's top seniors — Christine "YY" Younskevicius and Amy Boyle — have written editorials in the school newspaper that angered their principal. As today's story begins, they are seated in the principal's office, facing her wrath.



**T**he voice of wisdom does not know when to shut up. "Good morning," it says, wafting once more through the halls like some cheerfully disembodied spirit. "Our thought for the day is: If we had more guided men, we wouldn't need more guided missiles."

It's not even 8:30 a.m., too early for the voice to sound so perky. But the voice is always perky.

Every morning, when most of the school is still cursing the invention of alarm clocks, some bright-eyed kid down in the front office scampers onto the P.A. system and reads the morning announcements, always starting with the thought for the day. Actually there are several bright-eyed kids down there, all of them taking turns at the microphone. Just before show time, they open a little metal box filled with typed sayings, the official thought-for-the-day vault, and choose whichever one strikes their fancy.

What nobody around the school seems to notice is that the sayings tend to be puzzling non sequiturs, vaguely ominous warnings, scattered bits of slightly skewed advice. Whether the kids do this on purpose — whether they are truly attempting to enlighten or merely engaging in a sly form of subversion, saluting the start of each day

**N**obody — none of these so-called adults, that is — has the faintest notion of what it means to be a fun-loving yet achievement-oriented 17-year-old trying to find her way in this hyper-accelerated Age of Mega-Turbulence.

"What do you try to dream about?" says the teacher.

The boy pauses. "There's no school," he says carefully, "and the whole world is pavement."

It is a beautiful vision. So beautiful that a big goofy grin is now spreading across the boy's face.

Out in the halls, Jaimee the ghost has wandered into October. The first report cards of the year are about to be handed out — Homecoming is only a couple of weeks away — and yet Jaimee remains oblivious. Quietly she glides down the



with a tiny salvo of absurdity — is one of the abiding mysteries of life at Largo High.

"Ideals are to run races with," they say one day, defying all logic. "The moment we stop chasing them, they sit down and become opinions."

Another: "If you wish success in life, make perseverance your bosom friend, experience your wise counselor, caution your elder brother and hope your guardian genius."

This is rich. But not nearly as rich as the day when the kids share these immortal words: "Leisure is a beautiful garment, but it will not do for constant wear."

Over in the pod, in one of the GOALS classrooms, a slender boy with sandy hair — a skateboarder who religiously reads *Thrasher*, a magazine aimed at skateboard fanatics — sits in class, talking about the ultimate thrasher dream.

"You can never dream about what you want to dream about. . . . I've tried so hard. It's impossible."

#### Life in the Fast Track

■ When it all gets too much for YY, when she starts to sketch out and go psycho, her friends will shoot her this look. "What's your damage?" they say, using one of the ritual quotes from *Heathers*. "Did you have a brain tumor for breakfast?"

halls, waving at her friends inside their classes, hiding in the bathrooms to elude assistant principals. She laughs when nothing funny has been said. She talks to people without looking at them.

Her mother is at the end of her endurance. She does not know how to reach Jaimee. She used to know, back before the change, before Jaimee started acting this way. But not anymore. Her mother has tried everything. She has reasoned with her daughter, given her a dozen second chances, played the understanding and forgiving parent, played the Nazi storm trooper. Last spring, after she caught Jaimee stealing her car,



she took her to the police station and insisted that she be arrested and taken to court, so she would understand that her actions have real consequences. But that didn't change a thing. Jaimee keeps lying. She keeps slipping out her bedroom window at night, going who knows where. She's constantly running away. From the house, from school, from reality.

It has to stop. Her mother doesn't know how. But somehow she has to find a way to make it stop, or she's going to lose Jaimee forever. She already knows how it will happen. In her mind, she already hears the phone ringing. It's the middle of the night, and she fumbles for the receiver, and there's someone official and stiff on the other end of the line. Someone she does not know. Someone who tells her . . .

**E**arly one Monday morning, YY sits at the back of the newspaper room, working frantically on a calculus assignment that somehow eluded her the night before. She is slaving away all by her lonesome when suddenly the voice of her principal comes floating over the P.A. system.

"Largo," says Judith Westfall, "we'd like to congratulate you on the very smooth opening of school and the first six weeks of school."

Ms. Westfall is giving a pep talk. She wants students to know that today is the first day of the rest of their semesters. Or something like that.

"We have many reasons," she says, "to feel very proud of being at Largo High School."

YY fights back a groan. It's not enough that this is a Monday and already she's running behind, playing catch-up in calc. It's not enough that she also happens to be in the middle of her menstrual period and feels so sick that, as she delicately puts it, she is on the verge of heaving a lung.

As it is, even without her period, YY is rapidly becoming a permanent contestant in the stressed-out sweepstakes, constantly chugging down aspirin and No Doz, fighting back the panic and the exhaustion and, yes, the urge to scream. Because nobody — none of these so-called adults, that is — has the faintest notion of what it means to be a fun-loving yet achievement-oriented 17-year-old soul trying to find her way in this hyper-extended, hyper-accelerated Age of Mega-Turbulence.

When it all gets too much for her, when she starts to go psycho, YY's friends will shoot her this look.

"What's your damage?" they say, using one of the ritual quotes from *Heathers*, their all-time favorite movie. "Did you have a brain tumor for breakfast?"

This is her friends' quaint way of telling YY to calm down. But calming down is not always within the realm of possibilities. YY is being yanked around so many ways she can't even keep count. There's the looming specter of her advanced placement tests and the ever-present demand to keep up her grades so she holds onto her scholarship for next year, plus the high hopes of her parents — Helen and Bob, she calls them, or sometimes Helen the Hun and Bob — and the high hopes of her teachers, not to mention the uncompromising standards she sets for herself.

YY never had a chance. She's been on this academic fast track since she was a zygote, swimming around inside Helen the Hun. She was raised in one of those comfortably messy homes where the

closets in the children's rooms were always overflowing with books — *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *The Phantom Tollbooth*, the collected works of Dr. Seuss and Beverly Cleary — and where the refrigerator door was hidden behind a blanket of glowing report cards, honor roll certificates and test papers marked with little stars.

Her parents are both incredibly smart people. It's not exactly correct to say that they're rocket scientists, but it's close. Her mom's a software engineer at Honeywell's military avionics division. She works on things like the navigational systems of fighter jets and the Star Wars defense plan.

"My mom," says YY, "is math personified."

Her dad's an electrical engineer at Honeywell who designs circuits for satellites and does other highly classified projects. YY's always kidding him, saying she knows he's a spy.

"Dad, what are you working on?" she'll ask him.

He'll smile. "You know I can't tell you that."

Together, Helen and Bob combined their gene pool to produce five highly intelligent children — YY's the second oldest — all of whom they instilled with a bedrock belief in education. The indoctrination is chronicled in YY's childhood photo albums. There's a picture of her at age 1, already grinning the wild and wonderful YY grin and already clutching a book, prophetically titled *Fun Days*. There's another shot of her at age 7, receiving her first library card, which might be considered a minor moment in some houses, but which Helen was determined to record for posterity. Then there's the big black-and-white glossy of YY on the set of *The Romper Room*, where she appeared for a couple of heady weeks in '77, playing and learning on TV with other kids. Even then, she was the ideal pupil, earning a Romper Room School diploma in which the show's host, Miss June, attested that young Christine "was, at all times, a 'Good Do Bee.'"

Of course, life was a little easier in those days. Now that YY's on the verge of adulthood, being a Good Do Bee is about a trillion times more complicated. Because she's got so much more than just her classes and her grades and her scholarship. She's got her after-school job on the buffet line at the Belleair Country Club, which requires her to swallow her pride and ignore the snooty tones of some of the members, a few of whom are so old and feeble they'll point at the rice — rice, mind you — and ask her what that is. And like a good buffet girl she tells them, because she needs the money, because it pays for lunch and shopping and of course gas for the Y-mobile, her red '83 Honda Accord with more than 50,000 miles on the odometer and a few scattered french fries on the floor.

There's more. She's got all these blowout parties calling her name on the weekends. And her continuing attempts to establish a meaningful dialogue with these subhumans she laughingly calls men. And, oh yes, this one tiny question about her life, like what should she do with it?

She's not sure, but she thinks she might like to become a writer. She already does articles for the *Packer Press*, writes lovely essays for her teachers, keeps a journal at home, contributes poems to the literary magazine. Next year, when she goes to college, she wants to major in English. There's just one problem. Her parents seem dead-set against it. If you asked them, they'd tell you they want their daughter to study whatever's in her heart, but YY is picking up a different message. She's feeling pressure from them to forget writing — there's no future or money in it, she's

been told — and to concentrate on math. That way, she can go into something practical like engineering or computers.

So now, YY finds herself wrestling with this little archetypal career crisis. Does she do what she wants, possibly invoking a major power struggle with her folks? Or does she cave in and devote her life to logarithms?

Helen and Bob don't seem to realize how strongly she feels about this. Lately they've been distracted, struggling with some problems of their own. Last year, after two decades of raising a family and building a life together, the two of them split up. YY knows it shouldn't be that big a deal.

Doesn't everybody's mom and dad get divorced these days? But when it happened with her parents, YY was hit hard.

Her father is still around — he's at the house almost every day, seeing the kids, making sure he remains a presence in their lives — but YY feels as though Bob doesn't know how to open up to her. He has no trouble talking with her three younger brothers. But he seems totally at a loss when it comes to her. YY knows he tries. But it still hurts that with all his brains and all his security clearances he can't sneak through the trenches to get closer to her. Back in August, when she had her birthday, he told her he loved her and gave her a balloon with a hundred-dollar bill tied to the other end of the string. Garfield was on the balloon; Ben Franklin was on the bill.

"Thanks, Dad," she told him, not sure of what else to say. "I love you, too."

But that's ancient history. Because now, as if she didn't already have a thousand and one reasons to go psycho, YY finds herself here at the back of this empty classroom, forced to listen to another one of Judi Westfall's pep talks.

YY is still smoldering from their confrontation. It had been an astounding moment. There they were, YY and Amy Boyle, the vice president and president of the National Honor Society, two

of Largo's most dedicated students, and Ms. Westfall had the gall to accuse them of being an embarrassment to the school. And for what? For having the temerity to question her with their editorials. She'd made it sound like they were little terrorists or something.

And now, here comes Ms. Westfall again, commandeering the P.A. system, making the school sit through a soliloquy on the joys of being a Largo Packer. One of the first things she mentions is the shorts program, which despite YY's objections seems to be a spectacular success. Attendance is up, grades are up, and most of the kids seem to be following the rules most of the time.

"One thing I'd like to remind you," says Ms. Westfall. "Applications for the second six weeks' honor card will be available on the patio today during lunch. Applications are due by —"

YY has heard enough.

"Shut up, Judi," she tells the wall speaker.

The thing is, YY essentially agrees with Ms. Westfall. YY may gripe about her school. She may make scathing jokes about it. Still, she is devoted to Largo High. She adores her teachers, joins a ridiculous number of clubs and organizations, immerses herself completely in the Packer experience. Not being the cheerleader type, however, she doesn't feel the need to brag about the place.

She doesn't have to. With her academic record, she is already a walking advertisement for the kind of excellence Largo can churn out. Beneath the wisecracks, she is a true believer.

Which is why she can't stand to have Ms. Westfall — or anyone else, for that matter — shove the rah-rah down her throat.

So now, YY and a few of her friends begin exacting their revenge. They commit themselves to a guerrilla campaign in which the only object is to ridicule the enemy in as many petty ways as possible. They call Ms. Westfall names. When she speaks over the P.A. system, they repeat what she says in the voice of Elmer Fudd.

Most seditious of all, however, is the dart board. One day after school, YY and Amy go out and buy a dart set.

They bring it back to the newspaper office, and cover the board with cutout photos of various people who have aroused their scorn. Old boyfriends, Dan Quayle, a couple of curvaceous girls they call the Boom-Boom Twins, and, yes, Ms. Westfall. They choose one of her official portraits — she's in a dress with a floral pattern, smiling her most positive smile — and put it over the bull's-eye.

They hang the dartboard in the newspaper darkroom, where it won't be obvious. They stand back, darts in hand, then begin hurling. Maybe they're not really throwing the darts at Ms. Westfall. Maybe, on some subconscious level, she's just a convenient target for all their pent-up frustrations. Because the truth is, the severity of the girls' reaction — especially YY's — is out of whack with what happened with Ms. Westfall. Where is all the anger really coming from? Who or what are they really mad at?

Doesn't matter. When they nail one of their old boyfriends in the crotch, or when they score a direct hit on Ms. Westfall, they are overcome with an intense sense of gratification. They shout. They squeal. They almost jump for joy.

Of course, they don't score direct hits too often. Their aim isn't that good. YY, who's renowned for her lack of hand-eye coordination, has a hard time even hitting the board.

That's okay, though. The year is young, and these girls are hard workers. They believe in self-improvement. Practice may not make them perfect, but they know it will bring them closer to Judi.



#### Book Learning

■ YY's parents made books an integral part of her upbringing, from *Fun Days* at age 1 (top) to getting a library card at age 7 (right). The wild and wonderful YY grin is already in evidence in an elementary school photo (left). (Photos courtesy of YY's family)

**B**ack in the pod. Inside a fourth-period American government class, where once again Mike Broome is missing. "Where is he?" asks one of the kids.

"Suspended," says Mike's older brother, Wade.

"What did he do now?"

"Smoking."

The problems with Mike have not magically disappeared. Just because he opened up that one afternoon, tearfully confessing his feelings of alienation to Mrs. O'Donnell and Ms. DiLello, does not mean he is ready to make a turnaround. Mike still blows up, still pushes people away, engages in one self-destructive act after another.

Here in the pod, in that secluded world of the school known as the GOALS program, Ms. Westfall's pep talks play a little differently. In the pod, there are times when things go remarkably well, when the teachers are astounded at the progress the kids are making. But there are other times when it truly can be reassuring to hear about all the positive things happening at Largo. Sometimes, it's reassuring to hear about anything positive happening anywhere.

On the bad days, on the days when she's ready to scream, Mrs. O'Donnell will call her own home from school and leave herself a cheerful message on the answering machine. That way, when she gets home, she'll hear something upbeat. Someone telling her that she's a good teacher and she's not just beating her head against the wall. Someone promising her that everything's going to be all right. . . .

**E**veryone's got these funny ideas. When a black girl goes out with someone who's white, black guys at the school get all worked up. The crazy thing is, white guys get worked up too when a white girl goes out with someone who's black.



#### The Rail

■ There aren't many black kids at Largo, and many of them don't feel welcome in the larger world of the school. But the rail is different. It's the one part of campus that's universally acknowledged as theirs.

**T**he rules are clear. They're not written down anywhere, but everybody understands how it's supposed to work. Just look around.

The steps in front of the auditorium belong to the acolytes of the apocalypse, with their Metallica shirts and skateboards and smokers' coughs. The long metal rail down at the end of A wing, just in front of the pod, is where black kids sit. Sitting smack in between the two, with the rail off to one side and the steps off to the other, is the patio. You can't miss it. It's the big courtyard at the entrance to the school, the one with the trees and the benches and the inspiring view of the Mister Donut across the street. The one that's crawling with patio people.

There's lots of room out on the patio, and lots along the patio people for all sorts of hierarchies. There's the jocks and the ers, the mousse-and-lace-leggings brilliant officers and student council reps, y air-headed and of course those acachievers who come equipped with so. The patio is the physical hub around many things revolve. It is the heart of the social structure, the premiere stomping r the most popular and powerful kids in school. For all their different subsets, nem fit the same general profile. They e the ones with the designer clothes and mer hair and virtually no understanding of like to be alone on a Saturday night. And they are white.

Andrea Taylor doesn't care about the general Andrea — 'Dre to her nearest and dearest to sit on the rail. But now she goes onto o whenever she wants. She eats her lunch she stands under the shade of those cute lit-o trees, she mingles and makes jokes and though it were the most natural thing in rld. Some of her friends from the rail used : her a hard time about it.

'ou're turning into a white girl, 'Dre."

ventually, though, her friends learned to ac- he fact that Andrea is the type who writes wn rules. Some of them have even joined her e patio.

Andrea's a senior now, 17, a solid student, tall lender, with startling brown eyes and a smile could stop rush-hour traffic out on Missouri ue. She's one of those people who actually 's. Guys are constantly making fools of them- es over her. Last year, one boy was so crazy t her he gave her his beeper number, just so could reach him whenever she wanted. She'd

him up at work in the evenings — he delivered as — and tell him she was hungry and would lease, on his next run, stop off somewhere and her a Big Mac and some fries. He'd do it, too.

John Boyd, a buddy of Andrea's who has spent share of time on the rail, used to kid her.

"What have you done to this boy?" he'd ask.

John's no stranger to lovesick admirers him- lf. He's a sweet guy, with this soft voice and an canny ability to make anybody smile at any ne. He also has a body that's featured promi- ntly on a good many Top 10 lists — he's a run- ng back on the football team, with the muscles o prove it — all of which explains why girls are al- ays throwing themselves at him in the halls. At

named Alyma who goes to Dunedin High.

Anyway, John understood about the boy with the beeper. He thought it was funny the way this kid pined for Andrea. Not everyone felt that way, though. Some of Andrea's other friends didn't like the idea of her and this guy being together, because the boy happened to be one of the patio people.

"I hear you go out with white guys," someone said to Andrea one day.

Andrea looked at this person. "I date black guys, too."

Everyone's got these funny ideas. She hears them from both sides.

When a black girl goes out with someone who's white, black guys at the

school get all worked up. To them, there's only one reason why a white boy would want to go with a black girl. The crazy thing is, white guys jump to the same conclusion when a white girl goes out with someone who's black.

Andrea herself is not immune to funny ideas. The kid with the beeper was the first white guy she ever went out with, and when she was finally ready to grant him a kiss, she found herself wondering, as their lips moved toward initial contact, if it was going to be different from kissing other boys. Was he going to have some strange technique she'd never encountered before? No. He kissed just like everybody else. It was nice. Later on, she went out with this other white guy, and when he kissed her it was better than nice.

"I'd let him kiss me for days," she says.

Andrea knows how much this stuff upsets some people. She knows how some people feel about anyone who's black, period. Sometimes, in the halls, she'll pass the skinheads and see them glaring at her. She doesn't let it get to her, though. She just looks them in the eye and smiles and keeps moving.

She's got what you call a positive attitude, which accounts for the glow. She had it when she was a little girl, and she just never let it go. Next year, when she goes to Florida State, she wants to study business. She'd like to be an executive.

"I guess I want to be the boss," she says, grinning. "Like Abby Ewing on *Knots Landing*."

Andrea knows she can do it, too. Her mother has been telling her so since she was a little girl. Her mom is this no-nonsense woman who works on an assembly line at Honeywell. When Andrea was growing up, her mom used to sit her down in the kitchen and give her this speech, telling her

## WHO'S WHO



**John Boyd**

■ A junior football player and friend of Andrea Taylor.

**Amy Boyle**

■ A senior who, with YY, wrote editorials in the school paper that angered the principal. Also one of the Fearsome Foursome, the school's most powerful clique.

**Mike Broome**

■ An angry freshman in the dropout-prevention program, GOALS.

**Andrea Taylor**

■ A senior who could be Largo's first black Homecoming queen.

**Meridith Tucker**

■ Student council president and one of the Fearsome Foursome.

**Karin Upmeyer**

■ Senior class vice president and one of the Fearsome Foursome.

**Judith Westfall**

■ The principal.

**Christine "YY" Younskevicius**

■ Amy's friend who also angered the principal. One

how she wanted Andrea to stay in school and do the best she could.

"Education is important," her mother would say. "You need your education. You will not make it in this world without an education."

Her mother knows how hard it can be. She knows about people like the skinheads. She tells Andrea to not let other people define her.

Andrea knows it's good advice. But it hasn't always been easy to follow. When she was a freshman she did what was expected and stayed on the rail. There aren't many black kids at Largo — only about 10 percent of the student body — and it's rare for them to run for student council or apply for the newspaper or even go to the school dances. Many of them don't feel welcome. But the rail is different. It's the one part of the campus that's universally acknowledged as theirs. It feels safer to sit there. It feels friendlier.

But when Andrea sat on the rail, balancing her weight against the metal, she'd watch the white kids walk by and not even register her presence. As long as she stayed there, it was like she wasn't a real person to them. So out into the patio she went, ready to try another balancing act.

Some of her friends tried to stop her. They warned her she was going to get hurt.

"Don't even think about it," they said. "Don't think you're going to go out there and be Miss La-di-da. Because they're going to bring you down."

It seemed like somebody was always predicting the worst. Andrea didn't listen, though. She didn't see how she'd ever get anywhere if she gave in to that kind of thinking. And she was right. This year she's president of Largo's Black Culture Club, but she's also a cheerleader and a student council rep and a member of a student committee that works with the county's school superintendent. She goes to dances with other black kids at a community center, but she also goes to the school dances and to the football games. She still sits on the rail sometimes. She sits wherever she pleases.

Now, though, she's trying something new that has her girlfriends shaking their heads again. She's in the running for Homecoming Queen.

Andrea has no idea who nominated her. But when she found out she was one of three finalists, she couldn't help but get excited. Of course, it has never happened before. In the 75 years of Largo High's existence, a black girl has never been named Homecoming Queen. Her friends are already preparing her for the disappointment.

"Don't worry about it if you don't get it, 'Dre," they tell her. "You'll still be our queen."

**O**n a cool moonless evening in mid-October, throngs of wide-eyed parents come to the school to see the place where their children's lives are being shaped.

In the old days, they would have called this Back to School Night. Now it's just Open House, which sounds more professional, more upscale, more like something arranged by a real estate agent.

The parents arrive at dusk, just as the sun sinks into the gulf. They file into the auditorium and settle into their seats. Quietly, they observe the tableau that has been so carefully prepared for them. They stare up at the stage, gazing at the unfurled flags and the blossoming flowers and the



**The Principal**

■ Judith Westfall is not about to apologize for how passionately she feels about Largo High. Her office is a comfortable place, filled with antiques, dolls, embroidered sayings and little pigs — knickknacks that honor the school's official animal symbol, a razorback hog.

faces of the student leaders seated behind the lectern. They listen appreciatively to the school's jazz band. Some of them even look to the right and see the school seal on the auditorium's wall.

Shaped like a shield, the seal bears three images — a cluster of oranges, a winged foot and what appears to be an Indian maiden, waiting to serve a plate ofchow to some men parked offshore in a big ship — all under the word "LARGO." To a first-time observer, it's unclear why these images have been chosen. But there can be no doubt as to the intent behind the official school motto, displayed below the seal. The motto says:

*The Key to Success is Work.*

This is good. This is exactly the kind of thing parents look for at Open House. They have come here, as parents do every year at every school in the land, to be reassured. They want to meet the teachers and tour the campus and bear witness with their own eyes that the walls of education are still standing. They want to hear — they need to hear — that everything is going to be okay.

Of course, not everyone has come tonight. If just one parent of every student had shown up, there would be close to 2,000 people in this auditorium. As it happens, there are only about 500, which is still a better turnout than some schools get. The funny thing is that the parents who are here tend to be the ones who have the least to worry about, the ones whose kids are already doing fairly well in school. And the other parents? The ones whose kids are struggling and could use a little hands-on attention from Mom or Pop? As usual, most of them are nowhere in sight.

No point in wasting any tears over them now, though. There are plenty of people who have taken the trouble to be here. They're sitting out there at this very second, their faces turned expectantly toward the stage.

"Good evening," says Judith Westfall. "I'd like to welcome you to the 1989-90 school year and our Open House activity."

With that, the rituals of hope and stability commence. The parents are introduced to the senior class president, an impressive young woman who leads the Pledge of Allegiance. They meet the student council president, another poised young woman, who shimmers with enthusiasm as she briefs them on Homecoming, which is only a week away. And they pay close attention when Ms. Westfall begins listing the school's achievements. For several years, she points out, Largo has been named a Florida National Merit School. Just last spring, it won an Outstanding School Award from the Florida Department of Education. "You can see," she says, "why we're filled with pride this year to be Largo High School Packers."

Ms. Westfall does not realize the effect such words would have on YY and her friends. She does not know about the dart board or the nasty jokes. If she did, she would probably be surprised. Still, she is not about to apologize for how passionately she feels about this school.

It's true, she was angry at YY and Amy. She still thinks that their editorials were unfair, but she wasn't trying to attack the girls personally. If she had to do it over again, she might have tried to be a little less fervent with them. But she's hardly the villain they'd like to make her. High school students have always found it convenient to ste-

reotype their principals, so it is only natural — perhaps even inevitable — for YY and the others to make assumptions about Ms. Westfall, to categorize her, dismiss her, turn her into a dragon. The truth is, the girls don't know the first thing about her. They have no idea what she feels or thinks, what she worries about late at night, what she was like when she was their age, competing in a stressed-out sweepstakes of her own. . . .

Up at the lectern, Ms. Westfall is talking about the shorts experiment and how Largo kids won over the school board. Those students, she says, have learned a valuable lesson about working for change within a political system.

"It was time that Pinellas County schools listened to students," she says, emotion rising in her voice. "Students have good ideas."

Applause fills the hall. The parents look intensely happy that their children are part of something so wonderful. It's so progressive. So democratic.

This is not the high point of the ceremony, however. The high point comes when the parents join Ms. Westfall and a choir of students in a hushed rendition of the alma mater. Some of the parents — many of whom attended Largo — get this dreamy look in their eyes as they move into the second verse.

*One day a hush will fall  
the footsteps of us all will echo  
down the hall and disappear.  
But as we sadly start, our journeys far apart,  
a part of every heart will linger  
here in the sacred halls of Largo,  
where we've lived and learned  
to know that through the years  
we'll see you in the sweet afterglow*

The moment is strangely touching. When the alma mater plays at football games, kids invariably mock its archaic lyrics. But tonight, their mothers and fathers invest the song with a kind of wistful grace. They sing it with so much sincerity that it becomes something transcendent. It's a wish, really. An act of faith.

**T**hey glide into the cafeteria on another pizza-and-corn-dogs Thursday, just as first lunch is kicking into high gear. They are cloaked in the color-coded uniforms; they are exuding the requisite aura of imperial contempt. No one can touch them.

They walk up to a table. Up to one of the clueless innocents.

"So," they say to him together, reciting the ritual introduction, "this is what we call a lunchtime poll."

They draw their breaths, pause the ritual pause, then continue.

"You win \$5-million in the Publishers' Clearinghouse Sweepstakes, and the same day that Big Ed guy gives you the check, aliens land on the Earth and say they're going to blow it up in two days. What do you do?"

The innocent stares at them. Poor thing. He has no idea why they have uttered these words. He has no idea why they are dressed this way, one of them in yellow, one in blue, one in purple, one all in black. But something stops him from committing the heresy of asking. Something deep inside him tells him to fulfill his role, which is to provide them with a response. Well, let's see. If Big Ed gave him all that money, he says, what he'd do is keep \$2-million for himself and use the rest to bribe the aliens into backing off.

A sensible answer. Not one of the answers laid down in the sacred text, but it will suffice.

They move on, pose the question to others. One person, reverting to basic instinct, says she would grab the cash and head for the mall. Another says he would use it to buy a weapon to annihilate the aliens.

YY, who has been assigned the pivotal role of official secretary, records every response on a clipboard. She is wearing a yellow top offset by a black jacket and yellow tights offset by a black skirt. She is supposed to be Heather Number Three, the yellow Heather. Even with the costume, this is a stretch. In the movie, Heather Number Three is tall and blond. Not a bit like YY.

So what? YY and Amy Boyle and their two closest girlfriends in the entire world — Meridith Tucker and Karin Upmeyer — are engaged in symbolic theater here. They are reenacting a crucial scene from the movie that stands, at least in their minds, as the most underrated, most wickedly funny high school satire of their day. This is no time to get excessively literal.

It's Oct. 26, one day before Largo's Homecoming. As part of the festivities leading up to tomorrow night's big game, this has been designated as Character Day, when kids are encouraged to dress up like their favorite fictional or historical characters. YY and company have chosen to immortalize *Heathers*.

The movie is so much a part of their lives, it's hard to believe that it was only a couple months ago when they stumbled across it in the video store. It had played briefly in the theaters earlier in the year, but like many other people, they'd never heard of it, which made it all the more of a revelation. When they watched it together the first time, the four of them felt as though they had been struck by a thunderbolt.

*Heathers* is a dark and twisted comedy that stars Winona Ryder as Veronica Sawyer, a girl who discovers one day that she has joined the most vicious clique in the annals of high school history. There are only three other girls in this clique, all beautiful, all spoiled and all named

Heather. To keep themselves apart they each pick a different dominant color for their designer wardrobes, and together they rule their Midwestern high school with lip-glossed brutality. They amuse themselves with the lunchtime poll, asking other students to play the fool and thereby acknowledge the foursome's supremacy. If anyone crosses



### The Real Heathers

■ The stars of the film *Heathers* are (above, from left) Winona Ryder, Kim Walker, Lasanne Falk, Shannen Doherty, and (left) Christian Slater.

(Photos courtesy of Trans Atlantic Pictures)

them, even another Heather, they crush her, threatening to turn her into a social outcast.

Just when Veronica has reached her breaking point, she meets a new kid — teen idol Christian Slater, playing a rebel named J.D., which stands for Jason Dean — who decides the time has come to wipe the slate clean and begin killing off the Heathers and their allies, the thick-necked date rapists on the football team. J.D. draws Veronica into the plot as an unwitting accomplice, then leaves her no choice but to help him cover their tracks by making the murders look like suicides. It works like a dream; as the death toll rises, everyone instantly accepts that the Heathers — or any other kids — would kill themselves. It has become the fashionable thing to do.

"Dear Diary," Veronica writes in the movie's signature line. "My teen angst bulls—t has a body count."

*Heathers* would horrify many adults, especially parents, because for all its exaggeration, the movie shows kids talking like they really talk and acting like they really act. Plus, every parent in the picture is either borderline psychotic or completely detached, snacking on pate, drinking wine, staring blankly into the TV. Teen-agers aren't exempt, either. As reprehensible as the Heathers may be, they're only the natural product of their Darwinian surroundings. Just about every kid in the movie is maneuvering for one kind of status or another. At one of the funerals, a boy is shown kneeling at the open casket, supposedly praying but in reality asking God to help him get admitted to college.

"Preferably an Ivy League school," he adds.

When they watched *Heathers* that first night, YY and her pals were instantly hooked. They



laughed hysterically, totally enraptured, grateful to learn that someone finally understood just how absurd and savage high school has become. They rented it over and over. They memorized the lines, analyzed the plot, even went so far as to begin a running debate — these are honor students, remember — as to whether J.D. is supposed to be a Christ figure.

"I'm totally serious," sweet little Amy insists one day in the newspaper room.

She and YY have also decided that Veronica symbolizes the woman of the same name who wiped Christ's brow as he carried his cross. Their evidence? Amy and YY lean heavily on the fact that at one point in the movie Veronica burns a cigarette lighter into her palm, creating her own stigmata. As for J.D., they argue that just before he dies — and as a nonconformist, he does die — he stands with his arms held out and his legs crossed in the classic crucifixion pose.

"He did not cross his legs," says Karin, her eyes bulging with exasperation.

"Five bucks," says YY, ready to bet on it. "*Jason Dean is a Christ figure.*"

Karin's not buying it. After all, J.D. is a murderer. "Jesus," she notes, "never laid a finger on a fly."

"He might to prove a point," says Amy.

Sitting a few feet away, Meridith — the cautious one, the one who hangs back before committing herself — shakes her head, laughing.

But when Character Day rolls around, none of them hangs back for a second. Given the opportunity to slip into the Heathers' skin for a few hours, they can't resist. There are four girls in the movie, and there are four of them in real life. They call themselves the Fearsome Foursome. And though they're not the type to brag, there's no question that the girls are all heavy hitters in Largo High's ruling elite. For starters, YY and Amy have their fiefdoms with the newspaper and the National Honor Society, which means they exert some influence over the flow of written information and the happiness of the school's top students. YY has even been known, in joking moments, to wield her honor society position like a blunt instrument.

"You guys get out of my mug," she tells a couple of uppity juniors making fun of her one night at a football game, "or I'll mess up your work in NHS. You're talking to the vice president."

Amy, meanwhile, is a delegate on the student council, along with Meridith and Karin. Meridith is the council's president. She is also one of the bright-eyed kids in the front office who gets to select the thoughts for the day, which endows her with a bizarre kind of power unto itself. As for Karin, in addition to her duties on the council, she's vice president of the senior class and holds the unofficial title of funniest person in the school. Actually, all four of them are funny. They're quick, they're charming, they can maim with their one-liners. They are the Heathers of Largo High.

With one big difference.

YY and the gang like to think they're pretty hard-edged. But never in a million semesters could they even feign the depths of cruelty flaunted by the characters in the movie. These are nice girls. They're so nice, someone should probably report them to the proper authorities. They go to church; they lead school food drives for the poor; they truly work at making their parents and teachers proud. Still, they are human, and they are teen-agers. If they were given a truth serum once a month and forced to divulge every detail of

their weekends, their parents would probably be permanent guests in a cardiac unit.

Whenever they want, for instance, YY and the others can head for one of the get-togethers on Party Island, a circle of sand in the middle of the Intracoastal Waterway where scores of high school kids gather on weekend days. They pay a couple bucks admission for the beer and the boat

ride that gets them there, then hang out for hours, drinking and playing volleyball and working on their tans. The Fearsome Foursome doesn't hit the island parties too much anymore, though; usually the sand is too crowded with insufferable sophomores and juniors.

On Friday and Saturday nights, however, they will make appearances at the neighborhood blow-outs. Last summer, YY gave a party of her own. Halfway into the evening, some drunken fool took the liberty of eating some live shrimps he'd scooped out of the aquarium in the family room.

"You got any cocktail sauce, man?" he asked.

YY stopped him before he ate the blowfish, which was good, since it would have been poisonous. She didn't know the guy. She didn't know half the people there. Someone stood at the front door, charging admission. Someone else walked up to her and issued an apology.

"I feel really bad that we're trashing your house," he said. "Here's 85 cents."

In the end, the police were called, the house was emptied, and the blowfish tried to get on with its life. It was traumatized for a week, hiding behind plants, hoping the big hand would not return.

Naturally, Amy and Karin and Meridith were at the party with YY. But it would be misleading to suggest that all their time together is spent at beer-soaked affairs. Usually they're busy with more mundane pursuits, going to school, studying, heading for work. But even then they are almost always together. They sit together in class — Amy and YY are enduring the same calculus and physics courses — they work on the newspaper together, they eat lunch together, they sit around the same table and gripe about the same teachers.

They would definitely be patio people, except they tend to spend every spare moment at school inside AB-12, the room number for the newspaper office. They are all AB-12 rats. They eat there, sleep there and constantly torture each other there. YY has received an untold number of noogies there, has had her shoes ripped from her feet there and hidden many times in the ceiling's removable panels, has even been locked inside one of the cabinets. AB-12 is their inner sanctum, a place where they can yell, cry, store the dart board and their secret supply of No Doz, write inane quotes on the board and gather to weave the epic stories of their lives.

YY periodically collapses onto one of the tables in back and begins talking to whoever will listen. She talks about the barren tundra of her love life, Helen the Hum, her little brothers, the saga of the traumatized blowfish. She tells about the morning last year when she went outside her house and discovered that some unknown agents had covered the windshield of the Y-mobile with an encrusted layer of smooshed-up cookies. Nutter Butters, to be exact.

"So I'm out there with a spatula," she says, "trying to get them off. . . ."

YY and the other girls understand each other instinctively. They're all second kids (except for Meridith, who's the first-born in her family), each

with an older sister, which means they know what it's like to live in someone's shadow. And though well-to-do surroundings are no guarantee of academic success — some of the GOALS kids at Largo have been known to drive a Mercedes to school — they all come from middle-class to upper-middle-class homes. More important, they come from homes like YY's, where the walls are covered with books and where reading and learning are as much a part of daily life as watching TV or playing Nintendo. All of their parents went to college, and it was always assumed their children would do the same. There was room to argue about what university they would attend and how many degrees they would pursue. But from the day the girls were born, they were definitely going. Dropping out was simply never an option.

Now that they're seniors, YY and her friends may complain bitterly about the system and hurl the occasional dart at Ms. Westfall's mug. But they do not walk away. They've stuck it out for almost 13 years of school now, counting kindergarten. They've jumped through all the hoops, followed a fair percentage of the rules, done almost every single thing expected of them. To an astonishing degree, they have been ideal students.

Not surprisingly, they get pretty sick of it.

Which is why, on this Thursday, they are having a blast dressing up as the Heathers. To these girls, the notion of surrendering to their evil alter egos — of letting their monstrous mirror images run loose for a day — is irresistible. So through the halls they glide, wearing the clothes and wearing the attitude. They don't have to say FTW. They have their own slogans, from the movie.

"If you want to f—k with the eagles," they proclaim, quoting from one of the picture's key speeches, "you have to learn to fly."

They love it.

"Why do you have to be such a megabitch?" they say. Automatically, they give the required response. "Because I can be."

Not all of the clueless innocents are amused by this little act. Not all of them, in fact, are convinced that it's an act. Some kids, when they find out what's going on, would argue that YY and the others are merely revealing the essence of their natures. Who do the four of them think they are? Don't they know how they're coming off?

They'll find out soon enough. Soon, the backlash will begin. And before it's over, the inner circle itself will be shattered. Just as Veronica and Heather Number One battle it out in the movie, two members of the Fearsome Foursome will turn on each other with a silent vengeance.

That same Thursday, as YY and the others conduct their lunchtime poll, the final ballots are being cast for Homecoming King and Queen. The winners will be announced at tomorrow night's football game, during halftime.





Andrea Taylor is determined to enjoy Homecoming, no matter what happens. She'll go to the game tomorrow night, and then on Saturday she'll go to the Homecoming dance and let loose. The theme for this year's dance is "Sea of Love," but Andrea isn't expecting any big romantic night, because she's going with John Boyd. She tracked him down in the weight room the other day and arranged it with him. It made sense. Andrea doesn't have a boyfriend right now, so she figured it would be nice to go with her old pal. John's always fun to be with, plus there won't be any of the usual anxiety over whether some guy's going to lunge at her on the doorstep. That just won't happen, since John's already spoken for with Alyma, her girlfriend who goes to Dunedin.

Of course, when Alyma hears about the arrangement, she gets a little sketched. But Andrea tells her to calm down.

"Just friends," she says. "We're just going as friends."

**J**aimee the ghost does not really care who wins Homecoming Queen. "I don't even know who's running," she says.

Her full name is Jaimee Sheehy. For the first time in two weeks, she has made an appearance in her English class down in the pod. She's the thin one, with the long blond hair and the green eyes and the clean good looks you normally see on the cover of *Seventeen*. She's sitting at a table in the back, ignoring the Homecoming updates airing over the P.A. system.

Almost none of the kids in the pod are going to the big game. Almost none of them are going to the dance, either. For them, the idea of attending such functions — of actively seeking to establish such a connection with the rest of the school — is unthinkable. The GOALS teachers would like to change that. They're urging their students to go to the game; at least one teacher is giving extra credit points to anyone who shows up. But it's unlikely that many of them will take her up on it. When you're a kid living in a mobile home with your boyfriend, as one girl in GOALS is doing this year, Homecoming is insignificant.

#### Class Action

■ The members of the Fearsome Foursome are almost always together. They sit beside each other in class — in this instance, Karin is clowning around in front of Meridith — they work on the newspaper together, they all eat lunch at the same time, they sit around the same table and gripe about the same teachers.

Jaimee won't be there, either. She's not even here now, in this class. Even as she sits at the table, she is someplace far away. Someplace that does not appear on any map, except perhaps the one inside her head.

Just the other day, her mother discovered that Jaimee has stolen some money from her. By accident, Laura Sheehy learned that her only child — the one who'd begged to be trusted again after the car theft — had taken some checks from her and taken a couple hundred dollars to bankroll a shopping spree. Jaimee doesn't know she's been caught. Her mother hasn't told her yet.

The checks are the last straw. Laura Sheehy knows what she's going to do. It'll take a little time to get everything together. She has to call the insurance people. But one way or another, she is determined to make Jaimee face reality.

**F**riday night. Halftime. And the lights are blazing. They're burning with such a bright white light that they've turned the grass on the field into this super-charged shade of cartoon green.

Andrea already knows. They haven't even announced it yet, and already she knows. The first time around the track, it became so obvious. She and the other two candidates for Homecoming Queen are in these convertibles with the tops down. They're sitting up on the back seats, smiling and waving. They're circling the track in this little caravan — Andrea's in the third car, bringing up the rear — and as the first girl's car goes around the fourth turn and passes the stands, Andrea hears this round of applause, rising up in a tide of enthusiasm. The next girl goes by, and there's another big round.

Then comes Andrea. She's just made the turn and is heading down the straightaway when this roar begins. The car is slowly bringing her toward the crowd, and as she approaches, the roar just keeps growing. People are cheering and screaming. They're going wild.

When the three girls get out of the cars and onto the field for the announcement, Andrea is already trembling. She watches as the senior class president walks up to the microphone to name the winners. First she announces the king, which is this football player who's one of the best-liked guys in the entire school. Then she announces the queen, which anyone with one good ear has already guessed.

When Andrea hears her name, she does what Homecoming Queens are expected to do. She gives a little jump — not too high, since she's wearing high heels — and begins to cry. The crowd roars again. People are yelling and waving their arms and firing off their flash photos. Andrea's mother and older sister and Alyma are out there, and Andrea can actually make out her mother's voice, rising above the others.

"That's my baby!"

Everything happens so fast. Someone puts the crown on Andrea's head. She can't get it to stay. It keeps flipping off, and she keeps picking it up and putting it back on. Last year's queen hugs her and hands her two bouquets of red roses. Ms. Westfall hugs her and tells her how proud she's made them. The senior class president hugs her. Everyone on the field, it seems, is hugging her. Except for one person.

Andrea doesn't notice at first. But when she finally gets a few seconds to catch her breath, it occurs to her that one of the other two queen candidates — a girl who was favored by many

people to win the crown and who happens to be the longtime steady of the Homecoming King — is keeping her distance. Other people are all swooping over, gathering Andrea in their arms and squeezing her and telling her how beautiful she looks.

But not this girl.

Andrea looks over and sees her. At that moment, she's standing to the side, too crushed to say anything. She's just looking off in another direction, away from Andrea and the glittering crown that was almost hers.



#### The Ghost

■ Even as Jaimee Sheehy stands there, she is somewhere far away. One way or another, her mother is determined to make Jaimee face reality.

**T**he next night, at the dance, things get a bit uncomfortable.

The dance itself is great. There's a big turnout — there are more people from the rail than Andrea has ever seen at this affair — and the

music is pumping so loud and hot that at one point the amps overheat and the tunes stop dead for a few minutes.

But that's not the problem. The problem is that as queen and king, Andrea and the football player are supposed to dance a slow song together. They're supposed to do *Sea of Love*, since that's the theme of the night. But when the song begins to roll and they start moving in the middle of the floor, Andrea can't help but notice the guy's girlfriend, the one who was so disappointed at not winning.



## Queen for a Night

■ Everything happens so fast. Someone puts the crown on Andrea's head. Last year's queen hugs her and hands her two bouquets of roses. Andrea can actually make out her mother's voice, rising above the others. "That's my baby!"

(Photo courtesy of Largo High publications)

The girl has still not said word one to Andrea. In fact, a week will pass before she speaks to her at all, and even then there'll be this vague lingering tension. At this moment, during the dance, the girl is looking especially despondent. Andrea can see her over her partner's shoulder. She's dancing listlessly with another guy, gazing off into space again.

Andrea can't take it. Before the song is over, she asks the king if he wants to go ahead and dance with his girlfriend. So the two of them are reunited, and Andrea is cut loose. But that's okay, because John Boyd's waiting for her in the wings. The guy always looks hot. But tonight he is positively volcanic. He's wearing this black tux, and when Andrea gets near him, she discovers that he's slapped on this killer cologne.

Turns out she has plenty of chances to smell it. They're on the floor together for every slow song. John's pulling her real close. It catches her off guard. They're swaying together, and he's holding her hand — holding it tight — and she's leaning on his shoulder, zoning in on that cologne.

Suddenly Andrea realizes she has another problem to worry about. There on the dance floor, it hits her. She has to figure out what to do about Alyma. She has to find a way now to save their friendship. Because Alyma is not going to take it well when she learns that Andrea, her oldest and dearest confidant, the one she was supposed to trust, has stepped off into the deepest waters of the sea of love and is now sinking unpredictably and undeniably head over heels for none other than John.

**H**alloween's a few days later. Mrs. O'Donnell is walking on campus during seventh period — it's one of her planning hours — when she sees something she will remember for a long time.

It's Jaimee Sheehy and one of her friends from the pod. They're outside the gym, dancing with these big plastic skeletons.

"Am I going to see you girls in class?" Mrs. O'Donnell asks them.

They laugh.

"Oh, we'll be there. Maybe tomorrow."

Jaimee does not know yet that the missing checks have been discovered. She does not know what her mother intends to do. She and the other girl look very happy. They dip and tilt. They giggle. They move with the skeletons to some song no one else can hear.

ST. PETERSBURG TIMES

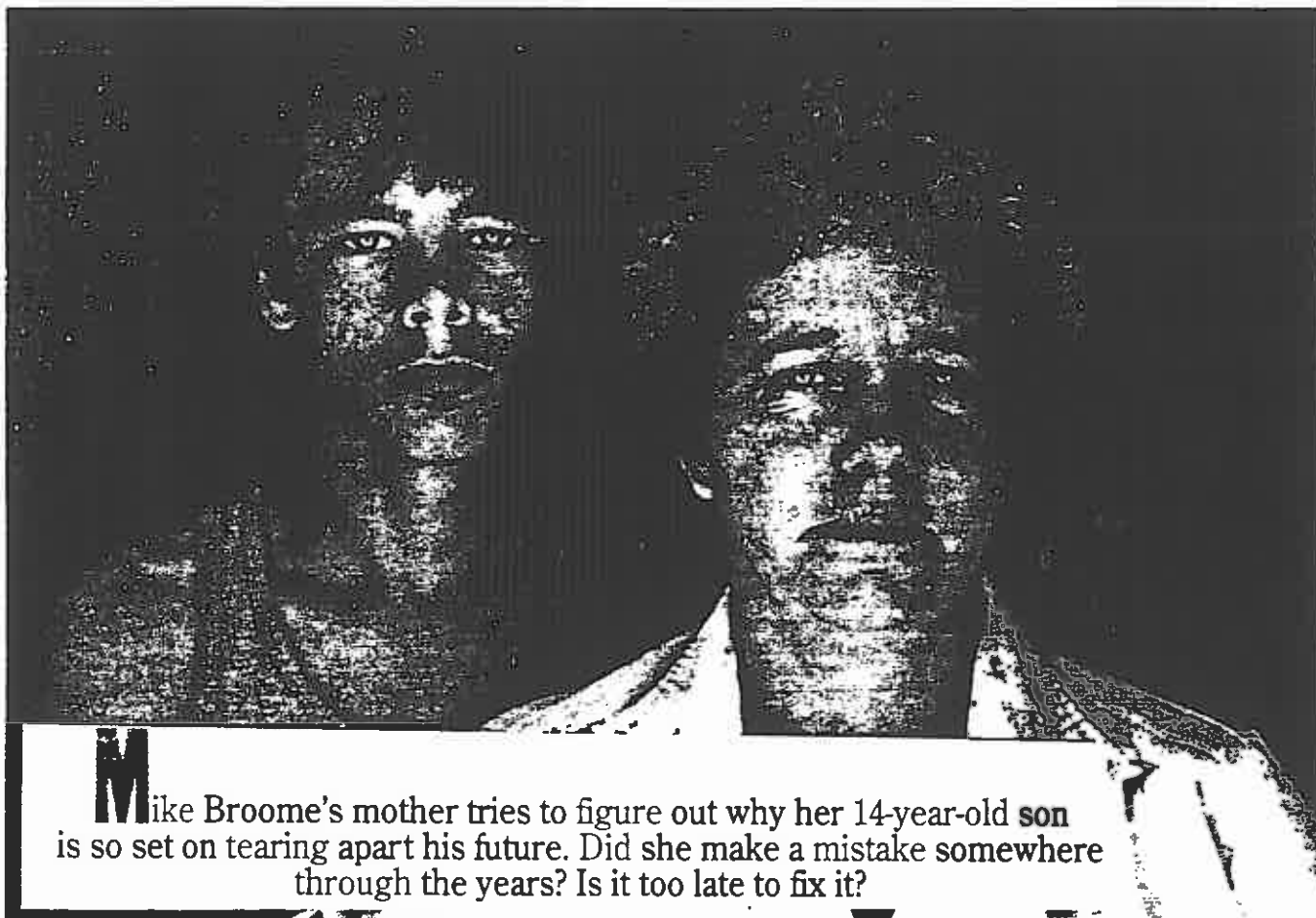
TUESDAY, MAY 14, 1991

of

A YEAR IN THE LIFE  
OF A HIGH SCHOOL

DAY 3

# Mother's Milk



**M**ike Broome's mother tries to figure out why her 14-year-old son is so set on tearing apart his future. Did she make a mistake somewhere through the years? Is it too late to fix it?

**A**s the fall semester barrels toward that balmy stretch that Florida jokingly refers to as winter, Andrea is fighting a hopeless yearning.

**O**ff in another part of the school, far away from Mike Broome and his silence, Andrea Taylor is engaged in damage control.

Andrea is a practical girl. She knows a hopeless yearning when one hits her. And what she's yearning for now is more than hopeless. As much as she'd like to go out with John Boyd, she knows it would be crazy to try. If Alyma found out, she'd probably never forgive her. So Andrea, who dearly values her friendship with Alyma, is keeping her feelings to herself. She hasn't breathed a word



to John. And she certainly hasn't told Alyma that John already tempted her with a kiss.

It happened after the Homecoming dance, when John took her home. He just gave her a little peck while they were standing beside the car. Nothing passionate. The kind of kiss someone gives a friend out of politeness. Still, Andrea was taking no chances. The next day, when she gave Alyma a rundown of the night, she conveniently skipped over the close encounter in the yard.

"And then he brought me home," she told Alyma, "and that's about it."

The problem is, that's not it. As the fall semester barrels toward that balmy stretch that Florida jokingly refers to as winter, Andrea can't get her mind off John. She knows she should be happy. Since she won Homecoming Queen, all the rules seem to be under revision. Black kids are still doing the balancing act on the rail, but they are also venturing onto the patio in greater numbers. They sit under the patio trees with other black students, but they also sit with white kids. It's the same in the cafeteria. It's not the end of racial problems, not by any stretch of the imagination, but at least it's a step in the right direction.

None of that, however, helps Andrea with her

time. Of course, she can't really talk about this particular object of desire. Alyma can, though. She goes on about John all the time, and as her best friend, Andrea naturally is called upon to listen. It's terrible. When Andrea can't take it anymore, she changes the subject.

"Yeah," she says, burning inside. "Whatever."

**'G**ood morning. Our thought for the day is: It's no use getting into a good college if you fail tuition." The voice of wisdom shares this friendly tidbit on a Wednesday in November. Once again, the thought behind the thought for the day is open to interpretation. Is the voice actively taunting students whose families can't afford to send them to college? Or is it just making a poorly chosen play on words? Who knows.

At Largo High, it's easy to feel on edge these days. Only a couple of weeks ago, students were relaxing in the calm of October, letting their homework slide, telling themselves there was still

#### Torn Between Love and Friendship

■ Andrea can't stop thinking of John, but she values her friendship with Alyma, who's also involved with him. Andrea even has a poster of her and Alyma on the wall in her room.

plenty of time to straighten up and salvage their GPAs. But now the inevitable acceleration is taking hold. Kids suddenly are waking up to the fact that Thanksgiving is almost here, which means Christmas is almost here, which means exam week is descending upon them like some angel of doom. Reality is finally kicking in. Sort of.

"I don't think he's that cute," one girl says to another inside a B-wing classroom. "He's got a good body, but his face is not that cute."

A few feet away, another girl — a girl who has recently been thrown out of her house — leans over a piece of paper, silently writing.

*I have come to a time in my life where I feel abandoned, alone, and where my time is running out. The clock keeps ticking away as more and more evil things keep happening and I have been put out in the cold*

Early one dead November afternoon. Scattered sunlight fighting its way through the window of a tiny cluttered office. Phones ringing endlessly somewhere in the distance.

Mike Broome sits against the back wall, slouched in a chair, studying his fingernails and dodging questions from yet another adult with a fancy title.

"Mike," says this person, sighing across a desk, "aren't we trying to work things out?"

"Yeah."

He keeps looking at his nails.

"Am I going to get suspended for this?" he says, still not looking up.

"No. Should you?"

"I don't know."

This day, a Thursday midway through first semester, Mike has been given two disciplinary referrals in a half-hour. One was for allegedly picking on another kid and then insulting his teacher when she tried to stop him; the other was for causing a disturbance when he was sent to the office. His specific words during the disturbance, according to the second referral, were, "I don't know why the f—k I was sent up here."

Now Ruth Riel, the dropout prevention specialist who leads Largo's GOALS program, sits on the other side of the desk, trying to understand why Mike does these things.

"Why do you use 'f—k'?"

"Because I want to."

"That is the worst word that you can use. It gets you in trouble."

No response from the other side of the desk. Miss Riel keeps looking at him. He won't return her gaze.

"I don't want to get suspended," he says, finally looking up. "Because my mom said if I get suspended again, I got to go live with my dad. . . . I ain't going to live with him."

The moment Mike mentions his father, the air of feigned indifference disappears; an edge immediately enters his voice.

Miss Riel does not know the full story about Mike and his father, but she can tell he has lowered his defenses, if only for a moment, and shown her something real inside him. She turns to a computer screen, scans through Mike's disciplinary record. He hasn't done anything terrible for a few days now, she says. If he'll apologize to his teacher, they're willing to make an exception this time. They'll let him off with a few demerits. Will he do that for them?

Mike looks down at his lap.

"All right."

If Mike ever ventured out into the open, there's no telling what he'd share with the teachers. He might talk about how alone he feels. He might even try, maybe, to explain how hard it is for him to breathe here at the school. Not just because of his asthma, either. It's the walls. And the walls around the walls. And all those stupid rules. Or he could tell them what it felt like when he was 2 and his father suddenly went away. But Mike tells his teachers nothing. He guards himself with silence, just like his dad does. At least that's what Mike's mom says.

"What's the matter?" she'll ask Mike.

Always, the answer is the same. "Nothing."

A few years ago, Mike used to tell her more.

He and his brother Wade would talk about how their father didn't love them. They knew he cared about Greg, the oldest of the three boys, because he'd always remembered Greg's birthday and because Greg had gone to North Florida to live with him. But they couldn't see any signs of their father caring about them. Why didn't he call? Why didn't he write?

Finally Jewelene Wilson called her ex-husband and told him what the boys were saying. So Mr. Broome drove down one weekend and came by the house — Jerry, Jewelene's second husband, politely slipped out to a movie — and spent a couple hours with them. He told them he did love them. He tried to get them to talk with him. But Mike and Wade clammed up. They sat beside him on the couch and refused to talk. They shut him out, just as they felt he'd done to them.

Now Mrs. Wilson has no idea what to do. She sits in her easy chair in the living room — it helps to sit, ever since she had the tumor removed from her hip — and listens to the traffic out on Belleair Road and tries to piece it all together.

She wishes she could go to school and secretly watch Mike in class. She wishes they had a classroom with a two-way mirror, so she could sit in the next room and observe without his knowing it. Maybe then she'd understand and know what to do. She wonders if Mike's taking drugs. She has asked him, and he denies it. She's taken him to the doctor and had him tested, but the test came out negative. She searches his room, but she can't find anything. So what's making Mike act like this? Is it just his anger about his father? Or is it her, too? She sits in that chair in the living room and wanders through her memory for what she might have done wrong over the years. Did she make a mistake? Is it something that can be fixed?

She's so tired. Even though her eyes burn with the same fire as Mike's, the rest of Mrs. Wilson's face is taut with tension, lined with worry. She's only 42, but she looks much older.

"Sometimes I feel like I'm 142," she says.

Over in A wing, the head of the social studies department is giving her advanced placement American history class its usual grilling.

"What amendment," asks Rosa Waldrep, "provides for direct election of senators?"

It is a sneaky question. So sneaky that many lawyers could not answer it without looking it up.

A boy seated near the front raises his hand. "Ummm, 19?"

Ms. Waldrep shakes her head. "The 19th Amendment gave women the vote." She pauses a beat and gives him a cutting little smile. "I'm glad you know that one, John."

She makes sure they know the correct answer (it was the 17th Amendment) and then moves on. She's always moving on, always asking more questions, always pushing them harder. Some years ago, Ms. Waldrep suffered a stroke that paralyzed half of her face; even today, the paralysis makes it difficult for her to speak. But after two decades in the classroom, she's not about to stop. Known as one of Largo's most demanding instructors, she is also one of the most affectionate. Sometimes, when she's probing her students' minds with her endless queries, she stands beside them, gently stroking their hair. "Dear children," she calls them, without a trace of irony.

"Who can name for us — look me in straight in the eye — and name the first seven presidents?"

She calls on a girl sitting off to the side. The girl casts her eyes upward, as though the answers might be scribbled on the ceiling.

"Look at me."

The girl does as she's told — then — miraculously — reels off all seven names in the order of their election. Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Adams, Jackson.

Sitting at the lectern, Ms. Waldrep rewards her with a nod of approval. She knows how tough the kids think she is. But today, like on so many days, she wonders if she's too easy. There's so much they need to learn. So much to etch into their brains. . . .

Over in the cafeteria, a GOALS student with an enigmatic smile sits in a booth, busily rearranging what's left of his lunch into some kind of sculpture. He is an artist who specializes in works constructed out of food and food containers. Once it was the *Leaning Tower of Milkshakes*. Another time, *Portrait of a French Fry*. Today he places a straw inside a milk carton and attaches a rectangular section of crumpled foil to the straw.

"It's abstract. Very abstract," he says. "It's a representation of the American flag in a hurricane."

Out in the halls, Jaimee the ghost glides quietly past the lockers. Something compels her to make her way into Mr. Taylor's seventh-period world history class. She actually takes her seat and begins taking notes. Mr. Taylor is at the over-



He doesn't remember how long it has been. He looks at his roll book and informs her that she has not shown up for this class since Oct. 20. In that couple of weeks alone — forget all the earlier absences — Jaimee has missed more than the nine days allowed each semester.

Other kids hear this and stare.

"You've already failed," one girl tells her.

"What are you doing here?" says another.

Jaimee says nothing. She fixes her eyes ahead, up at the projector as Mr. Taylor returns to his lecture. A few minutes later, when he's done and the bell is about to ring, he looks back at her.

"You going to come back tomorrow?" he says. She smiles. "If you're lucky."

**D**espite all the evidence to the contrary, Jaimee Sheehy claims she wants to graduate from high school. "I have to," she says, sighing as though someone is forcing her to state the obvious. "I don't want to work at McDonald's or something."

When people ask, she tells them she's headed for college. After all, she has ambitions.

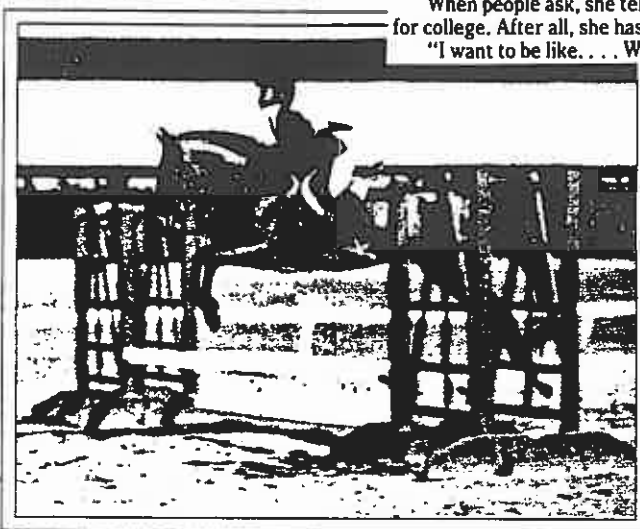
"I want to be like. . . . What do I want to be?"



### Jumping

■ Laura Sheehy doesn't know what happened with her daughter. As a youngster, Jaimee loved horses, and when she was 10, her mother bought her one named Shoney. She loved spending hours with Shoney. "My favorite is jumping," she says. Then Jaimee hit 14, and something happened.

(Photos above courtesy of Jaimee's family)



Um, maybe be a horseback rider, like a Grand Prix rider."

She already owns a horse, she says. His name is Shoney. She loves to ride him.

"My favorite is jumping," she says.

She does love to jump. She does it every day at school, always taking chances, feeling the wind on her face as she leaps over the edge. Horses have nothing to do with it. They used to, though. She did once own a horse named Shoney, and she did love to ride and jump with him. But that was centuries ago. Back when she was still just Jaimee the fairly normal kid.

At home, in her room, she keeps this paperweight from an insurance company. The paperweight has an equation written on it. The equation is this:

$$\text{Quantified risk} = 0 \text{ risk}$$

Her mother doesn't know what went wrong.



head projector, talking about ancient Rome.

Jaimee squints up at the screen.

"I can't read your writing," she says.

Renny Taylor is not surprised. "Because you're not here enough to know what my writing looks like," he tells her. "Jaimee, this is the first time you've been in here to take notes in —"



Maybe the change was coming all along. But Laura Sheehy didn't see it. She's an intelligent woman — she works as a respiratory therapist at the Largo Medical Center — but she had no idea what was ahead.

In the beginning Ms. Sheehy sympathized with her daughter. Laura was no angel herself in high school. She was a master at cutting classes and still getting by. She used to skip with Jaimee's father, who went to the same school on Long Island. The two of them dated until graduation, then he followed her off to college, then eventually they married and had Jaimee. Within a few years, though, they were divorced. Laura packed up Jaimee and moved to Florida.

When the time came for school, Jaimee did all right. She never much liked to read, and her elementary school teachers mentioned how easily distracted she was. One day in fourth grade, Jaimee and another girl terrified their teachers at Ridgcrest Elementary when they sneaked out of class and disappeared for a while, playing in some woods behind the school. Still, Jaimee was doing well enough that at the end of every school year she was always promoted to the next grade. And she was proving to be a dedicated athlete. She went out for both soccer and baseball, and when a kids' hockey league started up at the Sun Blades Ice Skating Center, she joined that, too.

Then there was Shoney. Jaimee got the horse when she was 10. Ms. Sheehy had a hard time scraping together the \$500 to buy him, but she thought it would be good for her daughter. Shoney gave her something to love, something to care for.

It was Jaimee who taught the horse how to jump. She was so patient, pushing and coaxing him day after day. She even built her own jumps. She and her mother would collect these old boards and barrels and would hammer them all together. They kept Shoney at a stable in Pinellas Park. Other girls Jaimee's age had horses there, too.

Most of these girls were from families who could afford to foot the bill for the riding lessons and the equipment. Jaimee knew her mother didn't have that kind of money, but she didn't care.

"Don't worry about it, Mom," she'd tell her. "I'll just borrow something."

Jaimee took a job cleaning the stables so she could pay for Shoney's feed and for riding lessons. It was hard work, but she stuck it out. Jaimee grew close to the other girls at the stables. They'd ride together, and brush their horses together, and clean the stalls together. Sometimes they'd even spend the night with the animals, giggling in the dark, sneaking up and scaring each other, sleeping on blankets stretched across fresh hay.

Then Jaimee hit 14, and something happened. She didn't want to go to baseball practice. She didn't want to play soccer or hockey. At school, it was even worse. Jaimee skipped so many days that she failed every course in her freshman year of high school; she lied to her mother, saying she was doing fine, even bringing home a doctored report card that showed her receiving mostly As and Bs. Her mother put her in GOALS, hoping that would help. The problem only intensified.

The low point came late in the second semester, when Laura Sheehy discovered that her black Firebird was missing from the hospital parking lot. She'd just called the police when a co-worker, looking out the window, pointed across

the way.

"There's your car," the co-worker said. "It's over there."

The Firebird was in a different parking space. It was dirty. French fries were scattered on the floor in the back.

That was it. Ms. Sheehy took her daughter to the police station and insisted that she be charged with the theft. A juvenile court judge eventually placed Jaimee on probation. But that didn't help, either. Jaimee didn't take the probation seriously. She didn't take much of anything seriously: Her mother tried counseling, but these sessions did not solve the problem. Jaimee had lost interest even in Shoney. That summer, her mother decided to sell the horse. She thought Jaimee would be crushed, but she barely noticed.

Now, only partway into this new school year — Jaimee's second stint in the ninth grade — the tailspin is accelerating. Just the other day, Jaimee bought a new poster. It was of Jim Morrison, the doomed lead singer for the Doors. She gave it to her mother, as a gift.

"I love you, Mom," she told her.

Laura Sheehy was touched, but she couldn't understand how Jaimee had bought the gift. Where did she get the money? She didn't have a job, and her mother certainly hadn't given it to her. Ms. Sheehy looked around and discovered other new things in Jaimee's room. Some clothes, a cassette tape, another poster. Then Laura looked in her checkbook and noticed some checks were missing. She went to the bank and found that a couple of hundred dollars had been withdrawn from her account. Ms. Sheehy couldn't believe it. For months, she'd been working overtime, saving to buy a house. Jaimee knew it, too. And yet she'd taken the money. Not to buy anything major, either — it's not like Jaimee's trying to make a living out of this — just some little trinkets for her and her friends.

What Ms. Sheehy couldn't help notice was the name of the cassette tape Jaimee had bought with the stolen money. It was by the Red Hot Chili Peppers. It was called *Mother's Milk*.

Laura Sheehy thought back to how she'd nursed Jaimee as a baby. In those days, it wasn't widely done. Her doctor tried to talk her out of it. Jaimee was jaundiced, and the doctor told Laura that it was because she had insisted on being different and nursing. Laura ignored the stupid man. She held the baby in her arms and felt her

**The assistant principal informs the boy that he has been removed from the attendance rolls as a student.**

**"Why?" he says.**

**"What do you think?"**

**"I don't know."**

**"You've been missing for three weeks."**

drinking from her and saw her looking up into her eyes, contented and safe, and it didn't matter what the doctor said. So what if Jaimee was yellowish-brown because of the jaundice. That could be treated easily. Besides, she was

so beautiful. She'd been born with a tan. . . .

Laura knows that beautiful child is still there. And she has decided how to bring her out of whatever wasteland she's wandering. This time, she will put Jaimee someplace where she'll get 24-hour attention. She is going to place her daughter in the adolescent unit at Charter Hospital of Tampa Bay.

Jaimee won't hear of it.

"I'm not going to go," she says.

Her mother tells her she needs help. She tells her they've got to do it. The decision is final.

"You are going to Charter," she says.

**E**arly one gray morning, an assistant principal sits in her office, listening to a hard rain falling against her window and silently watching as a man struggles to make some kind of contact with his daughter.

The man is leaning uncomfortably on the edge of his chair. He is trying to find the right words.

"If you don't come out with an education, you can't prepare yourself," he tells his daughter, staring into her eyes. "There's not too many choices for you. You can hustle hamburgers, or work at a car wash. . . ."

His voice trails off. Something in her face — maybe a hint of a blush — tells him he has made her feel self-conscious.

"I'm just talking out loud," he says. "I'm not trying to embarrass you, honey."

Across the desk from both of them, Patricia Palmateer lets the man talk. She has already explained to this girl — her name is April — that she is over the nine-day limit for absences and that unless she appeals to the attendance committee she will automatically fail the entire semester. Mrs. Palmateer has even tried to inject April with a small dose of reality, suggesting — though she does not put it in these exact words — that if the child goes on this way, the day will come when she may not be able to afford all the little niceties to which she has so obviously become accustomed. For instance, those L.A. Gear sneakers she's wearing. The expensive ones with the black and pink laces.

April keeps looking away from her father, who's still talking. He wants so much for her, he says.

"If I knew when I was 18 what I know now, I really would have tried to stay in school longer," he says. "Because I didn't know how tough it is out there. By the time you get out of school, out on the street, in the real world, either you make a living or nobody cares."

He gazes toward the window, where the rain is still falling against the glass. For a moment he looks as though he has gone somewhere far away. He begins to talk about when he was a young man, when he went into the Navy and was stationed on a ship at sea. Every evening, he'd go up on deck and watch the dark waves veering past the ship. That was when he began to understand.

"I'd stand there, looking at the water passing by, thinking 'There's got to be a better way,'" he says, pausing. "The ship was getting somewhere, but I wasn't."

A quiet falls over the room. Mrs. Palmateer looks over at April's father with awe. If only she could hire this man just so he could tell his story to all the students who sit in that chair where April is sitting now. Because there are so many of them. They hover out there, holding the referrals that summarize for Mrs. Palmateer exactly what they have done to be sent to her office. In addition to other duties, Mrs. Palmateer is the assistant principal who oversees Largo's GOALS program. On this morning, almost every student she sees is from GOALS.

Just before April, it was Melissa, who yawned and played with her hair while Mrs. Palmateer recited the litany of what happens to those who do not go to class. Then, immediately after April and her father leave, comes John, who learns from Mrs. Palmateer that he has been withdrawn from the rolls as a student.

John nods. "My mom told me. Why?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't know."

"You've been missing for three weeks."

Just after John comes Laura, who was sighted with some other kids skipping up at the Burger King. A few minutes later comes Tabatha, who slumps in the chair and stares at the floor.

"You have come so far," says Mrs. Palmateer. "Do you want to go back to where you were?"

Tabatha considers the question for a moment. In one ear, she is wearing an earring shaped like a skull and dagger; in the other, a tiny dangling pair of handcuffs. Hanging over her shirt is a necklace that bears the words *Oh Shit*.

"No," she says finally, sighing.

Tabatha was a nightmare last year. She rarely spent a whole day in class; sometimes, she'd head with her friends for this big drainage pipe behind the school. They'd sit inside on a piece of plywood and smoke cigarettes; Mrs. Palmateer isn't sure, but she thinks some of the kids might have had sex there. Later on, Tabatha turned around — she was one of the bright successes down in the pod — but now she is drifting again. Turns out she was one of the kids with Laura up at the Burger King. A police officer saw them, and they ran.

"Running from a police officer is very, very dangerous," Mrs. Palmateer tells her. "It can get you hurt. It can get you taken off to JDC." She means the Juvenile Detention Center. "I don't want you there. Do you want to be there?"

Tabatha shakes her head.

"You deserve good things," says Mrs. Palmateer. "And they'll happen to you. Hang in there. Pass all your classes. Get that diploma and then go on and become whatever you want to be. Because you can do anything you want."

Still slumped in the chair, Tabatha has begun to cry. She's trying not to, but it's no good. The tears are running down her cheeks, glistening faintly beside the dangling shadows of the handcuffs and the skull and the dagger.

Outside, the rain is finally stopping.

**T**he revelation visits the Heathers late in the second half.

They are up in the stands, in the section filled with shivering seniors. They have been busy on this chilly night. Already they have butted heads and spoken in tongues and played Pick a Noise. They have even shamed a member of the boys swim team, sitting nearby, in-pulling up the cuffs of his pants and giving them

a peek at his freshly shaved legs, the sight of which prompts them to hoot and stomp their feet.

Suddenly Karin Upmeyer fires the retros and makes a solemn pronouncement.

"You want to think of something really scary?" she says to the others. "This is the last home football game..."

YY, sitting a few inches away, fending off the cold with the sleeves of her sweater pulled over her hands, picks up the beat and completes the sentence with her, speaking in tandem.

"...of our whole entire lives."

The first semester isn't even over yet, and already YY and Karin and Amy Boyle and Meridith Tucker are waxing nostalgic, immortalizing every moment of their final year at Largo High. Before you know it, they'll be issuing commemorative mugs for their last pop quiz, their last broken pencil, their last party raided by the police. Right now, though, they are so overwhelmed by Karin's terrible observation that they fall into a state of shocked silence. They say nothing for a good long time, maybe even two or three full seconds, before they launch back into the torrent of wisecracks, running gags, gossip bulletins, chimp imitations — featured prominently in Pick a Noise — along with assorted beloved quotes not just from *Heathers* but from an astonishing number of other movies, songs, cartoons and late-night TV ads.

"Shhhhhhhhh," they tell each other in a stage whisper, repeating the timeless words of Elmer Fudd. "We're hunting wabbits."

"Is that *Freedom Rock*?" they say, reliving their favorite campy moment from their favorite campy K-Tel-type commercial. "Well turn it up, dude!"

It's Friday, Nov. 10, one day after Tabatha breaks down in Mrs. Palmateer's office. Tonight, as the Largo Packers face the Patriots of Pinellas Park High, YY and the girls are gathered with a gang of their fellow AB-12 rats and miscellaneous senior cohorts. They don't know how lucky they are. They do not realize how wonderful it is that they can sit here singing and laughing under the stars, huddling together against the cold. Intellectually, they recognize all the advantages that allow them to be so happy — they know, for instance, that not all kids have so many friends or live in nice big homes or enjoy the shelter of families as loving as theirs — but on an emotional level, they don't fully understand how good they have it and how bad it can be for others. They cannot imagine the depth of the sorrows that run through the lives of some of their fellow students.

How could they imagine it? YY and Karin and the others are still just teen-agers who have their hands full trying to make sense of their own lives. They're just kids, trying their best not to look too frightened as they stumble forward into the future. They work extremely hard, both in school and out. Why shouldn't they have fun sometimes? Plus, it's not like the girls have had their GPAs handed to them on a proverbial platter. Other kids probably like to think so. That's usually the rap against those who do well, isn't it?

But YY and company have all paid the price for their success. For years, they have all been pushing themselves past the point of exhaustion; sometimes they get so overwhelmed it seems as though they're going to collapse under the load. Meridith will get sketched and just start sobbing; Amy puts on her jogging shoes and tears off into the night,

to get her to lighten up.

Karin giggles. "I'll major in YY. Oh my God, that's really scary."

They try to act so tough. They laugh, they shoot off their one-liners, they pretend as though they have never heard of doubt or insecurity. But they all have moments when they want to sit alone in their rooms and stare at the walls. Amy, the quintessential perfect kid, torments herself by wondering if she can measure up to the towering precedent of her older sister, who was perhaps an even better student than she is. Karin, the loudest and funniest and most outrageous of them all, the one with the big hair and the bigger smile and the voice that doubles as a sonic boom, has worried since she was a little girl that her mother — a graceful, beautiful woman who was once a contestant in the Miss America Pageant — thinks she's overweight and unattractive. The thing is, Karin's not at all fat. She has been known to put on a few extra pounds now and then; even so, she is a pretty young woman. Still, she feels as though she'll never be quite pretty enough.

As for YY and Meridith, they're both still nursing away from it all. The Wild and Wonderful YY keeps pulling at her eyelashes and laughing that nervous laugh and biting her nails. Not long ago the dear child actually wrote a poem defending her right to chew on her fingers.

*The earth will still turn, on its axis still bent,  
And I'll still bite my nails, and I'll be content.  
Don't become nit-picky, a harpie, a fighter,  
Don't pick on a habitual nail-biter.  
So all of you hecklers please desecrate,  
I want to bite my nails in peace.*

It's not exactly Emily Dickinson, but it will have to do. Especially now that the girls are seniors and are working up a monster dread over the pressures they'll encounter next year at college. Karin's probably the most worried. She doesn't know what college she'll be attending — unlike the other three, she's only an average student and has yet to be accepted anywhere — or what she's going to study if and when she gets there.

"She's gonna major in Karin," says YY, trying

ing wounds from the divorces of their parents; when the subject comes up, Meridith sometimes gets this distant look, as though she has drawn an invisible curtain across her face. YY, meanwhile, is still staring down her archetypal career crisis, trying to figure out whether she should point her life in the direction she wants or bend to the pressures she's feeling from Helen the Hun and Bob. She tries to talk to her mother about it. But Helen doesn't seem to want to hear it.

"You're doing math," she tells her.

YY, who knows her mom is only trying to look out for her, doesn't want to force the issue. But it's almost always there in her voice. It's in all the girls' voices. Beneath the invincible exteriors, the Fearsome Foursome are scared just like the rest of us. Scared of failing, scared of letting their parents down, scared of college and jobs and marriage and mortgage payments and all the blank pages of their lives waiting to be written. You can hear it tonight, at the Pinellas Park game, as they joke and patter and fire away with their assorted



snickering when some poor receiver dives for a pass and comes up with nothing but a mouthful of turf. Still, YY and Karin and the others have all shown up tonight, as they do at almost every football game. They may be yelling at the cheerleaders — half of whom, for the record, are their pals — but they also go wild when the squad leads the crowd in this hybrid dance-chant called the Gigolo.

*We put our hands up high  
And our feet so low  
And this is how  
We do the Gigolo*

When Largo barrels into the end zone, the girls jump up and emit ear-splitting screams. When the play gets called back on a penalty, they flip into a spiel about how their school always gets robbed of its TDs.

beloved quotes, repeating them together in one voice like so many incantations recited against the dark, against uncertainty, against loneliness. They're trying so hard to have a deliriously good time. . . .

It's working, too. A joyous evening is indeed being had by all. Right now, the girls and their friends are taking yet another opportunity to make fun of the cheerleaders. They keep talking about how lazy they are. They make it sound as though they're slugs in short skirts.

"Wait," says one critic, feigning breathless anticipation. "They're going to do something."

Down on the track, in front of the stands, the girls in uniform are trying to pump up the crowd with a rousing chorus of "Let's go, Largo!"

"Original cheer," says YY.

"They can't say more than two words at a time," says someone else.

As usual, YY and company are doing the old outside-but-inside routine. Here they sit, mocking the concept of cheerleading — and a strange concept it is, when viewed from a distance — ridiculing any administrator who wanders within range.

"Let me get this straight," say YY and Karin, speaking in tandem again. "Their touchdowns count, but ours don't. Okay, rules are rules. Every time we score, it doesn't count. Okay, got it."

A few minutes later, when the final seconds tick away and Largo has lost 24-14, YY and the gang moan about how unfair it was, then quietly join the crowd shuffling out of the stadium. They don't even smile when the school band serenades their departure with the customary rendition of the *Flintstones* theme. It's the last time the girls will hear this song on this field. Their last chance in their entire high school lives to dance under the lights with Fred and Barney, and all they do is get in their cars and drive away.

Down in the pod, in Mrs. O'Donnell's class, they're climbing back on the deathmobile. It's time again for show and tell, and today it seems that death is all they want to talk about.

"I think the end of the world is coming," says one boy.

"I do, too," says someone else.

"Too many things are happening."

Someone brings up the subject of the spirit world, which inevitably leads to a discussion of Ouija boards. "I burned mine," says this one kid named Eric. He's a tall boy with deep-set eyes that look as though they could cut through metal. Some of his friends call him the Dragon.

Mrs. O'Donnell, who knows a hint when she hears one, presses him for more details. Why did he burn his Ouija board?

"I didn't like what it told me."

"What did it tell you?"

He looks down at the table. "It told me when I was going to die."

#### The Assistant Principal

■ Many of the students tower over Patricia Palmateer, who oversees Largo's GOALS program. "You deserve good things," she tells one girl. "And they'll happen to you. Hang in there. Pass all your classes. Get that diploma and then go on and become whatever you want to be."

"When are you supposed to die?"  
"1992."

The other GOALS kids stare at Eric with a quiet intensity that borders on admiration. Death is always in the Top 40 here in the pod. It surfaces constantly in the kids' conversations, it floats through so many of their favorite songs, it swirls silently in the overwhelming grimness of their wardrobes. They wear black shirts and black pants; they wear necklaces and rings and earrings adorned with skulls and skeletons. Last year, in one of the GOALS English classes, a boy wrote mock obituaries for his family, inventing horribly violent ways for them to exit this world.

Maybe this fascination has something to do with their feelings of powerlessness. Or maybe they're young and slightly morbid and think this stuff is fun. But if there's an edge to it, if it hits slightly close to home, their interest only grows more intense.

"If you're into black magic," a girl volunteers

The teacher presses for details from the boy some kids call the Dragon. Why did he burn his Ouija board?  
"I didn't like what it told me"  
"What did it tell you?"  
He looks down. "It told me when I was going to die."

to the rest of the class, "there is a way for you to meet the devil."

"Would you like to meet the devil?" asks Mrs. O'Donnell.  
"No."

They talk about everything. About their dreams that turn out to be prophecies of the future, their jobs that never work out, the endless arguments with their parents. One day a new boy in school tells Mrs. O'Donnell's fourth-period class about the time he nearly died while driving drunk. He has the scars to prove it. He parts the hair on his head and shows them off.



#### The Teacher

■ Mrs. McGraw is no novice when it comes to dealing with kids. She has taught for 14 years; she has also raised three children of her own, all boys. Still, what she sees every day has unnerved her.

By no means is show and tell always so serious. One day a girl brings in a copy of *Sassy* magazine and lets the others check out some hot photos of Patrick Swayze, the movie star.

Mrs. O'Donnell makes the mistake of saying she's not familiar with *Sassy*.

The girls look at her as though she must have been trapped in a cave since the Stone Age.

"You've never heard of *Sassy*?"

Mrs. O'Donnell picks up the issue and flips through it. "What do they tell you about in here?"

"Makeup tips. . . Five types of guys to avoid at all costs."

Another girl wants to show off her teddy bear, which she made herself in home ec. Someone else stands up one morning and gives a speech about the importance of Earth Day, which is coming up. Another kid shows off his leather jacket. Another wants to tell about his mother's out-of-body experience. Then there's the clean-cut boy on the football team, who gets other kids to make thumping bass sounds with their mouths as he performs a rap number — the lyrics of which, he informs the class, he wrote himself.

*I'm a bebop maker,  
a girlfriend taker,  
a rhyme creator  
When the beat come out,  
it sounds so sweet  
When the beat kick out,  
it will be neat*

One November morning, when a show and tell session is scheduled, Mike Broome raises Mrs. O'Donnell's hopes by bringing his guitar from home. But once the class starts, he changes his mind and sits slouched in his chair, emanating hostility. A little while later, though, he calms down, pulls the guitar out of its case and quietly strums for the rest of the class. Suddenly he's a different kid. Suddenly he's approachable. But there's no telling when the other Mike will return.

On another day, after he comes back from another of his many suspensions, Mrs. O'Donnell tries to give him a test. He knows the material; he was here for the review. But he refuses to take it. Trying to make it easy, Mrs. O'Donnell offers to let him use her review notes, which will include the answers. Still he refuses.

"Do you want to take the test later?"  
"No."

He sits there with the test in front of him, ignoring it, glaring at her.

Mrs. O'Donnell doesn't know it, but there's been a setback. Earlier in the semester, Mike was talking about how he wanted to go into the Air Force like his oldest brother, Greg. But the other day, he talked to Greg on the phone and found that he might not be able to make it into the service, even if he straightens up and graduates from high school. It's Mike's asthma. The Air Force, Greg told him, might not accept him because of it.

Mike says he doesn't care. "I'll just have to find something else to do," he says outside of class. But it's so obvious he does care.

What the teachers can't seem to get across to Mike — what he seems unwilling to accept — is that he cannot continue this way without paying the consequences. They hate resorting to that kind of bombast. *Pay the consequences, Mike.* They don't like falling back on all those turgid old phrases that used to make them want to gag when they were kids and had to suffer through lectures. But they can't help it. They don't know how else to put it.

"What can you do with yourself if you drop out?" Ms. DiLello asks him.

"I don't know."

Mike is hardly the only one in the pod hiding

from reality. Not long ago, Miss Riel found herself trying to talk some sense into a girl who had decided to drop out and move in with her boyfriend.

"He's going to support me," said this girl, whose name is Diane. "He's going to take care of everything I need."

"What about five years from now, when you and this guy aren't together anymore?" said Miss Riel. "What are you going to do then?"

"I don't care. I'll marry somebody."

The scrawny boy in Mrs. McGraw's seventh-period class, the one who screams without warning, is growing more and more remote. The angelic-looking girl in Mrs. O'Donnell's sixth-period, the one who believes she is a witch, suffered a breakdown recently and went away for a few days. Now she's back in class, staring at people.

"I forgot who I was," she says, giggling.

Eric the Dragon sits in class and stares into space. He's a friendly kid, with a quiet, self-deprecating charm — he's not nearly as imposing as his nickname sounds — but when he talks about his life it's clear he feels a deep sense of isolation. One of his favorite pastimes, he says, is to climb this one tree and sit there for hours, watching people go in and out of a nearby bar, wondering if their lives are better than his.

"I build a wall to hide everything," he says softly one morning at the back of a classroom. "Eventually, it will break."

So many of them feel just as removed as Eric does. They're watching from the outskirts. They don't have the faintest idea how to do the outside-but-inside routine. These kids, or at least a large number of them, exist only on the outside.

## Who's Who

### John Boyd

■ A junior football player and friend of Andrea Taylor.

### Mike Broome

■ An angry freshman in the drop-out prevention program, GOALS.



### Arnette DiLello

■ A math teacher working with Mike in GOALS.

### Mary O'Donnell

■ Mike's science teacher.

### Jaimee Sheehy

■ A second-year GOALS student who has begun to spin out of control.

### Laure Sheehy

■ Jaimee's mom.

### Andrea Taylor

■ A senior who, after becoming Largo's first black Homecoming Queen, finds herself falling for John Boyd, even though he's dating her best friend.

### Karin Upmeyer

■ A senior who, along with YY, Amy Boyle and Meridith Tucker, make up the school's most powerful clique.

### Christine "YY" Younskevicius

■ Karin's friend who is fighting a massive stress overload.



### Getting Involved

■ When a kid brings in a skateboard, teacher Mary O'Donnell kicks off her shoes, steps onto the board and asks how to position her feet. Suddenly the class is urging her on. Suddenly they are the teachers and she is the student.

Like YY and the rest of her gang, they see the pettiness of the rules — just ask them about the logic of bathroom passes, if you dare — and the tactical nature of certain policies. They sense the same smothering qualities of the system. But they have trouble seeing beyond these limitations. They don't understand that any system they enter, any school, any business where they'll ever work, has its petty rules and smothering qualities. It's hard for them to accept that high school offers something worth their time and trouble. To them, school is just stupid and unfair.

"They can't hang with the system," says one girl, trying to explain. "They give up. They quit."

YY and her pals have to cope with their own painful problems. But they're flexible enough to compartmentalize. Even if they're upset about something, they can put it aside for an hour or two while they study for tomorrow's exam. GOALS kids have a hard time slicing up their emotions like that. Some of them, struggling with the most wrenching emptiness in their lives, are left with almost nothing extra to help them cope with smaller frustrations.

The tiniest change can unhinge them. One weekend, Mrs. McGraw goes to the beauty salon and gets her hair done. When she returns the next Monday, the kids are shaken up. They want to know exactly what she's done.

"Did you color your hair?"

"No."

"Yes, you did."

"No, I didn't."

Mrs. McGraw, a stout woman with a slight twang to her voice that hints at her upbringing in southern Ohio, is no novice when it comes to dealing with kids. She has taught for 14 years; she has also raised three children of her own, all boys. She knows that even the most difficult kids often turn out fine in the end. Still, what Mrs. McGraw is seeing at Largo has unnerved her. Every day she has five classes, with about 90 kids total. In her grade book, where she keeps track of them all, she puts a little star by the name of every kid who's dealing with serious difficulties, either at

home or school. Well before the end of the first semester, the number of stars has burst into a galaxy.

"It just tears me up," she says.

Mrs. McGraw and the other GOALS teachers do their best to make their classrooms a place where the students can feel safe and secure. They bombard the kids with positive reinforcement, try to listen to them without judging, try to make the classwork as stimulating as possible. When Mrs. Glidden wants her biology class to understand how blood circulates through the body, she draws a huge heart on the floor and leads the kids through the ventricles as though they were flowing through them themselves. When Mrs. Frye wants her family living class to prepare for a test, she splits them up into competing teams and has them review the material with a game of Jeopardy! And when Mrs. O'Donnell wants to find out what's on the minds of her students, she announces that it's time for show and tell.

If a kid brings in a motorcycle helmet he wants to show, Mrs. O'Donnell will try it on and let the class laugh at her. If someone brings in a skateboard, she'll kick off her shoes, step onto the board and ask how to position her feet.

"Show me," she says to a kid one day who's just been doing kickflips for the class. "I'd like to try it."

After rolling tentatively between the desks, she steps off the board and shakes her head. She says it's too hard. She says she can't believe how easy this kid makes it look.

Suddenly the class is urging her on, telling her to give it another shot. Suddenly they are the teachers and she is the student.

"You just can't do it because you think you can't do it," one of them tells her, echoing the words she uses so often with them. "Just get on it real confident. Jump on that thing and take off."

Back on the board she goes. Her knees are wobbling. Her arms are waving. She's laughing.

"You just want me to kill myself," she says. "so you won't have class."

Mind you, none of it flies without the parents.

If mom and dad are on board, too, willing to work at it with their kids and with the teachers, then maybe the program can work. That's why parents are asked to sign the admission agreement. If they want their kid in GOALS, the parents — as well as the student and at least one teacher — must sign a piece of paper promising to go the extra mile.

Some of the parents are so determined to turn things around that they're ready to go a hundred extra miles. Some will barely move an inch. And others are simply oblivious. Earlier this semester, the mother of one GOALS student came to Open House so she could meet her son's teachers. As she left the meeting with Mrs. McGraw, the mother turned and said something incredible.

"Good luck with your sprouts!" she said.

Mrs. McGraw smiled and nodded and was already talking to someone else. She probably didn't even register exactly what the mother had said. Sprouts? *Sprouts?* What kind of problems did she think the teachers in the pod were dealing with? Did she think she'd stumbled onto the set of *Leave It to Beaver?*

If Mrs. McGraw had the time, she might have found a way to straighten this woman out. Maybe she could have told her about the two girls who were chatting it up in class the other day, talking about having sex with their boyfriends in a park. They were going on about how sex outdoors is so messy and how dirt and sand are always getting stuck in the most sensitive of places. Mrs. McGraw told them to stop it, that it wasn't polite to discuss such things. The girls just rolled their eyes and told her to get real.

"That's life," they told her.

Or maybe, if she'd had just a moment more, Mrs. McGraw could have cornered the mother and insisted that she come to the school the following week, when GOALS is sponsoring another parent workshop. This is one of the new things they're trying this year. One evening every week or so, a different speaker visits the pod and tries to enlighten parents on what's happening in the lives of their children. The first session was on family communication. The one next week will be

on teens and drugs; Nancy Hamilton, the director of juvenile services for Operation PAR, the drug treatment and rehabilitation program, will be the guest.

A major push is under way to round up a good crowd. Calls are being made to parents; fliers are being sent home with the kids. The teachers are very excited.

**N**ancy Hamilton, it turns out, does not disappoint. For more than an hour one Tuesday evening, she stands in front of a GOALS classroom and rivets the members of the audience. She paints a portrait of how drugs are only a symptom of a larger ailment. She tells them that the average onset of drug use among the adolescents who come to Operation PAR is around age 10 or 11, but that it's not unusual to see them starting as early as 7 or 8, often with cigarettes.

"We've had kids," she says, "whose moms have been rolling joints for them since they were 5."

She talks about parents who let their kids drink at home, naively hoping it will keep them from drinking somewhere else. She acknowledges that crack is a serious problem but points out that alcohol is still the drug most commonly abused by high school students.

"I can't believe how alcohol-centered these kids' lives are," she says.

She talks about how the drugs that are available are 10 times stronger than they used to be; how incest is on the rise; how most kids not only are having sex but having it with multiple partners — this is a shift, she says, from the serial monogamy they practiced not so long ago — and about how an increasing number of the young are living on the streets and leasing their bodies to some stranger, just so they can eat or have a place to sleep. "Survival sex," she calls it.

At the heart of her talk, however, is a simple plea for parents to listen to their children.

"Most kids," she says, "just want to talk to you."

There's just one problem with Ms. Hamilton's presentation. Almost no one's on hand to hear it. There are plenty of teachers here — six of them, which is about half of Largo's GOALS faculty — even though they've been at school since 7 a.m. But for all the calls and fliers sent home, the audience is filled with a grand total of two parents.

A week and a half later, the next workshop rolls around. This one's on satanism and cults; again there are six faculty members in the room and only two parents.

One week after that, at a session on family dynamics, the teachers find themselves sitting with one mother.

Andrea Taylor is getting tired of being practical. She is rapidly reaching the point where practicality is tearing her in two. She can't stand it anymore. The time has come, she decides, to let John Boyd in on this melodrama. Maybe he'll know what to do. Maybe he'll talk some sense into her. She drops the bomb one day after school.

"You're probably not expecting this," she tells him. "I wasn't expecting this. But I like you."

John stares at her, dumbfounded.

"You do?" he says.

She nods. "You couldn't tell?"

"No."

She says she knows it's wrong. But she couldn't hide it any longer.

As usual, John is a gentleman. He tells her it's okay and promises to keep quiet. Still, he's in a state of mild shock. A few days later, though, after the surprise has worn off, he gives Andrea a jolt of her own. He sends her a note, confessing that he feels the same way she does. He likes Alyma just fine — she's a sweet girl — but the truth is, he says, he wants to be with Andrea.

So much for talking sense. Now they're really in trouble.

Back in the pod, the parent workshops have been canceled due to a lack of parents. A certain girl, asked to join in a class discussion, recently offered her nails as a current event. And in her room near the end of the hall, Mrs. McGraw has been trying to get tough with her freshmen English students. But they keep making her laugh.

"You know you love us," they tell her.

"That's beside the point," she says, fighting back a smile.

**O**n the day of the biggest football game of the year, something happens. Two things, actually, which when taken together come close to a definitive explanation of the place high school has become.

It's Friday, Nov. 17, the day the Largo Packers will wrap up the season by playing their archrivals, the Tornadoes of Clearwater High. In honor of the game, this has been declared Farmer Day, which is a nod to the old days when the only two public high schools in this corner of the county were Clearwater and Largo. Back then, Clearwater was known as the city school, and Largo was supposedly filled with nothing but farmers.

Anyway, in honor of that history, many of the teachers and even a few of the students are walking around in overalls and straw hats, dangling oats from their lips and debating whether they'll whip those sissified city boys from Clearwater. It's a loose kind of day, a day when even the administrators are lowering the walkie-talkies for a second and enjoying themselves, and everything's going fine until fourth period, when the girl in the pod starts rambling on about the devil.

It's the angelic-looking girl who thinks she's a witch. In the middle of Mr. Howard's math class, she bursts out with an ominous question.

"Is there anybody here who can take me to the hospital?"

Tracy Howard asks her what's the matter, but it's as if she doesn't hear him. She stands up and walks toward the door.

"If nobody is going to take me to the hospital," she says, "then I'm going myself."

With that she takes off down the hall. People run after her; people run for help. Somehow they get her to the office, where she launches into a speech about how she's God or at least a messenger from God and how she can't breathe because the devil has been sucking her blood. She says she needs to get to a hospital and get a transfusion, so she can breathe again. Finally the police arrive

and take her to a hospital for psychiatric care.

What happens next, though, is what really makes the day so remarkable: The Farmer Day pep rally goes on just as planned.

There's no reason it shouldn't. No reason at all. Still, there is something surreal about the fact that these two events can occur in one place in the space of a single day.

The pep rally gets under way late that afternoon. Students are summoned from their classrooms and called to the stadium, where they listen to the band and watch the cheerleaders and listen to the football coach. His name is Pat Mahoney, and though he is well regarded as both a teacher and coach, it sounds odd to hear him talk about a game of football when some in the crowd are still thinking about what happened to that girl.

Coach Mahoney is a barrel-chested man with ramrod posture and a close-cropped beard that bristles with purpose. He reminds the crowd how long it has been since Largo has beaten its north county nemesis. But the members of his team, he says, have assured him victory is at hand.

He looks up at the kids in the stands, looks them in the eye, and says he expects each and every one of them to be at the big game.

"There's no excuse for you not to be there tonight."

That evening the Largo Packers venture into the enemy's stadium and vanquish the Tornadoes 13-6. YY and the gang join a horde of other students swarming on the field in a mass celebration.

Why shouldn't they celebrate? Tonight truly is the last football game of their entire high school careers. No matter how silly or overblown it may be in the larger scheme of the universe, this moment will never come again. If they're going to revel in it, they'd better do it now.

And revel they do. For a few minutes of one evening, YY and company abandon the outside-inside routine and give themselves over entirely to their school. They chant, they dance the Gigolo, they bark like dogs. YY sits atop someone's shoulders, twirling triumphantly under the lights.

**J**aimee Sheehy is gone.

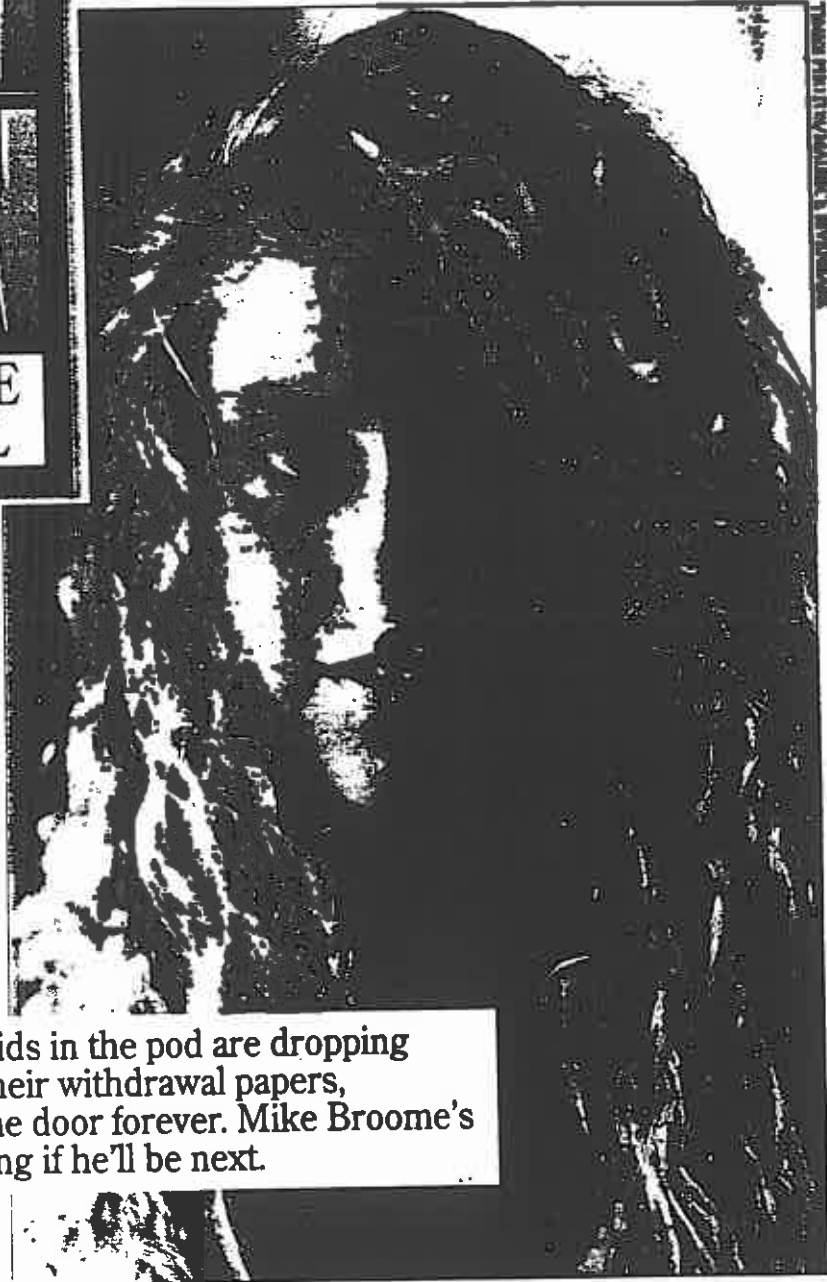
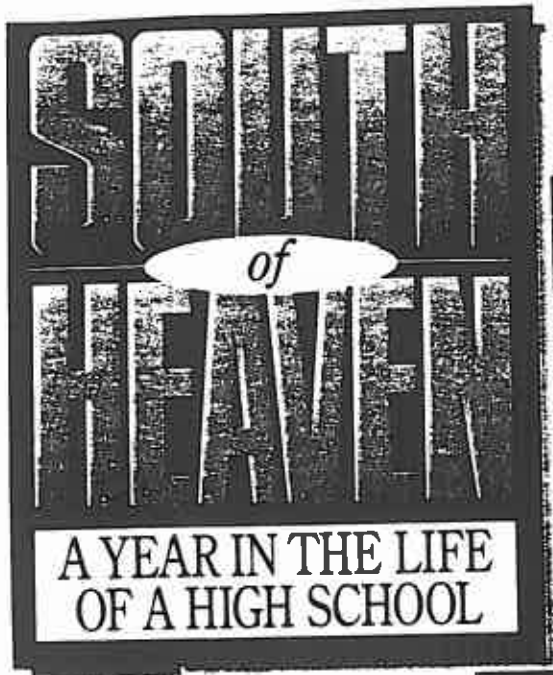
It happens on a Saturday. On the same day when her mother is set to take her to Charter. Laura Sheehy intends to do it that evening, after she gets off the day shift at her own hospital. Laura calls the apartment repeatedly from work, making sure her daughter's still there. When she gets home, though, Jaimee's gone.

Hours go by, and she does not return. It's way past dark. Laura Sheehy gets on the phone. She calls emergency rooms, calls Jaimee's friends, calls the police. One of Jaimee's friends asks around and finds somebody who has talked to her just a little while ago. She was up near the Pizza Hut. She was with the girlfriend who danced on Halloween with her and the skeletons. The two of them had packed some clothes; supposedly they were talking about going to the Clearwater bus station and heading for Cocoa Beach.

Ms. Sheehy checks at the bus station, but no one has seen the girls. They have vanished.



# Disappearing Acts



ST. PETERSBURG TIMES  
WEDNESDAY, MAY 15, 1991

**A**s first semester ends, the kids in the pod are dropping left and right. They fill out their withdrawal papers, empty their lockers, then walk out the door forever. Mike Broome's teachers wait, wondering if he'll be next.

## The ghost

■ Jaimee Sheehy has sent a long letter to her mother. "I miss you very much," she writes. She says she's better. Her mom's not sure.



No doubt about it. Andrea Taylor and John Boyd are trapped in the shadows. They are more than friends, but not quite a couple. They talk on the phone, they exchange notes and longing glances, they hang out with each other constantly. But that's it. No hand-holding. No kisses by the car. For Alyma's sake, they have decided that it's impossible for them to become boyfriend and girlfriend. Still, there's lingering heat between them.

One day Alyma nearly stumbles on the truth, totally by accident. She's over at Andrea's, hanging out, when she notices that Andrea has recently put a photo of John in a place of honor on her bedroom wall. It's a fairly incriminating piece of evidence — if she'd thought about it, Andrea would have probably hidden it — and for a moment, it appears as though Alyma might catch on. But Alyma obviously doesn't suspect a thing, because there are other photos on the wall, too. In fact, when she sees John's face among the others, she breaks into a smile.

"That's my baby," she says.  
Andrea feels her heart skip a beat.

Y sits alone on her bed, pencil in hand. Above her, Van Gogh's *Starry Night* hangs on the wall, endlessly spinning. Beside her, the bulletin board fights for air underneath a maelstrom of academic ribbons, certificates of achievement and who knows how many goofy snapshots of her and Karin and Amy and Meredith and the rest of the AB-12 rats.

She opens her notebook and begins with a simple sentence.

*I was 14 when my parents got a divorce.*

She is trying to get it all down on paper.

*I had started my first year of high school, which is a scary experience for anyone. But also around this time, I started getting warnings from my parents. They never seemed to talk to each other anymore. They wouldn't fight, in fact a raised voice was never heard. . . . Everything was normal, but something was wrong. You couldn't place your finger on it, you just had a feeling of dread.*

She has altered a few details. She was not 14 when it happened; she was 16. She was not a freshman; she was a junior. She has made other changes, too. She writes that she has only an older sister and a younger brother, when actually she has an older sister and three younger brothers. She has also streamlined the facts, taking moments that occurred separately and combining them into one scene.

*One day, my parents sent my sister and me to get pizza for dinner. We got into the car and started heading for the pizza place, having a regular conversation. But my sister had a weird expression on her face, and she didn't talk much. I asked her what was wrong.*

*"Well, Mom and Dad have been talking to me," she said in a quiet voice. "They've definitely decided to get a divorce. The trial's in two weeks."*

*I started to cry. I hadn't even really thought about what was happening, but I started crying just the same. We pulled over at the place and she held me for a long time.*

She tells herself that she is only trying to make the story simpler, to make it more dramatic, to shift it from the specific to the general so that more people can relate. But there is a small part of

her, deep inside, that recognizes that perhaps she is changing details to keep some distance between herself and the girl she's describing.

*After a while, we went back home. I walked in the door, and then made up some excuse and left. Glancing over at my parents, I knew I couldn't stay there.*

*I took my bike out of the garage and started riding down the road towards a small park about a mile away. I hadn't even gone bike riding in ages, it just seemed like the thing to do. Finally, I reached the park and sat down on the grass. For the next hour I stayed there, huddled in a ball, because I had convinced myself that nothing could hurt me as long as I stayed in that position.*

She takes the piece to school and works on it there. She erases parts and rewrites them, gradually shaping it all into something smooth and alive. When she reads it over, it gives her a comforting kind of clarity. Before, her feelings about the divorce were so mixed up; she did not know exactly what she felt. Now she has captured those emotions on paper and given them a structure and order and shape. It still hurts to think back on those days, but at least she has found a way to start putting it all behind her.

*People say that you pattern your future relationships after your own family, but I haven't had a serious enough relationship yet. I've promised myself that when I get married, I'll never get a divorce. However, if I've learned one thing from this situation, there are just some things that you can't control.*

It feels good when she finishes. It reminds her of why she loves to write. Now if only she could make her parents understand.

Not far away, in another house, Mike Broome lies in the darkness of his room, alone with his Guns N' Roses photos and his Miller High Life Beer poster and his 95YNF sticker. He smokes another Marlboro. He flips the tape in his nearby stereo and listens to the other side of *Theatre of Pain*, one of his favorite Motley Crue albums.

*Some got to go  
Some play the role  
Some scream out in horror just for show*

The idea of putting his own thoughts on paper seems laughable to Mike. He doesn't like to write; he has no interest in reading. His mother does, though. At night, Jewelene Wilson loves to settle in her easy chair with one of her mysteries or romance novels and tune out the rest of the world. If she gets her hands on a really good book, it's almost impossible to get her to look up until she fin-

**A** boy has just realized that his girlfriend has broken up with him. She doesn't use words to tell him; she resorts to momentum. The two of them are strolling together when suddenly he stops and she keeps on walking. That's how she does it. No goodbyes, no nothing.

ishes the last page. It's wonderful. But Mike wants nothing to do with it. None of Mrs. Wilson's boys ever did. When they were young, she tried to read aloud to them, but they just didn't care. They were always jumping up and running away to find some toy. So she gave up. Why try to force it?

Now, all these years later, Mike does not even have the refuge of books. About the only things



he's got are his skateboard and his Marlboros and the driving anger of his music.

*Some have no reason  
Some have no hope  
Some like it loud  
We like it loud louder than hell*

Mike's mother wonders what will happen when he turns 16. She doesn't want him to quit school, but there doesn't seem to be anything she can do about that, either. Wade seems to be doing okay in class. He always has his sense of humor, always seems able to flow with the tide. Not Mike, though. He's starting to scare her these days. He acts as though he doesn't care what happens to him. He keeps telling her, when he tells her anything, that he wishes he were dead. . . .

**'G**ood morning. Our thought for the day is: We all didn't come over on the same ship, but we're all in the same boat."

As December approaches, the countdown to the end of the semester is about to begin at Largo High. With it, of course, will come the usual period

of pre-finals dread, which will soon escalate into the usual pre-finals panic, which will then evolve, in the days immediately before the tests, into the usual tide of pre-finals fatalism.

Out in one of the long hallways, a dark-haired boy has just realized that his girlfriend has broken up with him. She doesn't use words to tell him; she resorts to momentum. The two of them are strolling together past the lockers when suddenly he stops for some reason and she keeps walking. That's how she does it. That's how she tells him he is now relegated to the status of a non-entity. No goodbyes, no nothing. She just keeps going, never looking back.

"Her name is Heather," he says afterward, still mourning her departure. "She's a bop. She's a patio person. . . . It's like, 'Your dad doesn't drive a Ferrari, so you can't hang out with me.'"

In a classroom on the second floor of the AA building, Me-Me Panzarella — a straight-talking health teacher from the Bronx, not to mention the owner of the greatest name in the school — is passing out a worksheet on menstruation. She tells the males in the room to pay attention, too.

"Guys, you need to know this stuff so you can understand us. So you can deal with us," she says. "It's very important, especially for people who are sexually active and who do not want to get pregnant."

## Acceleration

■ The countdown to semester's end is under way. With it, of course, has come the usual period of pre-finals dread, which will soon escalate into the usual tide of pre-finals panic, which will then evolve into the usual tide of pre-finals fatalism.

She turns to one of the boys.

"What's ovulation?"

"Release of the egg."

"How long does sperm live in the uterus?"

"Three days."

Ms. Panzarella nods.

"Eight hours in the vagina," she says. "Three days in the uterus."

Some parents grow faint when they hear the things their kids learn in health nowadays. Not that it's all sex ed. Ms. Panzarella covers alcohol and drugs, diet and nutrition, mental health and first aid. At one point every semester, she hauls out the mannequins with the inflatable lungs and teaches CPR.

"My class is about life," she says.

Ms. Panzarella refuses to play make-believe. She refuses to ignore the fact, confirmed by

national study after national study, that many, if not most, teen-agers are sexually active by the end of high school. She doesn't particularly like it — just get her talking about how so many kids turn to sex out of a lack of love in their lives — but she also understands that no matter how much she or anyone else preaches to her sophomores, teens will still be fumbling with each other's clothes in the back seats of their cars.

"I hate to say this," she told one group of wide-eyed mothers and fathers back on Open House night, "but a lot of my students are already having sex before they ever get to my class."

Day after day, Ms. Panzarella's class is dedicated to the notion of honestly confronting who kids really are and how they really act. If she's not willing to face what their lives are like, how can she help them? How can she teach them to help themselves?

She turns now to a boy who has fallen asleep at his desk.

"Ricardo. What is this?"

He lifts his head just in time to see the photo she wants him to identify. It's a close-up shot of a human egg, surrounded by thousands of sperm trying to wiggle their way inside.

"I don't know," he tells her.

She steps forward, visibly agitated.

"What did you say to me?"

He has violated one of the cardinal rules. Ms. Panzarella won't let them say they don't know. She forbids it, because she wants them to understand that all the answers are already inside them.

The boy looks again at the photo.

"It's an egg," he tells her.

"What's it covered with?"

"Sperm."

"So you *do* know."

On to the next question. "How many sperm does it take to fertilize . . ."

Over in the cafeteria, as lunch lurches forward, a couple wrapped in a passionate embrace quickly disentangle themselves under the locked and loaded stare of today's cafeteria watchdog.

"I didn't touch her," says the boy, visibly blushing.

Not far away, at another table, a gaggle of puny freshmen joke about all the older women who are dying to meet them and fall into their arms this weekend. As the others giggle, one of the boys dips the tip of one finger into the ketchup on his tray and tastes it. He does it again. And again.

The letter arrives at the house one day like a slightly garbled message from the other side. It is filled with misspellings and grammatical fumbblings, which come as no surprise from one who has been such a stranger to the concept of sitting in class.

MOM

Hello well Lee called last night but I didnt talk to him. The staff were listening to our (you & I) conversation I am not aloud to call you for 3 days I cryed so loud I cant stand it My doctor is the biggest jerk I miss you very much

The rest is one long stream. No paragraphs, no breaks, just words flowing together through Jaimee Sheehy's declarations of love, her promises of improvement, her pleas for understanding.

I need a chance. I need my mother. I am 15 I dont deserve not to have you I cant

stay here. I need you by my side to be there for me



Straight Talk

■ Me-Me Panzarella, the health teacher who refuses to play make-believe, shows a diaphragm to her students. "I hate to say this," she tells parents, "but a lot of my students are already having sex before they ever get to my class."

Laura Sheehy wants to believe it. But she's still not sure whether she can trust her daughter, not after that terrible night when Jaimee and the other girl from the pod disappeared. The Largo police found the two of them the next day. They were over in front of St. Patrick's Catholic Church, hanging out with some friends.

Ms. Sheehy picked up her daughter at the police station and took her straight to Charter Hospital in Tampa. That was Sunday, Nov. 5. Ever since, Jaimee has been inside the tightly controlled cocoon of the hospital. They tell her when she gets up, when she goes to bed, when she can use the phone. They push her to think about what's happened to her life. They talk to her in one-on-one sessions, in group sessions with other kids and their parents. Occasionally they let her mother take her out somewhere.

It seems to be working. Jaimee seems calmer, seems more willing to talk honestly. She admits she was out of control. She says that she was selfish, that she picked the wrong friends, that she lied because she felt trapped. But she's better now, she says. She's ready to leave and come home.

I need you mom I dont know how to tell you I can only show you Get me out Give me a chance I will prove my doctor wrong It breaks my heart to be so far apart from you Im a teenager I need my mother Yes we have problems, we can work them out! I . . . you!

The doctor thinks it's too soon. Jaimee's not ready yet, he says. To remove her from Charter's structured environment, he says, would be a mistake.

Ms. Sheehy doesn't know what to think. She misses Jaimee so much. She reads over the letter, wondering when she'll be able to believe all of her daughter's promises.

"When you do lip sync," says the familiar Bronx accent at the front of the auditorium, "you have to wear appropriate

clothing. You can't show your butt or your boobs . . . You cannot do *Me So Horny*."

Out in the audience, sprawled among the rows with their guitars and hand-scrawled lyric sheets, the children of MTV make no comment on these limitations on their artistic freedom. Dozens of students have gathered today to try out for the school's upcoming lip sync contest. Eager to make the cut, they listen carefully as Ms. Panzarella, who has been appointed to organize the show, lays down the law of lip sync in her usual no-nonsense style. No nudity. No simulated sex. And stay away from 2 Live Crew.

In a few weeks, in an extravaganza of impersonation, the students who survive these auditions will appear on stage in a swirl of fog and flashing lights to act out their favorite music videos. For one night, they will become blazing stars — Madonna, M.C. Hammer, the members of Public Enemy or the Cult — and strut their stuff in front of what probably will be a packed audience.

Most adults would not understand the point of a lip sync — "You mean they pay good money just to watch their friends imitate something they've seen on TV?" — and a cultural anthropologist could probably spend a lifetime digging through all its implications. But kids eat it up. Lip sync contests have become wildly popular events at high schools throughout America. Largo High holds two of them every year. This semester's contest promises to be especially intense; already, more than 20 acts have signed up for two days of auditions, hoping to make the cut.

"There's a lot of competition this year," says Ms. Panzarella. "It's going to be difficult to pick."

YY and Karin are trying out with *Closer to Fine*, a jangling folk song by the Indigo Girls. They know their chances aren't that good — the song's not nearly as visually dramatic as others — but they're giving it a shot. There's no question, however, that Andrea Taylor will make the cut.

Andrea is an exceptionally talented and dedicated dancer. She's been taking ballet and other lessons for years; on weekends, she performs in Point Blank, a local dance troupe. For the lip sync, she and some friends are performing Janet Jackson's *Miss You Much*, a cleverly choreographed number that's been a big hit on both the radio and MTV. A real crowd-pleaser. Andrea, who's taking on the Janet Jackson role, will undoubtedly be the highlight of the evening. Plus, in the second half of the show, after she's done with the song, Andrea will serve as a co-emcee along with John Boyd.

Appearing on stage together will be difficult. Andrea and John have grown tired of hiding. They're not being fair to Alyma; they're not being fair to themselves. The time has come, they tell themselves, to decide once and for all.

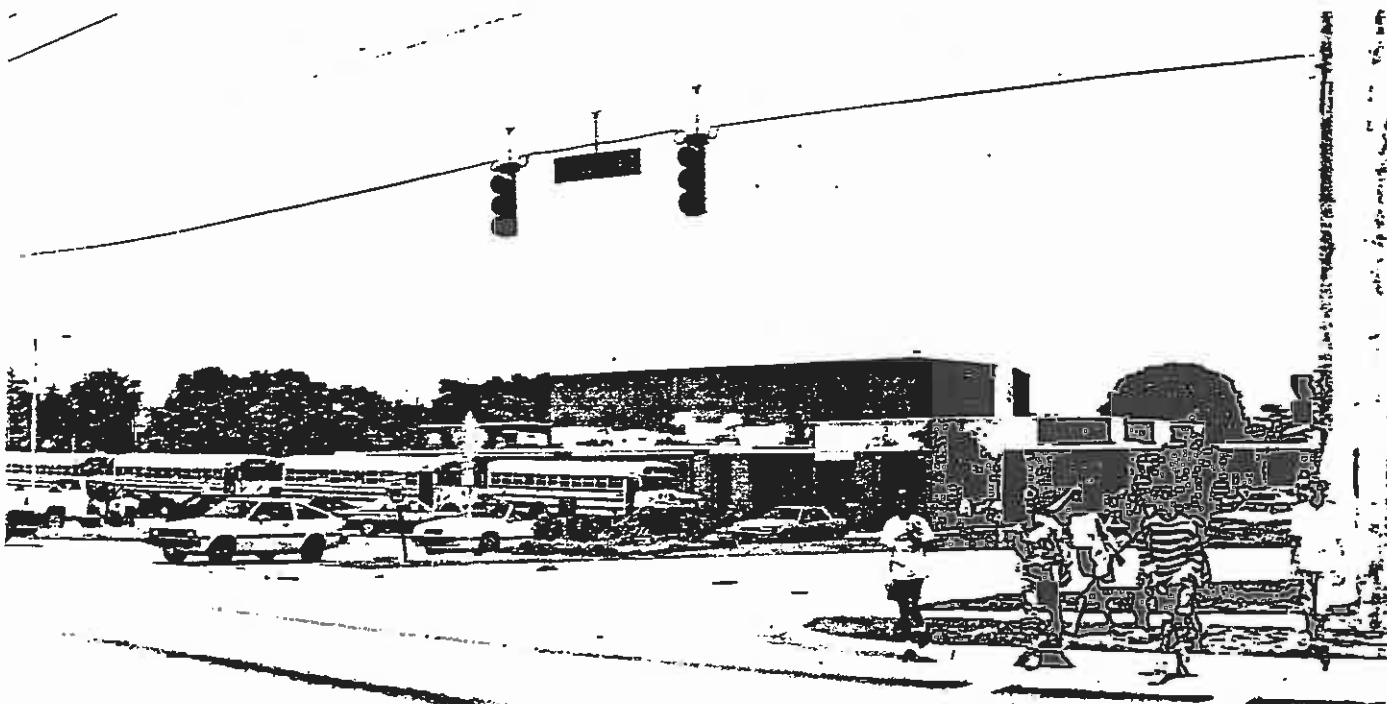
"All or nothing," says Andrea. "I don't want to be half-stepping."

One day at school they make up their minds. They're going back to being strictly friends. No more longing glances. No more secret notes.

"We're going to stop it right now," they tell each other. "It's wrong."

By now, you'd think there would be no surprises left down in the pod.

In the room at the end of the pod's only hallway, in Mrs. Frye's family living class, there sits a girl who wears a necklace decorated with metal tabs pulled off soda cans and beer cans. There are dozens of tabs on the necklace — 107 of them, to be exact. One day a visitor asks this girl why she collects them.



The other kids snicker.

"Calm down," she tells them, laughing herself. "Somebody give me a word to explain."

She hesitates for a moment, trying to find a polite way to put it. Finally she decides there is no polite way. Every time a guy gives her one of these tabs, she says, that guy supposedly is entitled to — as she puts it — "a free f--k."

"That's really what it means," she says, still laughing.

Eric the Dragon has begun talking about guns. He has a collection of them, he says. One day, when Ms. DiLello gets annoyed with a kid who's always pestering her — this big gawky freshman named Jim, who's harmless but irritating — Eric walks up to her and offers a suggestion. He is willing, he says, to eliminate the problem of Jim.

"I'll take care of him for you, if you want."

Ms. DiLello looks at Eric. He is not smiling. He appears absolutely serious.

"No," she tells him. "That won't be necessary."

Next door, in Mr. Klapka's American government class, a debate is under way. To help them understand how laws are made, Mr. Klapka has assembled his students into their own House of Representatives. Now they are arguing the merits of a bill one of them has proposed — a bill to ban anyone older than 65 from driving.

"Whoa," says one boy. "That's a bit harsh, isn't it?"

Another boy nods. "That's cruel."

Mike Klapka, who knows enough to stay neutral, turns to the author of the bill.

"Representative Cole," he says, "if you would please explain the reasoning behind the bill."

"Okay," says the representative, a blond-haired girl who now spells out her grievances against older drivers. "They're losing their eyesight. . . . They pull out in front of you. . . . They drive too slow, they can't stay in one lane, they can't make up their minds. I just don't think they should be driving anymore."

Toward the back of the room, Mike Broome sits without saying a word, studying his own list of proposed bills.

*the drinking age to 15*

*driving age to 13*

*tobacco age to 14*

*the law that if a kid quits school they can't get a license*

What he means by that last proposal is that he would like to get rid of the law that allows Florida to suspend the driver's licenses of young drop-outs. This is not an academic issue to Mike. More and more, it's looking as if he will in fact quit school when he turns 16. He's already doing his best to get kicked out. He's admitted it to the teachers. At least, that's what he says on some days; on others, he still swears he wants to graduate. It's like he's riding the longest roller coaster in history, and he wants to drag them all on board with him.

One day Mrs. O'Donnell, who has not given up hope, pulls Mike aside and tells him it's got to stop. She reminds him how she and Ms. DiLello stood up for him early in the semester. They've tried so hard to help him. Why does he keep slapping them in the face?

"I don't care if I'm hurting your feelings," he told her. "I don't care if I'm hurting anybody's feelings. Just screw it."

Mrs. O'Donnell and the other teachers in the pod can be forgiven if they sometimes take such things personally. They knock themselves out to make it as easy as possible for the Mike Broomes of the world to succeed. Even though GOALS teachers cover the same basic material as their counterparts in the regular classes — they teach from the same textbooks and follow curriculums guided by the same state requirements — they try to make learning as effortless as possible for the kids. They assign little or no homework. They keep reading and writing assignments to a minimum. If the kids finish their work, they reward them by letting them play computer games or by giving them a free day or letting them watch TV.

Outside the pod, there's considerable hostility toward the program. Regular students, who resent the special breaks given to GOALS students, constantly rail against the kids in the pod, calling

them stupid and lazy. There's a whole series of GOALS jokes. Like with the Video Highlights. This year, for the first time, Largo High will offer a video yearbook — a videotape, filled with scenes shot around the school — and some of the GOALS kids have been given the responsibility of putting it together. They've been roaming the school with a camera for months, collecting footage. So now regular kids have these lines about how badly the whole thing's going to turn out.

"When you put the videotape in, the screen's going to be black," says one junior honors student, reeling off the lines, one after the other. "When you put the videotape in, it's going to be Beta."

Kids aren't the only ones who rip GOALS. In the faculty lounge, there are more than a few teachers who love to privately trash the program. As far as they're concerned, it's a giant step in the wrong direction. Too many students, they say, already want their diplomas handed to them without an ounce of effort. They already come to class every day expecting some kind of entertainment extravaganza — some kind of elaborate TV game show, where the questions aren't too taxing, where no one's expected to read, where the contestants are automatically handed big cash prizes just for showing up and spelling their names correctly. And now, they say, here comes GOALS, surrendering to those terrifying expectations.

Some teachers can barely speak politely about the program. They resent all the money and time and attention that go into GOALS; they resent that the teachers there are given smaller classes, when almost every other teacher is struggling to breathe — struggling to do anything — in the crush of students who fill their classrooms.

In the pod, the criticisms sting. The GOALS teachers know the program is far from perfect. Sometimes they wonder themselves if they're too easy on the kids, if they're always striking the right balance, if they're really making a difference. But at least they're trying.

"You are not going to fail," Mrs. McGraw tells her kids. "I won't let you."

Still, the enormity of what they're up against can be overwhelming.

In her room at the pod's east end, Leah Whitehead — a veteran teacher who does not think of herself as one who is easily shaken — has almost lost hope with her sixth-period English class. One afternoon, as she attempts to lead them through a vocabulary assignment, they badger her because she won't let them put their heads down and sleep.

"My sleeping rule is cut and dry," she tells them. "I'm not going to negotiate on this."

"I think we need a democracy," says one boy.

"I think we need a vote," says another.

Mrs. Whitehead is not impressed. "You haven't earned the right to have a democracy. It's a right that is earned."

They hardly hear a word she says. They're too busy telling her what's wrong with her class. It's too boring, they say. It's no fun, they say.

"It's not our fault if we fall asleep."

"You should make it interesting."

"If they paid us \$3 or \$4 an hour," one of them says, turning to the argument so many of them use, "maybe I'd stay awake."

Mrs. Whitehead looks at the boy who has made this last statement. He is sitting with his feet propped on the table. She tells him to take them down. He tells her his feet are not really on the table, they're on the edge of the table.

"Get them down," she says.

She's not giving up. She's still trying to make them understand.

"Education is not about doing page 176," she tells them. "It's about listening and learning and finding out. Maybe you won't use it today. But maybe down the road 10 years from now, 20 years from now, you will use it. . . . I didn't understand William Faulkner when I was in high school. I thought he was pretty boring."

One of the boys raises his hand.

"Who's William Faulkner?" he says.

For the rest of the hour, they show no mercy. They say they don't have a textbook. They say they don't have their folders. In a stroke of perverse genius, they begin whistling the theme to *The Andy Griffith Show*.

Through it all, Mrs. Whitehead never breaks. But slowly, a look of defeat creeps into her face.

Amid the clamor, some students are actually working on the day's assignment, a vocabulary list. The final word on today's list is:

*devastate*

Flipping through a dictionary, one of the boys writes down a definition:

*to lay waste*



#### Looking Ahead

■ If Largo High were filled with students like the ones in her advanced placement English class, maybe Lucia Anne Hay would be happy all the time. But beneath the surface at this school, and many others, something is wrong.

In a room at the end of B wing, an English teacher with short gray hair and a sly smile sits perched on a stool in front of one of her senior advanced placement classes. By tomorrow, she says, she wants the class to have read the final act of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. A chorus of moans rises from the desks.

"Is that so much?" says Lucia Anne Hay. "One lousy act?"

Down the aisles, the kids mimic her in high-pitched, sing-songy voices usually reserved for imitating parents.

"Is that so much? One lousy act?"

Mrs. Hay fights back a smirk, trying her best to look stern. This is a game that she and her seniors play. She assigns a reading, they pretend to pitch a fit, she pretends to be shocked. But tomorrow, when the bell rings and they take their seats, she knows — and they know she knows — that most if not all of them will have read the one lousy act and will be prepared to dissect it with ruthless efficiency. These are advanced placement kids. This year they will read, among other things: *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Antigone*, *Medea*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Lord Jim* and Albert Camus' slim little classic, *The Stranger*. Furthermore, some of them will like it.

YY's in this class, sitting over in the front left corner. So's sweet little Amy Boyle, sitting directly behind her. Carolyn Hanson, the quiet young woman who will be this year's valedictorian, is seated next to Amy. The entire room is a teacher's dream. Sometimes, when Mrs. Hay looks out among them, she can almost see the neurons firing inside their brains.

Like right now, as she talks about Ibsen. She tells them how Old Henrik once said that the search for truth can make you lonely. She tells them how he said that the majority is never right until it does right. She even relates a little story about how the dear man used to keep a live scorpion — stinger and all — on his writing desk. It was a way of injecting venom into his plays.

"That's what he was doing," she says. "Getting out the venom."

When Mrs. Hay sits in front of a class like this one, bouncing ideas and questions off kids like YY and Amy and Carolyn, she looks so happy. If the whole school were filled with students like these, maybe she'd always be happy. Maybe she wouldn't worry so much about what's going to happen five or 10 years down the line.

Mrs. Hay is not a doomsayer. She has taught at Largo High for two decades now, and she is proud of its record and accomplishments. But

beneath the surface, something has gone wrong. It's been going wrong for years. Only now it's getting worse. Not just down in the pod, either. To one degree or another, the same disease that is ravaging Mrs. Whitehead's sixth-period class — the apathy, the withering of curiosity, the almost palpable frustration and anger — already has infected the rest of Largo High, as it has in so many other schools. How do you think it reached Mrs. Whitehead's room? How do you think it found its way into the pod in the first place?

In some parts of the school, it may be better hidden. It may not reveal itself so dramatically. But it's still there. The teachers talk about it. They stand in their empty rooms during their planning periods, when the kids are gone, and they talk about how scared they are.

"There is a problem," says Mrs. Hay.

They've got to get kids reading again. They have to find a way, she says, to make them understand that reading and writing and stretching their minds will eventually bring rewards that cannot be measured in dollars and cents. Somehow, she says, they have to show them that effort is its own reward. That's why Mrs. Hay is among those who believe GOALS is on the wrong track. She knows how hard the teachers in the pod are trying. Still, she doesn't understand the point of steering the kids away from book work. Books are at the heart of it all. Work is at the heart of it all. If you take away those things...

But that's not what's on Mrs. Hay's mind right now. What's on her mind, actually, is YY and Amy and the rest of the advanced placement class. Having finished talking to them about Ibsen, she is now distributing entry forms for the PRIDE writing competition. Every year, one senior is chosen as the best writer in the school; that person then goes on to compete with the winners from other schools. Of course, she says, it would help to know how to use apostrophes. It would help, she says, casting an eye in YY's direction, to know the difference between "it's" and "its."

YY puts her head down on the desk.

"I know," she mutters, laughing. "I know."

Mrs. Hay says she wants them to give it a shot. She turns to the only boy in the class that day. With all these females around, she says, he'll probably be able to share something different in his entries. He'll be able, she says, to give the male perspective.

YY snorts.

"Skip the male perspective," she says.

**Y**Y will tell you what she thinks about males. She's written her own thought for the day about them.

"All men are islands, and some should be deserted."

The problem is, they keep deserting her. Last year was the worst. That was when she fell hard for this one senior boy. They had a big romance. He used to sit in his trig class and write her notes where he'd leave out all the vowels. Or at least try to.

*Hw r y? Tdy I m gng t hv fn n trg . . . f y  
cn ndrind ths nl I wil b vry mprssd . . .*

Silly, yes. But deciphering this boy's notes gave YY something to do. And when he broke up with her, she was crushed. The official reason — what he told her over the phone — was that it was nothing she'd done, that it was just him, that things weren't working out. The real reason — what he told other people — was that with the di-

vorce of her parents, which was happening around then, YY just wasn't her old wild and wonderful self anymore. She'd changed. She wasn't any fun.

"How could his parents be so nice," Karin Upmeyer says now, looking back on YY's days with him, "and spawn such a thing from hell?"

The problem is, such creatures keep popping up in YY's life, slobbering and stomping on her aorta. It's like she's in some bad horror movie where the monster never dies.

One night she and Karin and the other Heathers are at this party when this jerk comes up and starts blatantly hitting on YY. He's so transparent, it's a joke. So YY digs into her Latin reserves and starts conjugating "exeo," which means to leave. She literally goes through the list of verb forms — *exeo, exis, exit, eximus*, etc. — until this lower life form gets so bored and confused that he slithers away. The girls burst out laughing.

Only YY. No one else would ever brush off a guy in a dead language. The others love to crack on her about it.

"Um, Christine," they say, "why don't you start conjugating the verb 'exeo'?"

Meanwhile, YY is still wrestling with the math vs. writing career crisis. It's kind of funny. For years, her parents have been drumming it into her skull that she should make decisions for herself. When she was growing up, Helen and Bob always let her pick her daily wardrobe, no matter how outlandish she looked as she headed out the door. They were so eager to encourage her intellectual freedom that they didn't give her a middle name; instead, they let her choose her own. A few years ago, she made her selection: Cecelia.

"She's the saint of music and poetry," YY explains, "and I thought that was pretty cool."

But now, when it really counts, her parents seem to be pulling rank and pushing her to take the math route. Especially her mom. Helen the Hun has always had it in her head that YY was destined for a life of numbers. She talks about how easy math is for Chrissie — that's what both parents still call her — how she never has to think about it, how it just flows naturally into her head. Her mom has this one anecdote she loves to tell. It's about when Chrissie was a little girl. She was a late talker, it turns out. Other kids made fun of her because she stumbled over her words and didn't really begin speaking until she was 3½. (She's been making up for it ever since.) But when she started, Helen remembers, one of the first things out of Chrissie's mouth was a story problem.

"Five forks and five knives," she said, watching her mother as she set the table one day. "That's 10."

YY rolls her eyes at the very mention of this incident. It's true that math comes easily to her. But though she doesn't have the heart to say this to Helen's face, it has never really thrilled her. What makes YY happy is writing. Like with the piece she did on the divorce. She's shown it to some of her teachers. They told her it was good, so now she's decided to enter that PRIDE competition, with the divorce story as the centerpiece of her collection. She hasn't shown it to her parents, though. She doesn't want to hurt their feelings; also, she's still trying to avoid forcing the career question to a head. Maybe if she waits long enough, it will blow over. Maybe it will all go away. . . .

**G**odzilla stands just behind the curtain. He turns to his minions, who are poised at their stations. "OKAY!" he roars. "THIS IS IT! PLACES, EVERYBODY!"

The auditorium goes dark, and then, as the first thumping strains of an INXS song blare out of the speakers, the chase lights begin to flash. The strobes begin to flash. A mind-boggling number of lights — lights of almost every color, lights that spin and rotate and fade in and out from somewhere high above — set the stage on fire.

Godzilla roars again.

"GIVE ME A LITTLE FOG!"

Nothing happens.

"EMILY! WAKE UP! EMILY! FOG!"

At the rear of the stage, the minions have erected a big rear projection screen, on which they'll be showing slides. Behind the screen, lying on the ground so her shadow won't be seen by the crowd, Emily finally gets the word and starts the fogger. Immediately, swirls of white vapor — by chance, tonight's batch is scented to smell like pina colada — drift outward, spreading across the floor like some ominous but fragrant cloud.

The audience erupts. There are at least 300 kids out there — YY and Karin, who did not survive the auditions, are seated together toward the front with Amy and Meridith — and every one of their vocal cords seems to be working overtime to form the same high-pitched scream. They are so loud they threaten to drown out the two emcees for the first half of the show, who are now launching into an extended explanation of the rules. They're introducing the judges; they're telling lame little jokes; they're driving Godzilla crazy.

"Come on, dudes," he says, muttering under his breath behind the curtain. "The show is dyin'."

His real name is Mark Granning, but he prefers the nickname. At the ancient age of 34, he has become something of a legend in high school circles. Turbulent, intimidating and intensely talented, he's a top-flight journalism teacher at Lakewood High in St. Petersburg who for the past several years has also been conducting his own mini-revolution in multimedia education. He teaches kids how to work with video cameras, light boards, computers and a massive sound system, then coaxes them into applying what they've learned in LAMP Productions, the school's own student production company. Together, he and his gang of young hotshots travel around the state, using their expertise and \$150,000 worth of equipment — paid for entirely out of the group's profits — to stage impossibly elaborate shows.

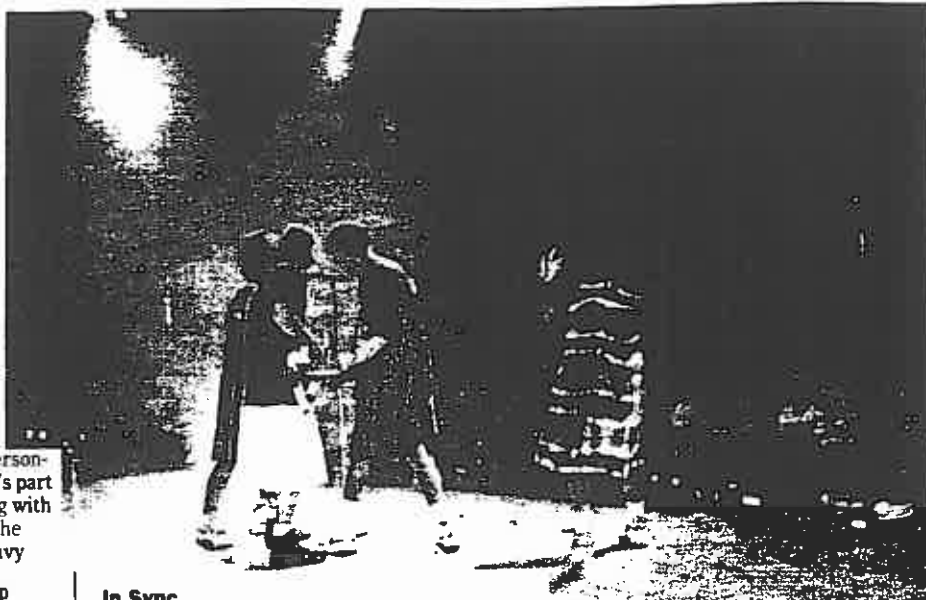
They bill themselves, without exaggeration, as "masterminds of extraordinary audio-visual odysseys." They do video dances at proms and state conventions. They do computerized 11-projector slide shows for school boards and teacher associations. And in one auditorium after another, they are begged to do lip syncs. The individual schools provide the acts; LAMP — it stands for Lakewood Associated Media Personnel — supplies the hardware and technical know-how.

Which is what brings them tonight to Largo, where the emcees are still hogging the mikes.

"Are you ready?" they shout, trying to pump up the crowd. "Are you ready?"

The lights dim again, and the contest begins with *Disposable Heroes*, a Metallica song performed by an angry-looking group of boys. It's a typically relentless heavy metal number, and the guys pound their way through it, spitting out the lyrics, banging their heads up and down in a requisite display of rhythmic hostility.





The audience doesn't take this assault personally or anything. They understand the anger's part of the act. But down the rows, kids are sitting with this detached look in their eyes, waiting for the song to end. There's nothing wrong with heavy

metal, but it doesn't usually play too well at lip syncs. Mr. Granning's students, who know this, are dying with laughter. They're pointing at the drummer, some hapless skinhead, showering him with scathing insults.

"How'd this guy get in high school? He must have paid off his middle school teacher."

"They're slobbering!"

"Make these guys disappear!"

With that, the LAMP kids hit the fogger and engulf the band members in a pina coloda cloud until they virtually vanish from sight.

One by one, the 14 acts on tonight's bill show off their moves, dropping to the stage and twirling, flirting with the fans in the front row, enacting little dramas of love and rejection, desire and betrayal, all in step with the music. During a Heavy D number, one of the performers falls to his belly and begins making pelvic thrusts, thereby violating one of the show's ground rules — not to mention the ground.

"Oh!" says Granning, shaking his head in mock horror, as though he has never seen a kid try such a thing before. "Sex on the stage!"

Some of the best acts of the night are the ones anchored by Andrea Taylor and John Boyd. Especially *Miss You Much*, the Janet Jackson song, in which Andrea leads a squad of other dancers through an intricate routine that starts and stops and starts again, all with the same precision as the original video.

"The class act of the evening," Granning whispers.

Dressed in black, just like Janet Jackson, Andrea prowls across the stage with a lethal grace. Inside, though, she is trembling. Because now, in the middle of the act, as she executes one flawless move after another, she has gazed out into the audience and found herself staring into the eyes of the one and only Alyma.

She's sitting off to the left, up front. Maybe the third or fourth row. Almost on top of the stage.

Her presence doesn't come as a surprise or anything. She told Andrea she was coming tonight; in fact, Andrea's giving her a ride

## In Sync

■ As the thumping strains of music blare out of the speakers at a Largo lip sync, a mind-boggling number of lights set the stage on fire.

home afterward. Still, there was no way to predict how unnerving it would be to see her out there so close. In a little while, after Andrea's done with her act, she and John are going to be on stage together, emceeing the second half of the show. And when they do, Alyma will be right there, checking out their every move.

Wonderful. Andrea's already torn up tonight, trying to accept, once and for all, that she and John just aren't going to happen. And now, just to stir things around a bit more, she has to worry about Alyma watching the two of them standing together on stage. It's too much. Can it get any worse?

It does, a few minutes later. Andrea and John are offstage, standing outside one of the stage doors, waiting until they're called in to take over the emcee duties, when suddenly John leans over and gives her a kiss. Not a polite little kiss like he gave her after the Homecoming dance, either. One of these long and lingering numbers that would probably get you arrested in some states.

Breathless, Andrea pulls away — not too quickly, mind you — and stares at him.

"Why did you do that? I thought we had an agreement."

John gives her this deadly smile.

"It wasn't like you didn't want me to."

Right about then is showtime, when they have to go inside and take the stage. Still reeling from the kiss, Andrea feels herself walking out under the lights in front of all those faces. She stands next to John, forcing herself to smile and joke and do whatever emcees are supposed to do. She's fighting to just get through this and to make sure, whatever she does, that she does not make eye contact again with Alyma, who is no doubt scoping her and John at this very instant.

The girl has known Andrea for so long, she can read her better than anybody. What if she's doing it right now? What if she can tell what's just happened outside, just by the way Andrea and John are looking at each other?



## Godzilla

■ Inside this ancient 34-year-old body there lurks a high school legend. Turbulent, intimidating and intensely talented, Mark Granning is a top-flight journalism instructor at Lakewood High in St. Petersburg who has also sparked a mini-revolution in multimedia education.



**A**ndrea and John aren't the only ones burning up the place. As the lip sync tears toward the end of the night, Jason Davenport — best male-type buddy to YY and company — is leading his band through a scorching version of the Cult's *Fire Woman*, a crude but effective little ode to lust.

*Wound up, can't sleep  
Can't do anything  
Ride it honey*

Jason doesn't have one-tenth of Andrea Taylor's dance moves, but he does have a way with the exuberant gesture. He's this willowy figure, stalking under the lights in a cowboy hat and a long black duster. He throws off the hat, swings the mike stand like an overgrown baton, spins like a tornado in sync with the others in the band.

The crowd is whipped into a frenzy. Even the LAMP crew is getting into it.

"These guys are good! Yeah!" says Mr. Granning.

Suddenly this girl in a bright red minidress comes prancing out in her bare feet and twists her way through some suggestive maneuvers usually seen only in a go-go dancer's cage. This is the Fire Woman — for the record, her real name is Heather — and her role is to exert her wiles upon Jason. He's on his knees when she slides up to him and begins literally hanging on the boy. Whoa.

The act is so hot that a little while later, after the judges tally their votes, Jason and Heather and the others in the Cult act win first place in the rock category. In dance and rap, Andrea's group has taken top honors for *Miss You Much*. Andrea doesn't feel like a winner, though. Standing on stage, posing for a photographer, she watches as Alyma — who has already given her a hug — rushes toward John and disappears with him.

Andrea feels her instincts for emotional self-preservation kicking in. Her heart's working overtime, doing that skipping business again. She takes off in pursuit of the happy couple. She finds them outside, not far from where John surprised her with the volcanic kiss. Only now he's holding Alyma's hand.

Andrea turns to her girlfriend and unwitting rival and tells her it's time to go home.

"Let's go. Now."

Alyma doesn't understand.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Let's just go."

John wisely keeps his mouth shut. But in the car, as she's being spirited away from her love, Alyma keeps pressing Andrea for clues.

"What's wrong with you?"

Andrea stares straight ahead at the road.

"Nothing. I'm upset."

"What are you upset about?"

"Nothing. Just don't worry about it."

Easy for Andrea to say. Because once she drops Alyma off, she heads right back to school, finds John and drags him to a Denny's to try to figure out what in the world they're going to do. After solemn deliberations, they return to Earth and agree once again that they have to keep away from each other.

"It's hard for me," says John.

"It's hard for me, too," says Andrea. "But we've got to just leave it alone, because we know it's not going to work."

The two of them mean it this time. They don't want there to be any more misunderstandings. The pact is back in force. It is not to be broken.

Bending it, however, is another matter. Because when Andrea takes John home, he ends the entire confusing evening with another kiss. A friendly kiss this time. But still a kiss that's honest enough to acknowledge, no matter what they've vowed or how many hours they've spent vowing it, that no pact can ever be trusted with something as dangerous as a human heart.

**T**he semester is hurtling forward. Days are blurring together; weeks are disappearing in the blink of an eye.

In the pod, the scrawny boy who screams without warning has just consumed his report card. At least that's what the other kids told Mrs. McGraw when they came into her room, howling with laughter.

"He got it, looked at it and ate it," she says, shaking her head in wonder.

Across the hall, in another classroom, a girl named Jesi talks about her wild weekend. She told her parents she was headed for Disney World, but instead she and a friend drove to New Orleans.

"My mom tells me she's not stupid," she says. "Well, she's stupid enough to believe me."

Jesi's teacher — her name is Mrs. LaVassaur, but the kids sometimes call her LaVassaurus — does not hear Jesi say this. Mrs. LaVassaur is worried about one of her other students. A girl in her fifth-period class. This girl's a great kid, struggling against incredible odds. She's the youngest of eight children, and all seven of her brothers and sisters are dropouts. Both parents, too. Still, she was doing so well. Then her boyfriend broke up with her, and she fell apart. She let her classes slip; she started talking about suicide and was finally taken to Horizon Hospital. This past Saturday, when she was allowed one four-minute call from the hospital, she called Mrs. LaVassaur. She just wanted to talk to someone she trusted.

Another one of Janet LaVassaur's students withdrew from school for a couple months so she could have a baby. She's planning to keep the child; her family's going to help. On Saturday, the same day Mrs. LaVassaur got the call from the student at Horizon, she and other teachers from the pod went to a shower for the pregnant girl.

"We bought her a baby monitor," says Mrs. LaVassaur.

So much happens here in the pod. The world happens here.

In her room at the end of the hall, Leah Whitehead is trying something new with her sixth-period class. In her ongoing struggle to get them to read at least something — Mrs. Hay would be proud of her — Mrs. Whitehead has turned to Zen Buddhism. She has written a Zen expression for them on the blackboard.

*chop wood  
carry water*

She tells them that they need to learn how to exist in the here and now. When a Zen disciple chops wood, she says, he doesn't worry about what he's doing later that afternoon. He pays attention to the strength in his arms. When he carries water, he thinks about the water. That's the kind of concentration she's after in their reading. As they read, she wants them to think about the words printed on the page.

This new approach stuns them into a kind of confused silence. For a few moments, they try it. They pick up their books and read.

"Was that so awful?" she asks.

Half of the class blurts out the same answer.

"Yeah!"

Mrs. Whitehead and the other teachers hold on the best they can. They know GOALS can work. They've seen it. Every year, they butt their heads against the wall for months, never seeming to get anywhere, and then, just when it seems they're past the point of no return, some of the students will make this incredible recovery. It's like one of those sappy inspirational movies, where the children in the wheelchairs stand up and walk five minutes before the final credits. Only it really happens. Not with every kid. Not by a long shot. But it happens.

Usually it hits when the teachers least expect it. They'll be standing at the overhead projector,

explaining photosynthesis or working through some equation, and suddenly they'll look out into the scattering of faces before them and realize that some of their most mind-bending cases — the ones who should have been written off long ago — are sitting quietly at their desks, pencils out, eyes directed intently toward the screen.

When the teachers repeat these tales of salvation, their voices drop a degree and a glint of almost religious fervor enters their eyes.

"You should have seen this kid a year ago," they say. "He was a monster. He was like a creature from another planet. Now look at him."

The turnaround cases are easy to spot, too, because they're usually the ones who've made good grades and have been granted honor cards and are therefore wearing shorts, even when it's cold. Kids like Bonnie Kaseman, who used to be a queen of the absentees — she once missed close to 40 days of class in a single semester — but who now spends so much time on the honor roll she should probably file for a homestead exemption. Kids like Michelle Fletcher, a talented writer who's so smart you wonder how she ever could have needed turning around in the first place.



**Wade Broome**

■ Mike's older brother has slammed the door and walked out of Largo High for good.

Still, even with kids like these, there's no telling when they'll change their minds and shift into reverse. Lately, Michelle Fletcher has been talking about how bored she is. In class, she's been making these ominous entries in her journal.

*I'm really sick of school. Everyone's changing to the worst. So am I. How can I run about being cheery when all these rules are stopping me? ... I want to get out of here so fast!!*

**T**hanksgiving comes, and some of the GOALS students are asked to write essays on what they're thankful for. Jesi, the girl who took the wild week-end foray to New Orleans, says she's thankful she can control her parents.

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Christmas comes, and one of Mrs. O'Donnell's students tells her afterwards how he spent the holiday getting drunk on beer. For a present, he says, his father gave him a cigarette lighter. His mother gave him lighter fluid.

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January comes, and with it the week of semester exams. Some of the kids in the pod bear down and do well; others fake their way through it, singing the traditional *O Christmas Tree* as they decorate their standardized exam forms with randomly selected answers. The GOALS teachers are already reeling. Michelle Fletcher has just walked

in and announced that she's ready to quit. She has a note from her father.

*Michelle has permission to withdraw from school effective this date. Thank you.*

Miss Riel and the other teachers are beside themselves. They beg her to reconsider. They point out how hard she's worked over the years. She's so close to graduating, why stop now?

Michelle won't budge.

"I've made up my mind," she says. "You can't talk me out of it."

**M**ichelle is not the only one dropping out of sight. As the second semester begins at Largo High, all sorts of familiar faces are disappearing.

Jaimee Sheehy is still gone, off at Charter. The witch who lost it on the day of the big pep rally, the one who talked about the devil sucking her blood, is still gone, too. In fact, she is not expected to return. She's headed for another school. Farewells have also been exchanged with the high-spirited Jesi. She filled out her withdrawal papers — officially, she said she was headed for night school — and cleaned out her locker. Miss Riel asked her what kind of career she wanted to carve out for herself. Jesi wasn't sure. She had heard, she said, that there's big bucks in cosmetol-

ogy. Or perhaps the field of perfume design.

And the girl with the seven brothers and sisters, all of them dropouts before her? The suicidal one who called Mrs. LaVassaur from Horizon? She's gone as well. She piled up a mountain of absences and decided she was tired of school. The scrawny boy who screams without warning? Gone. Transferred to a special school where someone might know what to do with him. Diane, the girl who once told Miss Riel that her dream boyfriend was going to support her for the rest of her days? Long gone. Gone for months now at another program at another school. And April? The one whose father sat in that cramped little office on a rainy day, trying so desperately to get through to her? April and her L.A. Gear shoes with the pink and black laces vacated the premises not long ago.

Even Wade Broome — the smiling, joking, relatively easy-going Wade — has dropped out. He was sick of everything. So one day, when Mrs. O'Donnell wrote him up again, he slammed the door and walked away for good. He enrolled in night school, made plans to get his GED, found a job at a car wash. But soon he left that, too.

"There's just no future in drying off cars and doing windows," he says, sitting at home.

So now Wade is gone, too. He and the others are now pursuing other opportunities. They have all vanished over the horizon.

Except Wade's little brother.

The GOALS teachers can hardly believe it, but it's true. Mike Broome is still here. The entire first semester was a washout for him, but he's plugging away. Suddenly he's paying attention, doing his work, controlling the rage. If this radical behavior continues, he'll soon be on the honor roll.

He's not sure, he says. But he thinks he might like to be a teacher.

**A**s Largo plunges into the second half of the year, something else has happened. John Boyd — the soft-voiced guy who's sent Andrea into perpetual meltdown — has gotten himself a gun. He keeps it at home, fully loaded. John doesn't want to use it. But if these people in his neighborhood push hard enough, he is ready to do whatever's necessary.

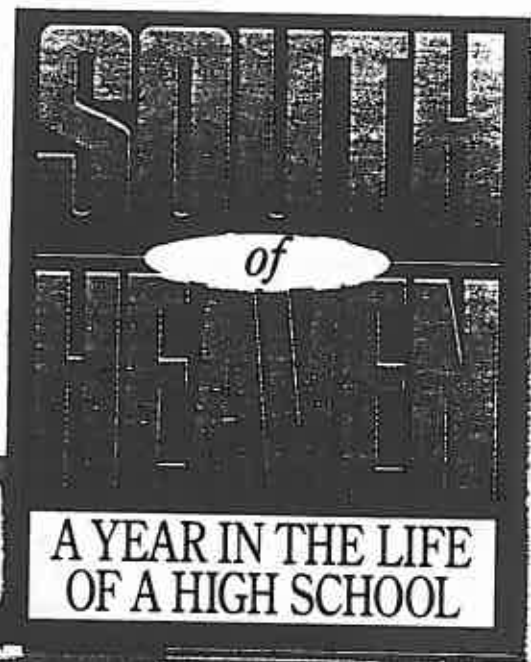
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**Coming Sunday — *South of Heaven* resumes with Day 5: The History Lesson**

**T**he drug dealers aren't giving John Boyd much choice. One night not long ago, when John and his friends were walking home from a party, one of the dealers cruised by in a car, making sure they saw the glint of the gun in his hand.

DAY 5

# The History Lesson



**John Boyd**

■ Dealers in his neighborhood have gotten it into their heads that John and his friends are trying to clean up the area. "This is stupid, right?" John says. The dealers don't think so.



T

hey are past the tiresome formalities, past the introductions and the cautious glances at their opponents' faces and the usual droning explanation of the rules. They have just finished with the first substitution break — no coaching allowed — and are now deep within the thicket of the five-point round. YY sits beside her teammates, her hand poised near the buzzer.

YY is on. YY is wired. YY and the buzzer are one.

"Abraham Lincoln won the 1860 presidential election by receiving a majority of the popular vote," says the adult up front, giving them another question. "True or false?"

YY hits the buzzer. "False," she says.

The questioner nods — five points for Largo — and moves on. He asks them about ordinates and abscissas, about

Verdi and *La Traviata*, about coulombs and electrons and minor arcs and equal circles, about Attila the Hun and Genghis Khan and the oratorios of George F. Handel.

"Name the Christian missionary and theologian," he says, after they have ventured at last into the 10-point round, "whose former name was Saul of Tarsus and whose —"

YY and the buzzer cut him off.

"Paul," she says.

Another nod. "Paul is correct."

It's late on a slightly chilly afternoon in January 1990. As the school year rolls from the first semester into the second, beginning the long slide toward graduation night in June, Tampa Bay is enjoying yet another impossibly gorgeous winter day. The sun is just now setting toward the gulf; everything in the

landscape — trees, buildings, even the blocks of bumper-to-bumper traffic — seems to be floating in a benevolent amber haze. Still, it is no time for idle reverie. Not now. Not for the Largo High quiz team.

YY and a handful of Largo's other top students are huddled at a table in the library of Dunedin High. Around them, huddled at their own tables, hands poised near their own buzzers, are the quiz teams from Dunedin, Seminole, Countryside, Clearwater and Tarpon Springs high schools.

This convention of brains and reflexes is another match on the quiz team schedule. But it's really just a warm-up, sort of like a regular season NBA game. Everyone knows that the real action doesn't kick in until the play-offs, or in this case, the district tournament in late February. That's when quiz teams from all 15 Pinellas high schools will battle it out for the title of county champ.

YY and the rest of Largo's team — Carolyn Hanson, this year's valedictorian; Jennifer Belzel, the salutatorian; plus several other remarkably intelligent students, including Bret Harper, a sleepy-eyed senior otherwise known as Elvis, the King of Suede — are determined to go all the way this year. Largo won last year's tournament, and they'd like to silence any doubters who think that was a fluke. Plus, if they lose, there's a good chance it will be at the hands of Seminole High, which is a thought that makes YY and Carolyn and Elvis and the others want to heave a lung.

"They're from hell," YY says of the Seminole

squad. "They're from the depths."

Why do they despise Seminole so much? First, because the Seminole kids are good. Second, because they know they're good. Third, because they are led by the notorious Timothy "I Challenge" Burrows.

Burrows is this pale stick of a kid who possesses one of the most impressive brains that Pinellas County has seen in years. He appears to have inputted entire sets of encyclopedias and other data bases through his ears, and during a match he can shuffle through those vast mountains of mental files and quickly retrieve almost any obscure fact. But what really gets to YY and her colleagues is how much of a pain Burrows can be during a match. He repeatedly interrupts the competition, challenging the knowledge of the judges or the accuracy of the answers — especially when he guesses and is told he's incorrect. It's his right to challenge; it's in the rules. But he does it so often that the Largo team would like to throttle him.

"I totally hate this kid," YY says during a break in the meet, glaring across the room. Her teammates try to calm her, but she brushes them off. "You don't understand. I am getting so mad."

She gets even madder when the match is over and Seminole wins with 155 points, leaving Largo to finish in the middle of the pack with only 100. It is a bitter defeat, made all the worse by what happens a few minutes later. YY and the others walk out to the parking lot and get into their cars, headed for home and another night of homework, when suddenly a couple of them find themselves smack in the middle of a quiz team's equivalent of a brawl. It's some of the Seminole kids. They're in another car and have just pulled in front of Jen Belzel when a couple of them turn and flip their middle fingers through the rear window at her.

If YY were here, and not already tooling away ahead of them in the Y-mobile, she'd probably jump out of the car and disembowel these creeps. But Jen is so innocent, so wonderfully good-hearted, that her mind has trouble processing what has just occurred. She can't believe it.

"Oh my God, Gayle," she says, turning to a teammate sitting beside her in the car. "What did they do? They didn't really flick us off, did they?"

**W**hy do these Largo quiz kids despise Seminole so much? First, because the Seminole kids are good. Second, because they know that. Third, because they are led by the notorious Timothy "I Challenge" Burrows.



### The Nemesis



■ Timothy Burrows (left) possesses one of the most impressive brains in the county. And he uses it as a member of the Seminole quiz team (above). (Seminole yearbook photos)

In the next few minutes, Jen is repeatedly forced to confront brutal reality. As the cars head out and drive down the street, the Seminole kids — Tim Burrows, for the record, is not among them — pull alongside Jen's car and flick them off again. Over and over. With an abundance of glee.

"Why'd they do that?" says Jen, still trying to reason it out. "That wasn't really nice."

That evening, Jen and Gayle report the incident to the others. There are cries of anger, howls of outrage. Another challenge, that's what this is. YY and Elvis and the rest of the team are not just defending their title anymore; they're defending their honor. They must go to that tournament and kick these finger flickers in the teeth. They must humiliate them. Drop them, once and for all, onto the dung heap of quiz team history.

**I**f someone told John Boyd about the quiz team and how Seminole flicked them off, he'd probably just laugh and shake his head. He wouldn't bother trying to tell them about the challenge he's been facing lately.

It's these dealers in John's neighborhood. Somewhere along the line, they've gotten it into their heads that John and the other Raw Dogs — that's what John and these neighborhood guys he hangs with, other football players mostly, like to call themselves — are trying to move against them and clean up the area. The Raw Dogs don't particularly like seeing crack sold on the street, but they also aren't looking for trouble. Still, the dealers see them as the enemy. For months now, they've been scrapping with the Dogs; they keep coming after them with bottles and sticks.

John wants no part of it. He doesn't think it makes any sense to go up against these people.

"This ain't really about it," he tells his friends. "This is stupid, right?"

But the dealers aren't giving them much choice. Because now they're starting to carry some heavy firepower. One night not long ago,

when the Dogs were walking home from a party, one of the dealers cruised by in a car, making sure they saw the glint of the gun in his hand.

That wasn't the end of it, though. The other night, a bunch of the dealers were outside John's house. Again, one of them had a gun. He stood holding it, just staring at John. The message was clear. Sooner or later, they were coming for him.

Which is why John's started carrying his own firepower.

It's this .32 revolver he borrowed from a friend. John keeps the gun in a closet in his room or in another closet downstairs. He tucks it in his pants when he walks around the neighborhood.

If people knew, they'd be shocked. John's just not the type they'd expect to do something so dangerous. John's a solid guy. He's real sweet-tempered. He's active in his church. During the summer, he does community work with little kids. At school, he's a starter on the football team. He's only an average student, but when he stays focused, he does just fine. Judith Westfall, the principal, is one of his biggest fans. When the tension starts to rise in the halls, she calls him to her office sometimes — she knows how much other kids look up to him — and asks him to calm people down and persuade them to keep their fists to themselves.

At home, John has even been known to spend a second or two considering the plea that's taped to his door.

*John, please clean your room*

His mom put it there years ago, and he never had the heart to take it down. He likes to look at it and grin. John's dad died when he was 4, after a blood clot burst in his head, but his mother has taken good care of him. She's a housekeeper for a retirement home in Clearwater. She calls him John-John; she smiles at the mere mention of his name. John has a little brother, but he also has four older sisters, and all of them — plus his mom — love to dote on him. He has photos of them taped up in his locker.

Of course, he doesn't tell any of them about the .32. And he tries not to alarm Andrea. She and John still aren't a couple or anything; with Alyma in the picture, they still feel they can't get together. A few weeks ago, though, not long after the lip sync, Andrea was disappointed in him for getting in this fight outside a McDonald's.

The whole thing was stupid. John's not even sure how he got caught up in it. It was a payback against these guys from Seminole who had supposedly jumped a Largo kid. Who knows? Anyway, John and some of his buddies, who happened to be black, ended up in the parking lot of this McDonald's, swinging away at the Seminole guys, who happened to be white. When Andrea heard, she was mad. Andrea hates fights, especially ones between black kids and white ones. Half the time, as far as she can tell, there's no real racial tension involved; it's just an excuse for boys to go at it. But anytime blacks and whites mix it up, it seems to her that the blacks get accused of starting it. Why play into people's hands that way?

John feels real strong about Andrea, but he doesn't think she completely understands what it's like for him. She lives in this nice neighborhood on a little street lined with shady oak trees. Nothing fancy, but nice. And at school, she hangs with this upwardly mobile group of friends.

"The good-girl clique," says John.



### The Power of Prayer

■ The way John (center) sees it, God didn't want him to become a dealer. He's turned to Young Life, a Christian group that reaches out to teens, to help keep him out of trouble.

For him, things are different. John lives in a housing project a few miles south of Andrea's neighborhood. It isn't a bad place; it looks about like any other subdivision, with quiet streets and stucco houses and yards where the grass fights to survive under the Florida sun. Almost all the people who live there have normal jobs and families and bills just like anybody else. But for years, there's also been a bunch of dealers out on the street, selling their goods. Most of them are in their late teens or 20s, plus there's always a few young ones hanging on the fringes, waiting their turn. The little wannabes, John calls them.

Time was when John qualified as a little wannabe. When he was in middle school, he was dying to join the dealers and make some quick money. He used to beg the older guys to let him help out.

"Man," he'd say, "when are you going to let me serve you?"

Things didn't work out like that, though. The way John sees it, God didn't want him to become a dealer. John thinks about God a lot these days. He's involved with Young Life, a Christian group that reaches out to teen-agers. It keeps him out of trouble, just like football does. That was the choice John made. Either he was going to be a dealer, or he was going to stick with football and try to use it to get a college scholarship. That's the choice many of the Raw Dogs have made.

The Dogs were formed last year, after they all fell in love with that Spike Lee movie, *School Daze*. In the picture, there's this bunch of black guys in a college fraternity — Gamma Phi Gamma — who are also known as the Gamma Dogs. So John and the others decided they wanted to start their own fraternity. They called themselves the Raw Dogs. One night they initiated each other — again, just like in the movie — by shaving their heads.

That was when the trouble started with the dealers. They thought the Raw Dogs were forming a rival gang. A gang dedicated to kicking the dealers off the corner. The dealers started looking

for excuses to fight them. One night at a dance, one of the Dogs tried to joke with one of them.

"You're looking at an all-conference football player," he told him.

The man didn't laugh. "You better get your all-conference ass out of the way."

From there it just got worse. The dealers would wait until one or two of the Dogs were alone and then come after them. Not long ago, they ambushed one of John's friends as he got off his school bus, coming after him with bricks and a metal bar.

And now they're waving guns.

"We're going to stand our ground," the Dogs have told them.

"You ain't got no ground," the dealers say back. "We'll take you out."

That's why John keeps his .32 close at hand. He knows he's taking a terrible risk. He could end up in prison. He could end up wounded or worse. But what's he supposed to do, call the police and ask for a 24-hour guard? He'd rather get arrested for self-defense than get killed.

He always keeps the gun loaded. A couple of times he's shot into the woods behind his house, so he'll be ready for how it feels, so he won't be surprised by the kick. At night, he stands with it in front of his mirror, checking himself out, practicing his determined look. If he ever has to point it at anyone, he doesn't want there to be any doubts that he's willing to use it. . . .

**'G**ood morning. Our thought for the day is: Some people have a good aim in life, but they never pull the trigger."

The voice of wisdom just won't stop. Even now, after all these months, it's still bombarding the school with one bizarre line after another, all delivered with the same chirpy verve. It's as though David Letterman were presiding over the

morning announcements. Or maybe Samuel Beckett.

Down in AB-12, in the controlled chaos that serves as the newspaper office, YY and Karin Upmeyer and other miscellaneous AB-12 rats have covered one of the blackboards with a new assortment of beloved quotes. Quotes from their own mouths, which they uttered during a recent journalism field trip to New York City.

"I can't believe we can't find the second tallest building in the nation!"  
 "New York — Hell's Sister City!"  
 "Wait a minute — he's got a water gun!"  
 "Don't smile on the subways!"  
 "When you cremate me, just throw me anywhere."  
 "Time for . . . lambada!"

In case it's not obvious, the elder rats are starting to feel the effects of senioritis. They're snapping rubber bands on each other's arms, locking each other in the closet, declaring noogie wars, collapsing on the tables and wailing about deadlines, homework and how they can't wait until graduation. One day, as YY sits trying to finish another calculus assignment, Karin sneaks up and snatches the assignment away from her.

"I'm sick of her doing her dumb calculus," says Karin, who proceeds to hide the paper in a trash can out in the hall. "Not only does she do it, she does it out loud."

Karin's joking, but beneath her smile there's an edge. Sometimes she feels so inferior when she sees YY and Amy Boyle huddled over their calc homework. Karin feels dumb compared to them and Meridith Tucker. She's quick enough — she fires off the most clever one-liners of any of the Heathers — but in class she feels like she's always muddling through. YY and Amy are already mastering college-level calculus, Meridith's taking analytical geometry, and yet here's old Karin, still suffering through Algebra II. She'll probably be in that class for the rest of her life, she says.

"I'm there forever," she says.



Karin tries hard. She stays after school for extra help, she goes to Amy for tutoring. But she got a D in math last semester, and she's not doing any better this time around. Her parents are not going to be happy. Especially her mom. When Karin received the D, the woman sketched out.

"We don't get Ds," Mrs. Upmeyer said.

"Well, Mom," said Karin, "I got a D."

The problem is, she's stuck in the middle of an exceedingly crowded pack. If she were a wonderful student like YY and the others, she'd be in those honors courses, where the classes are usually kept to a reasonable size. And if she were a failing student, she'd probably be down in the pod, where the classes are also small and where individualized attention is always the specialty of the day. But Karin doesn't fit either category. She's average, so she's forced to fight for air inside regular classes, where the rest of teen humanity is assigned. Sometimes, there are more than 35 kids jammed into one room.

Lots of times, if Karin has trouble understanding something, she doesn't even bother raising her hand. "I just kind of move on," she says.

Now, about all she thinks about is whether she'll make it into a decent college. YY and Amy and Meridith have already been accepted to the University of Florida. But then, they had the killer SAT scores. Not Karin. She has taken the test three times. But the best she could come up with was a combined score of 930.

Sorry.

"Schools say, 'Hey, if you don't get 1,000 or 1,050, too bad,'" says Karin. "They don't even look at you."

She didn't even apply to UF, because her parents didn't want her going to Gainesville. She did write to several other schools, though, including Florida State, but she hasn't been accepted at any of them yet. She knows how important this is. Not just to her. But to her mom and dad. She's trying not to panic, trying to tell herself that surely there's some school out there that will take her. Weeks are going by, and still she hasn't gotten any word from FSU. She's waiting, but the letter just hasn't arrived yet.

**I**n a room at the end of A wing, Mr. Feazell is leading one of his American history classes in a discussion of the events leading to World War II. But first he needs to wake up the boy who's snoring in the back.

"Where's my Walter Mitty?" he says.

That's what Mr. Feazell calls the sleepers.

"Mitty?"

He's calling out loudly, but there's no response. He turns to those seated around the boy.

"Wake him up."

The sleeper is nudged into consciousness as Mr. Feazell begins talking about Neville Chamberlain, the British prime minister who tried to negotiate with Hitler.

"Who was Chamberlain?" he says. "What did he say he wanted?"

Someone raises a hand. "Peace in our time."

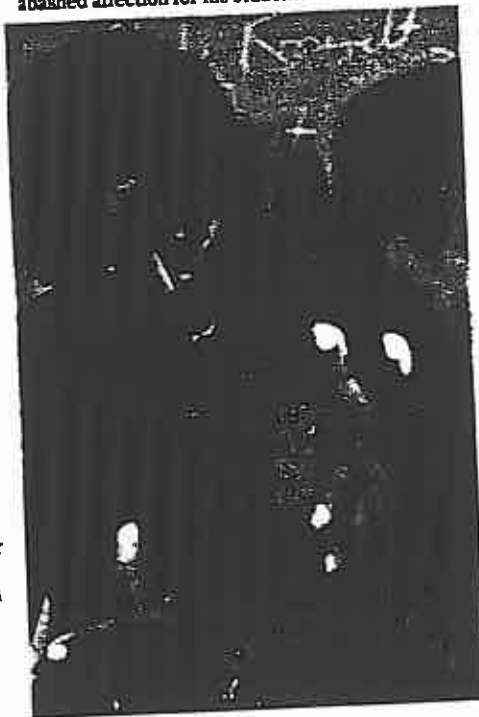
What about Hitler? says Mr. Feazell. Which country was it that joined Hitler in a non-aggression pact?

Another raised hand. "Russia."

Mr. Feazell nods. He's been teaching at Largo High for 20 years now and still loves it. He's shaped so many young lives by now. Sam Ford, one of Largo's health teachers, was once among his students. So was Rudy Falana, one of the assis-

tant principals at Clearwater High.

All of them have come under the spell of James Feazell. He's a showman, really. He leads his classes with humor, common sense and unabashed affection for his students.



**The Nurturer**

■ For years now, history teacher James Feazell has spent nearly every spare moment working with black students, coaching them on youth sports teams and finding them jobs. Mostly, though, he just listens to them.

"I'm the salt man," he tells them. "I can't make you drink. But I can make you thirsty."

One of the first black teachers at Largo High, Mr. Feazell is an incredibly nurturing figure. For years now he has spent nearly every spare moment working with African-American kids — coaching them on youth football and baseball teams, tutoring them at community centers, finding them jobs as they get older, helping them apply for scholarships and financial aid when they are ready to go to college. More than anything else, though, he listens to them.

By the time they reach high school, so many students — particularly black students — feel alienated from the system. It's hard for them to confide in an adult, especially since there are no black administrators at Largo. So they come to Mr. Feazell and tell him things they tell no one else. The stories they share can be appalling. Stories about drugs, pregnancy, abuse, a thousand forms of neglect. So many of them are starving for attention. So many feel this emotional void.

"When you're dealing with a kid with those kinds of problems," Mr. Feazell says, "it's hard to start talking about colonialism in America."

One of the things he hears from black students — one of the things he sees with his own eyes, over and over — is how the system grinds them down. Usually it starts around third or fourth grade. It's probably not conscious. But beneath the surface, in the words that are spoken and the

looks that are exchanged, runs this widespread expectation that black students will fail. Not just among the teachers and administrators. But among the students themselves. By high school, he says, these attitudes are so entrenched that many black kids are suspicious of anyone who does well in school.

"Right now," he says, "I don't think it's an acceptable thing among the black students at Largo High School that you should want to excel."

That's why Andrea Taylor is such an important role model. Mr. Feazell can't believe how strong Andrea's been, carrying the load all these years. When she was in ninth grade, eight or nine other black students in her class had just as much potential. But now, Mr. Feazell says, those others are gone. They all dropped out.

Not Andrea, though. She's getting ready to go on to better things at college. Of course, she's had to endure other kids hinting that she's sold out and turned white.

"I know they're just kidding," Andrea says, taking her usual positive attitude. "I think. I hope."

Mr. Feazell doesn't know about the frustrated romance between Andrea and John Boyd. He also doesn't know about John's .32. But he is aware that this is a perilous time for that young man. Mr. Feazell's been looking out for him since John was 7. He coached him in youth football when John was this stubby fourth-grader; now, all these years later, he's a junior, taking Mr. Feazell's seventh-period American history class.

John has so much potential. He could go so far. But in the past couple years, he's slipped. His grades have dropped; not long ago he wound up in that fight outside the McDonald's. He's walking on the edge. One mistake, and he could fall.

**D**own in the pod, the teachers are still in awe of the miracle.

They're not sure how it happened. They don't know if it will last. But suddenly Mike Broome has turned into this fantastic kid who can't wait for class to begin.

"What are we going to do today?" he says eagerly as he walks into the room.

He laughs. He jokes. He finishes his classwork, then asks for more. He is clearly the same boy, because he still wears the FTW jeans and the Metallica shirt that shows a sword coming out of a toilet, accompanied by the slogan "Metal up your ass." But now, he offers to clean the blackboard. One day, in Ms. DiLello's general math class, he asks for a pass to get a folder and then makes the unprecedented move of coming right back, folder in hand. Still, this is nothing to compare with the historic events of Monday, Jan. 29.

"I want to be a teacher," he tells Mrs. O'Donnell.

"Oh," she says, trying not to let her jaw hit the floor. "Oh."

She's staring at him. She's trying to think of what to say.

"That's . . . great. I hear you're good with young kids."

This is true. For months, she and Mike's other teachers have clung to the memory of how sweet he was on the day when he held that baby who was visiting the pod. Now Mike starts telling Mrs. O'Donnell how much he loves children. During the



summer, he tells her, he works with them at a public pool, teaching them how to swim. Swimming, he says, is one of his favorite things in the world. Especially the butterfly stroke. He's been on a team at the pool for . . .

What's happened? Who can say for sure. Maybe Mike just decided it was time to get serious. That happens sometimes with GOALS kids; they can resist their teachers' efforts for years, then suddenly something clicks in their heads — who knows what does it — and they change for the better almost overnight. Perhaps Mike's been thinking about what it's been like for his older brother Wade since he dropped out at the end of last semester. Wade's already had a couple jobs. For a while he was washing dishes at a restaurant, but they fired him because he was going to night school — he still plans to get his GED — and couldn't work on Monday and Wednesday evenings. At least that's the way Wade tells it. Then he was hired as a dishwasher at a motel. But they got rid of him there, too, after he left early one day because he was violently ill.

Mike's still telling the kids at school about it. What happened to Wade wasn't fair, he says.

"He started throwing up at work," he tells a girl in one of his classes, "and they fired him."

The whole thing seems to have made an impression on Mike. If nothing else, it has shown him that the teachers aren't making it up when they talk about how tough it is out in the world. Especially if you're just a kid and don't have a diploma.

Mike is doing particularly well in Ms. DiLello's class. He likes math. He also likes Ms. DiLello. Right now, he's getting an A in her class. He plows through the assignments like a machine; she could double the work, and he'd be happy. One morning, he points at this statue on her desk — it's one of those little figures in a cap and gown, holding a diploma — and announces to the class that he'll be holding a diploma someday, too.

One of the other kids snickers.

"Why are you laughing?" says Ms. DiLello.

The kid looks at Mike. "Because he's never going to get one of those."

Ms. DiLello gives this jerk one of her subatomic stares.

"Yes, he is."

Outside, in the halls, Mike asks her if she really thinks he can do it. Yes, she tells him. She believes he will pick up a diploma someday.

He smiles. "Yeah. I will get one."

It's a good time all around the pod. Despite all of the kids who dropped before, a new semester is always a chance to start over. Plus, plenty of new kids have been brought in to fill the empty desks. There's always a waiting list to get into GOALS, always more students who are desperate for the kind of care and support available in the pod. Many of them, once in GOALS, instantly thrive.

There's this freshman girl named Shannon. She was a big turnaround student in middle school, but couldn't handle it when she reached high school and was stuck in crowded regular classes. Now, in GOALS, she's doing much better. There's this other girl named Lisa — technically she's a freshman, too — who is determined to get an education but has some hurdles to overcome.

"I'm a little embarrassed about being in here," she told Mrs. O'Donnell on the first day, as she sat among other freshmen and sophomores.

"Why?"

"Because I'm 17."

"That's okay. Nobody in here knows how old you are."

"I'm a dropout."

"No, you're not. You're back in school."

Turns out that Lisa dropped a couple of years ago, in ninth grade, because one of her teachers supposedly kept coming on to her. He'd ask her to come up to his desk, she says, and then make some excuse for her to lean over so he could look

down her blouse. But when she complained, she says, no one believed her. So she quit. While she was out of school, she says, she was living on her own, supporting herself with different jobs. She painted houses, she laid carpet, she even babysat for exotic dancers. That's the term Lisa prefers.

"Not strippers," she says. "Exotic dancers."

She knew several of them who had kids and needed someone to watch them at night while they worked. She sat with the kids in this one house. Some nights she'd work from 6 in the evening until 5 in the morning. She didn't care, she says. These women were nice. Plus, as long as they paid her on time. . . .

"Shut up, you dumb brakes."

YY, resplendent in her fluorescent green Oakley sunglasses, sits at the helm of the Y-mobile. She is trying to ignore the persistent squealing coming from under her car.

"They sound real good," says one of the girls in the back seat.

YY lets the sarcasm pass. "I think I've run out of brake fluid or something queer like that," she says.

Deep into another amber January afternoon, she and several of her academic team colleagues are headed for another quiz match. Alas, the Seminole squad will not be among today's competitors. But with the county tournament only a few weeks away, the Largo kids are gearing up to defend their title and wreak vengeance upon the finger flickers who hounded poor Jen Belzel. They are also longing, more than ever, to muzzle Timothy "I Challenge" Burrows. As it turns out, YY and Jen are not the only ones who want to silence Burrows. A guy on the Clearwater team has confessed to YY that he and his compadres find Tim just as irritating as the Largo kids do. Together they are forming an anti-Burrows sect; already there are whispers of visiting his house one night and rolling it with toilet paper.

"He's so clueless," says one of the Largo kids.

Burrows is not the first kid in history to generate such hostility. A couple of years ago, there was a prodigy at Countryside who drove the other kids so crazy that they finally resorted to psychological warfare. It was a modified honey trap; instead of matching wits with him, they hot-wired his hormones. According to the official version now circulating through academic circles, this boy had a thing for a girl on the Pinellas Park team. So just before the final round of the county tournament, the girl walked up to him and stuffed a piece of paper in his pocket. On this paper was a phone number, allegedly hers.

"Why don't you call me?" she told him, presumably with her most devastating smile.

The play worked beautifully, or so the story goes. The whiz kid went into instant meltdown, and another team — Lakewood — won the title.

So far, no one appears to be planning any honey traps for Burrows. The fact is, YY and the others should be grateful to the kid for the extra degree of intensity he brings to the contest. Every competitor needs an archrival, someone to get the

juices flowing. Burrows, as it happens, has no idea that he figures so prominently in the imaginations of the Largo kids; he's unaware that he's been transformed, in their minds, into this diabolical adversary. Much later, when he is informed of how YY and the others felt, Tim — who turns out to be a well-spoken, personable young man — seems quietly amused. The funny thing, he says, is that he never thought much about the Largo team at all. He never thought, he says, that they were good enough to worry about.

Touche.

YY and the other kids, of course, would take issue with that viewpoint. They don't deny that Burrows is talented. Still, in these weeks before the tournament, they believe they have the brainpower to take him on. And maybe they do.

Their heaviest hitter is probably Carolyn Hanson, the sweet and utterly serious girl who was born to be a valedictorian. Carolyn tries to play down how much of a straight arrow she is. She claims, not very convincingly, that in her spare time she likes to "just act really wild." Her GPA is somewhere over 4.28 — on a 4.0 scale. Like most valedictorians, she downplays the academic competition for the number one spot in the school. Once she's locked up the title, she tries to assume this laid-back attitude; she alleges that it wouldn't particularly bother her if she ever received anything less than a perfect grade. YY, however, still talks about the six-week period last year when

Carolyn got a B and nearly lost it until she pulled it back up to an A in time for the semester grade, which is what affects the GPA.

"She can't get a B," says YY, "or she'll be destroyed."

A couple of years ago, when Carolyn took a standardized aptitude test given to high school sophomores nationwide — the ASVAB, as it's so tenderly called — she received a bit of a blow.

"They told her she wasn't college material," remembers YY.

So much for standardized tests.

The Largo team also has Jennifer Horner, another terrific kid who's bearing down like a cruise missile on next year's valedictorian slot, and Trina Kavula, a soft-spoken sophomore who's about to be named one of the top science and engineering students in the U.S. because of this little project she's been working on, Electroosmotic Irrigation: Part One of a Three-Year Study. In case that title conjures some image of Trina as a pimply geek, let the record show that she's a charming girl with long blond hair and a sly sense of humor who, like so many other kids, listens to the Power Pig.

Still, there's no question that YY hangs closer to the edge than anyone in this crew. Today, only a few minutes after hearing her wonder about the Y-mobile's brake fluid, Trina, Carolyn and Jennifer Horner are holding their breath in the back seat as YY demonstrates the finer points of kamikaze driving. Heading out of the school parking lot, on their way to the quiz match, she cranks up the stereo and peels down Missouri Avenue.

"Number one rule in my car," she says, speaking loudly over the music. "Don't complain about the speed I'm traveling at."

The girls in the back appear too frightened to complain about anything. YY's right foot is glued to the accelerator; her long brown hair is swirling in the wind of her open window. She zips from lane to lane. She yells at a pedestrian who moves out of her way too slowly.

"This is what sidewalks are for, dork!"

All the while, she's flipping channels on the radio. For a moment she lands on a heavy metal station and pauses to sing along with a Motley Crue song. Then she glances in her mirror and catches the poisonous look Carolyn and the others are giving her.

"So you guys aren't, like, Motley Crue fans, huh?"

They make it to the match safely — they take second place this time — but none of it's as memorable as the ride over. YY is the token wild child of this squad. Perhaps the only member of the team who even comes close to YY's more extremist sensibilities is Elvis, the King of Suede. Poor Bret Harper. No matter what he does, he can't shake the nickname. He's had it since that fateful day, earlier this quiz season, when he stumbled during one of the matches. The questioner had just asked for the identity of the King of Swing.

A couple kids, including YY, were reaching for the buzzer, but Bret beat them to it. Something inside him, perhaps some deep-rooted survival instinct, caused him to pause for a moment and ask the others if they wanted to take it. But since this one was so easy — doesn't everybody know that the King of Swing was Benny Goodman? — they told him to go ahead. And so he blurted out the two words that would haunt him for so long.

"Elvis Presley!"

The audience erupted. Bret looked around, confused.

"Why is everybody laughing?"

YY and the other Largo kids were staring at him like a war criminal. They were slicing and dicing him with the ginsu knives of their eyes. Scrambling for his honor, Bret quickly tried to account for the blunder. He said he'd misheard. He thought the questioner had said King of Suede. Not Swing, *Suede*.

This won him no sympathy.

"Stooge," the others hussed. "You are *so* stupid."

Even now, these many months later, the stigma lingers.

"It was an *honest* mistake," he says, for the umpteenth time. But no one cares. For the rest of his days, or for at least as long as anyone remembers, he will be the King of Suede. Or, when his persecutors are feeling more charitable, the King of Rock 'n' Roll. Or sometimes just the King.

Perhaps it's appropriate, then, that Bret was the one who supplied YY with a ticket to the recent Rolling Stones concert at Tampa Stadium. They weren't on a date or anything, but by the end of the show, YY did find herself in a budding romance with another boy who went with them, this college guy who knows Elvis. The relationship didn't last long, though. Apparently this guy likes his girlfriends to be a bit more subdued; YY's personality was too much for him to handle.

"You're really major," he told her.

Also, this guy said he didn't like the idea of hanging out with Karin and Amy and Meridith and all of YY's other high school friends. In a classic male-type power move, he was pushing her to choose between him and her girlfriends. YY told

him to forget it. Say what you want, but the girl is not a traitor to her pals.

Truth is, things have been going okay for YY of late. Turns out she won that PRIDE writing award Mrs. Hay wanted her to enter. YY thinks it was her divorce piece that helped her clinch it.



**Elvis, the King of Suede**

■ Bret Harper earned the nickname when he answered a quiz team question asking who was the King of Swing. His answer: "Elvis Presley!" Later, he says, "It was an *honest* mistake." He thought the questioner said King of Suede. Not Swing, *Suede*.

Still, she hasn't shown it to her parents. She's not sure how they'd feel if they read it.

"It's my mom's birthday today," she tells some of her friends. "Guess how old she is."

"Forty?"

"Higher."

"Fifty?"

"Almost. She's 47. Four-seven. She's ancient."

YY offered her a birthday cake, but Helen wouldn't hear of it.

"No," she told her daughter. "I'm on a diet."

"Okay. I'll make you a palace of celery sticks."

YY and Helen have been getting along well. Lately, in fact, YY has stopped griping about their dispute over her future career. Now that the stressed-out sweepstakes is entering its final and most intensive stages, YY has retreated into a protective shell. She's focusing on the essentials — such as making it through these last months of exams and papers — and forcing herself not to worry about any problems that don't need to be dealt with right now. She's rationing her emotional energy, flipping into survival mode.

All of the Fearsome Foursome are in survival mode these days. Not that they're acting like machines or anything. They still watch *Heathers*, still quote their favorite *Heathers* lines, still memorialize the movie by conducting their own lunchtime polls. Since the script only provided them with one question, they've had to make up some new ones — lately they've been asking kids what they'd save if their house was burning down and they only

had time to retrieve one item from the flames — but they've also remained faithful to the original story by publishing the results in the *Packer Press*. No one's saying it's exactly ground-breaking journalism. But it helps them stay sane.

One day Karin goes home and sees a letter in the mailbox from FSU. She's so excited, she tears it open and reads it right there in the car. The letter is polite, but as she reads it, she hears the

sound of another door slamming shut on her future. What's she going to do now?

Karin doesn't tell her parents. She leaves the letter in the glove compartment, wondering when she'll find the courage to break it to them.

"Did you get accepted?" her dad asks her.

"I don't know yet," she says. "I haven't heard."

**T**he moment John Boyd has been expecting arrives one winter afternoon, not long after school. John is walking through the neighborhood with one of the other Dogs, carrying some schoolwork — he has already retrieved the .32 from its hiding place and has it inside his pants, just in case — when he runs into the dealers. There's a bunch of them, maybe eight or nine of them, standing on the street. They have obviously been waiting for him.

The other Dog, who's standing beside him, sees them coming and turns to John.

"Giddy-Up," he says, using an old nickname from the days when John used to always wear a cowboy hat, "what you going to do?"

"I'm going home, man," says John. "I'm all right."

The dealers come up behind him. Some of them are carrying sticks and bottles. In the corner of his eye, John can also see the little wannabes and other neighborhood kids running up to witness whatever's about to go down.

One of the dealers decides to get things rolling. He steps forward with a clenched fist, dancing around on the balls of his feet like he thinks he's Muhammad Ali or somebody.

"What you all waiting for?" he says to the others. "Let's get him."

John pulls out the .32, turns and points it at him.

"You don't want to do that," he says.

The dancing boy stares at the gun and freezes. Behind him, the others freeze, too.

Suddenly John hears these sharp pops, like firecrackers going off. At his left side, where he's carrying the textbook for Mr. Feazell's history class, he feels the impact of something hitting the book. On his right arm, he instantly feels a second impact, this one softer than the first.

He turns toward where he thinks the shots are coming from and pulls the trigger on the .32.

Click.

Oh my God, John tells himself. In that split second, a hundred things race through his mind. Maybe his mother found the gun in the closet and took out the bullets. Maybe it's just not working right. But whatever's happened, he is standing in the middle of a gunfight without any way of shooting back. And in case that wasn't obvious before, one of the girls who's been watching now broadcasts this fact to the world.

"It's empty!" she says.

John turns and runs, tearing off through the yards between the houses, sure that he's about to get shot in the back. Knowing how fast he is, some of the dealers pile into a blue Impala and go after him. When they come near him, John ducks behind a parked car and waits until they drive by.

By the time he reaches his house, his fear has turned to anger. He can't believe this stupid gun. Still breathing hard, he looks inside the chambers

and sees them loaded with bullets. He opens it and checks the one that should have fired. He sees a mark in it, where the hammer hit. But why didn't it shoot? He steps out back, points it toward the woods and pulls the trigger again.

Boom.

He calls his mother at work and tells her what's just happened. He's all pumped up. He wants to take it right back to those punks.

"I'm going back out," he tells his mother.

"No," she says. "Don't leave the house. Just stay there."

She tells him she's on her way and hangs up. Meanwhile, some of the other Dogs show up. They've heard about the shooting. They want to make sure John's okay.

"Did you get hit?" they ask him.

"I don't think so."

Suddenly John remembers the two impacts. He rolls up his sleeves and on his right arm he finds a light bruise. The second impact. But he can't find any other wounds, not even on his left side, where he was hit first. Then he remembers that he was carrying the textbook. He picks it up and sees the lead marks, still there. In the space of a microsecond, a bullet has ripped its way through 400 years of American history. It penetrated the hard cover and tore through the tops of all the pages, finally bursting through the other side. By then it had slowed enough that when it deflected into John's arm, it barely touched him. Somehow, he emerged with nothing more than an overgrown mosquito bite.

John can't believe it. He was holding the textbook by his chest. If it hadn't been there to absorb the force of the slug. . . . There is no other way to look at it. He has been saved by history. Spared by a book. Protected by Mr. Feazell, who always manages to look out for him, even from a distance.

In high school, news travels fast.

"You okay, brother?" says Mr. Feazell. "I heard about your incident."

The two of them talk about it. About John pulling the trigger and nothing happening. About the bullet hitting the textbook. Mr. Feazell listens carefully. He doesn't lecture. He tells John he understands, and to prove it, he shares some stories of the foolish chances he took when he was young. But before he lets John go, he stares him in the eye and gives him something to think about.

"God is trying to tell you something," he says, knowing the depth of John's faith. "He has a plan for you."

**B**ack in the windowless world of the pod, the new teacher is slowly being devoured alive. She's teaching ninth-grade English. She's the one they called in to take over the classes assigned to Mrs. McGraw, who has taken over the classes that used to be assigned to Mrs. Whitehead, who at the semester break asked to be transferred into a position outside the pod, in regular classes.

The budget didn't allow them to hire another full-time teacher to fill Mrs. Whitehead's slot, so they hired a long-term sub. Her name is Laura Trimm. Actually, she prefers it without capital letters. Like e.e. cummings. Most of ms. trimm's students have undoubtedly never heard of e.e. cummings. But they know enough to have already

dubbed her the Hippie. The title is not quite accurate, since ms. trimm is only 22 and was still toddling around in diapers at the time of Woodstock. Still, she is about as close to a hippie as anyone gets these days. She reportedly does not eat meat. She does not wear makeup or shave her legs — the kids are astounded, despite their alleged commitment to non-conformity — and she wears soft black shoes decorated with tiny peace signs. Around her neck, she keeps a yellow tiger's eye crystal. She loves crystals. Not just for their beauty, she says. But for their energy.

"I work with them and meditate," ms. trimm explains. "I study Eastern philosophy on my own. Taoism and Buddhism."

She is such an easy target for a teen-ager. The fact is, though, that she's an intelligent and well-meaning young woman. Just last year, she graduated from the University of South Florida with an English degree; before that she was a student at Largo. The class of '85, to be exact. Mr. Klapka was one of her teachers; so was Mrs. Hay. In fact, ms. trimm has all sorts of ties with this school. Her mother is Mrs. Badders, one of the veteran math teachers; also, ms. trimm has a younger sister who's a senior this year and will graduate in June.

Although ms. trimm had been subbing in other classes for months, she'd never taught in GOALS. During the job interview — which took place one day before the job began — Assistant Principal Pat Palmateer tried to prepare the novice for the challenges that awaited her. She tested ms. trimm with hypothetical situations, asking her what she would do if, for instance, she were confronted by two kids on the verge of a fistfight. This was a good hypothetical, because on ms. trimm's fourth day on the job, a pair of boys came into her room preparing to rip off each other's limbs.

"I'm going to kill you," one of them told the other.

They were on top of each other, ready to let the punches fly, when ms. trimm asked them to separate.

"Please," she said. "Don't do this."

She had to ask them repeatedly, but finally they stepped apart. Other disasters, however, have not been so easily averted.

"I wouldn't want to be you for anything," one of the other teachers told her.

With every ounce of patience inside her, ms. trimm has tried to treat her classes with the respect she always craved when she was a student. Wonderfully, stubbornly idealistic, she subscribes to the commendable belief that kids will act like adults if they are treated like adults.

"I try," she says, speaking in a soft and non-judgmental voice, "to be a very caring and positive person."

In a perfect school — in a school, say, created by Hollywood — these good intentions would win over her classes and usher in a golden era of growth and understanding. But this is not Hollywood. This is the pod. The kids in ms. trimm's classes are not grateful for her gift of respect. What they're grateful for is this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to go wild. It probably doesn't help that ms. trimm is not much older than they are, or that without any capitals in her name she robs herself of a certain degree of authority automatically available even to freshmen. It certainly does not help that in the early days she invites the students to call her by her first name, a tactic she is soon persuaded to abandon. Even then, she is placed at a disadvantage because the only other name available to her — her last name — happens to be a

nasty slang term for the female pubic area. Imagine the fun the kids have tossing that word around. . . .

No, don't. Imagine instead how she must feel when they mock her, call her names, hurl pennies at her back, play roller derby with their desks, lock her out of the classroom, send her crying down the hall. Imagine what it is like when they seize her good intentions and use them to club her.

"Nothing personal," one of them says, "but why are you such a bitch?"

Try, if you can, to imagine what it means for her to walk into fifth period every day, knowing Mike Broome is waiting for her. Mike, who has a ways hated English with a special passion, no matter who's forcing him to learn it. Mike, who may be new and improved for other teachers, but who can still instantly revert to his old infuriating self.

"Let me see that thing," he says, grabbing for her crystal as she walks past him.

She backs away. In only a few days, she has learned enough to know when to back away.

"Are you going to do your work?"

He grins. "I don't know. That's a tough question."



**Laura Trimm**

■ Her heart is in the right place, but teaching is not easy for a 22-year-old long-term sub in the pod. Especially when she prefers not to use capital letters in her name, like e.e. cummings (Times photo by Steve Hase)

One of the Seminole quiz kids sits impassively, listening to the man who is leaning down and growling directly into his face.

"Get mean," says this person, presumably his father. "Get an attitude."

The day of reckoning has arrived. It is Wednesday, Feb. 21, and here at Pinellas Park High, the county academic tournament is about to begin. Timothy Burrows and the rest of the Seminole High team are seated together in the Pinellas Park auditorium, waiting to seize the title. Around them, other teams are psyching up as well. Down the rows, kids are quietly hurling practice questions at each other; one student is flipping through a copy of *Test Your Cultural Literacy*.

"Do you want to ask me what a coulomb is?" someone on the Largo team says to Jen Belzel. Jen turns to YY.

"What's a coulomb, Christine?"

YY shakes her head. "I never found out."

It's a running gag. All year, it seems, coulombs have been popping up at the quiz team matches, repeatedly stumping YY and the rest of

the Largo gang. They know it's some unit of electrical measurement, but beyond that, they're not sure. Never mind.

YY feels confident. She likes the fact that the tournament's at Pinellas Park.

That's where Largo won it all last year; it's also where the team won a double-header this year.

"This is, like, our place," says YY.

The way she and the rest of the team figure it, the top three seeds in the tournament are them, Seminole and Clearwater. As if to confirm this speculation, each of these three schools is now sent to a different room to compete in separate preliminary heats with other teams. The top two finishers in each heat will then meet in the finals.

YY and Elvis and the others are in Group B, which is dispatched to a large classroom in G wing. Quickly, they take their seats alongside the four other teams in this group — St. Pete High, East Lake, Pinellas Park and Lakewood — and dive into the five-point round.

The first question is perfect for YY.

"Which classical work," asks the woman at the front of the room, "did Spenser and Milton imitate by dividing their epics into 12 books?"

YY hits the buzzer.

"*The Aeneid*," she says.

"Name the form in which the following three poems are written: Tennyson's *Ulysses*, Browning's *Porphyria's Lover* and *My Last Duchess*."

It is a vicious little question. But once again, the buzzer sounds at the Largo table, where YY and Carolyn Hanson are grinning at each other. This is too much. It's uncanny. Just this morning, in Mrs. Hay's English class, they were discussing *My Last Duchess*.

"Dramatic monologue," Carolyn says.

It's too soon to get cocky, though. Because over the next 10 minutes, Largo stumbles repeatedly.

"I'm getting mad," YY says during the first substitution break.

She pauses. "I'm definitely getting mad."

Another pause. "Now I'm mad."

It only gets worse. As they fall further behind, Carolyn buries her face in her hands.

"This is death," says one of her teammates watching in the audience.

As they enter the final 15-point round, YY leads a last-ditch comeback that would make Mrs. Hay proud. YY nails one on John Steinbeck and Flannery O'Connor. She nails another on the figure of speech known as synecdoche.

"Yesssss," she whispers, making a fist.

When the round is over, they have clawed their way up to third place. But they're still one spot shy of making the finals.

Bye-bye.

"Can we start over?" says YY, trying to hide her disappointment.

The top two schools in their heat, St. Pete and Pinellas Park, move on to face first-round winners Seminole and Clearwater. And when it's over, Tim Burrows and the finger flickers of Seminole are the new county champs.

So much for revenge.

YY and the others head home for yet another glorious night of homework. No time to mope, though. They have a calculus test tomorrow.

John Boyd is back on track now. Literally. As the second semester rushes forward, John is speeding along with it, running the mile relay for Largo's track team, his eyes focused on the long trail before him.

Since the gunfight, things have quieted down in his neighborhood. The dealers are no longer trying to fight the Raw Dogs. They're too busy fighting among themselves. One day a police officer who was working the shooting came to school to talk to John. The officer had heard that John had also been seen holding a weapon.

"I don't suppose you're going to tell me where the gun is now?"

"I threw it in the lake behind my house."

That was the end of that line of questioning. As it happens, John truly does not have the .32 anymore. He left it one night in a friend's car, and for some reason the police stopped the car and found the gun and took it away.

An arrest has been made, however. A 14-year-old boy — he was a childhood playmate of John's — was charged in the shooting and taken to the Juvenile Detention Center. Since then, this boy has been going through some tough times. During his weeks at JDC, his father died. Now, with all these changes, he supposedly has turned himself around. He wants to go back to school. Through emussaries, his mother has encouraged John to let it go, to not pursue the charges. John sends word back that he will do as she asks. If her son is willing to stop, so is he.

Now the only thing left is to understand. Late at night, John sits in his room and thinks it all through. He remembers what Mr. Feazell told him. He wonders what might have happened if his gun had actually fired. Would he have killed someone? Would he have been the one arrested? But it didn't fire. There was a bullet in the chamber, the hammer hit it, and yet it did not shoot. Why?

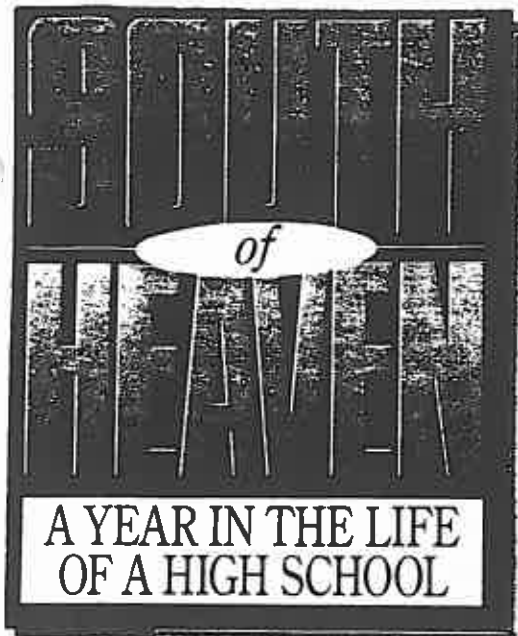
That's not the question that gets John the most, though. What he really wants to figure out is why he was carrying that book from Mr. Feazell's class. John does not know what made him bring it home from school that day. He didn't have any homework in that class on that night; he was caught up in the reading. So what compelled him to be holding the book at the instant when the bullet came tearing toward his heart? There's no logical reason for it. No logical reason at all . . .

They would deny it in the physics lab. But in these weeks before spring break, time is shifting into a higher gear. Things are starting to spin.

Andrea Taylor has a plan. After all these months, she sees a way for her and John to be together without destroying her friendship with Alyma. It will require delicate maneuvering. But it can be done.

Down in AB-12, the Heathers backlash has finally begun. YY and Karin and Amy and Meridith don't know exactly who's behind it. But they're hearing these nasty comments, passed along secondhand. Things are being written about them. Anonymous phone calls are being placed. YY and the others aren't sure what to do. But the resentment seems to be growing.

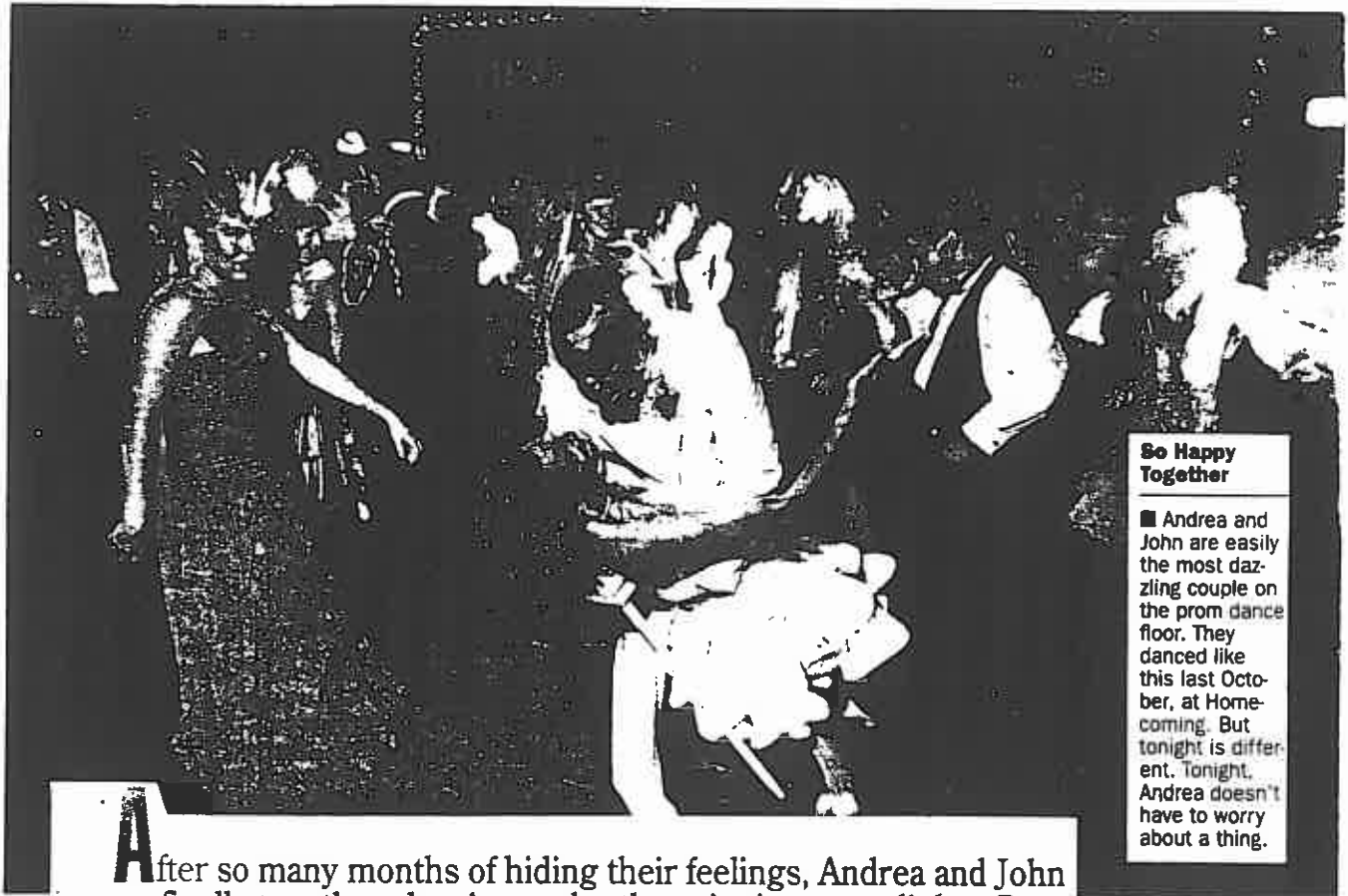
And over in the AA building, taking notes at the back of a health class, there sits a girl with freckles and long blond hair and an unmistakable sense of solitude about her. She says almost nothing. She barely looks up from her paper. But it is definitely her. Jaimee the ghost has returned.



ST. PETERSBURG TIMES  
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DAY 6

# Out of the Shadows



## So Happy Together

■ Andrea and John are easily the most dazzling couple on the prom dance floor. They danced like this last October, at Homecoming. But tonight is different. Tonight, Andrea doesn't have to worry about a thing.

**A**fter so many months of hiding their feelings, Andrea and John are finally together, dancing under the spinning prom lights. But that same night, tension is building inside the Fearsome Foursome. First will come the blow-up. Then the walls of icy silence.

**T**he plan is so simple. It's so easy. Now if only Andrea Taylor could bring herself to do it.

For some time now, Andrea has known something which, if disclosed to the right person, would allow her and John to finally become a couple. It's not a big deal or anything, but what Andrea keeps thinking about is that she and John and Alyma are not just involved in a romantic triangle. It's really more of a rectangle. While she's been dating John, Alyma has also been seeing someone else. No reason she shouldn't; she and John aren't that serious. Still, John doesn't know, and if someone told him, it would give him a natural opening to start seeing Andrea.

Andrea, though, doesn't think she can tell him. Being the nice girl she is, she doesn't want to spill anything confidential about her best friend. After all, the only reason Andrea knows about Alyma seeing the

other guy is because of the two girls' heart-to-hearts.

It's all so complicated. Perhaps a diagram is in order. . . .

One day, before Andrea is forced to make a decision, she gets this phone call that takes her off the hook. It's John. Through the grapevine, he's heard Alyma's seeing someone else. Which means he can gracefully break it off with her now.

Of course, the first person Alyma calls afterward is Andrea, who tries to soothe her as best she can. She does care about Alyma; that's why she spent so long trying to figure out how to do the right thing. At last, though, she and John can be together without feeling guilty. They'll need to give it a little time. But there's no stopping them now. Andrea and John won't be hiding in the shadows much longer.

**H**old on. Take a deep breath as Karin Upmeyer hits the brakes on the Beast and makes a last-second left turn across wet pavement. In their passenger seats, the other girls try not to yelp.

"OOOOHHHHHHHH!" cries Amy Boyle. "We were almost one with that ditch."

It's been like this all night. The tires on the Beast, which is Karin's nickname for her parents' hulking Econoline van, have been perpetually squealing. Karin and Amy and YY and Meridith Tucker have been forced to race around like madwomen, dragging the hems of their togas through the mud. And the rain just won't stop. Still, this evening — the evening of Friday, March 2 — is turning out to be one of the more wild and wonderful moments of their lives. It is a night for the archives. A night they should store away in their memories so they can look back on it, years from now, and treasure it as one of the last times the four of them were still together.

The night they kidnapped the freshman.

It's one of the extra-point options in the Sixth Annual Toga Scavenger Hunt. There are 35 teams competing in tonight's hunt, all from Largo High, all wearing the required togas — bed-sheets, actually, some of them painted with glow-in-the-dark colors — as they roam the area in pursuit of the \$100 first prize. If a team wants extra points, the options include obtaining a speeding ticket, delivering an old woman at the finish line (the rules stipulate that she must be at least 60) and showing the judges some physical proof that a sexual encounter has transpired during the even-

ing. Preferably, the rules state, an encounter involving one of the team members.

Or, for 100 points, the girls can kidnap a freshman and carry him, bound and gagged, over the finish line. The question now, for YY and company, is which freshman do they nab?

"There's one in my neighborhood we could get," says YY. "I'd like to bind and gag that little, that little —"

Various victims are considered, not just for their availability, but for the entertainment value in seeing each of them bound and gagged. Finally they decide to go for Wooter Buxton. His real name is Scot, but when he was a baby, he preferred to squirm across the floor rather than crawl, so his family started calling him Worm and Scooter, both of which were combined into Wooter, which is what he has gone by ever since. YY and the other Heathers know Wooter well. They think they can lure him into the Beast with no trouble. The only problem is, they have to get him before his older brother — Doug Buxton, a senior who happens to be on another team in tonight's hunt — snatches him away. Which is why YY gets to a phone as soon as possible.

"Hey Wooty," she says sweetly, already buttering up the poor child with a pet name for his pet name. "It's YY. Have you seen your brother tonight?"

The sacrificial freshman says no.

"Wooter," says YY, "stay at your house. Can we come get you? We need you."

YY neglects to explain to Wooter exactly why they "need" him. So Wooter says yes, they can fetch him. The girls dive back into the Beast.

"He said he was going to take a shower," says YY.

"A wet freshman!" says Karin.

This is beautiful. Not only are they going to obtain their freshman, they are going to steal him away from the competing clutches of his very own older brother.

"Doug is going to roll," says YY. "I totally want to get a picture of Doug finding out. I'd just totally lose control of all bodily functions if I saw him."

The toga scavenger hunt began at 7:30 in a shopping mall parking lot on Missouri Avenue, just north of the school. As the rain fell around them, close to 175 Largo students — seniors mostly, bunches of patio people, almost no one from the pod — milled in their togas, gossiping, flirting, waiting until the organizers handed out the super-secret list of the items to be scavenged.

In case it's not obvious, part of the thrill of these hunts is that they are not sanctioned by the school. They are organized entirely by the kids; this year, one of the Heathers' best friends, a fellow AB-12 rat named Troy Vaughn, is in charge. A few weeks ago, some Dunedin kids were charged with theft during their scavenger hunt because two of the items on their list were a man-hole cover and a Neighborhood Watch sign. At Largo, Troy and the other organizers of tonight's hunt have been careful to not include any items that would require contestants to break the law. Unless, of course, you count the 50 extra points to be awarded for the speeding ticket.

So here are YY and Amy and Meridith and Karin, plus two other girlfriends, Tracy and Louise, who have joined them tonight as honorary



Heathers, all of them careening around in the belly of the Beast. They are listening to the Power Pig, rapping together to their favorite songs. They are honking at cute guys. They are sipping on sodas and munching on Ruffles and Cool Ranch Doritos, Cool Ranch being their all-time favorite. Amy is sitting up front beside Karin, serving as navigator, reading aloud from the list so they'll know what they need other than a bound-and-gagged freshman. Not counting the extra-point options, there are 32 items to be gathered during the hunt. When Amy reads Item Number Eleven, she can hardly contain her excitement.

"One cooked pepperoni in a stamped envelope," she says, "addressed to Judith B. Westfall."

Amy then reads the address given on the list — the correct address, it should be pointed out — for the principal's home.

"They give her address?" says Tracy. "No way."

Wait a sec. Thirty-five teams are being asked to mail this woman a cooked pepperoni?

"Judi is going to have the surprise of her life," Karin says with a grin.

"Oh my God," says Meridith, looking slightly worried.

"She'll get over it," says YY.

"What are they going to do," says Karin, "expel us all for mailing her a pepperoni?"

Good point. The organizers of tonight's hunt have correctly gauged how far they can go without getting in serious trouble. The pepperoni gag is perfect. The odor angle — the thought of Judi opening her mailbox and reeling — gives it a good edge, but overall it's harmless.

Obtaining the cooked pepperoni is no problem. By chance, YY's family had a pizza earlier this very evening. So the Heathers dash over and pluck a pepperoni from one of the leftover pieces. Many of the other items on the list are just as simple as obtaining the pepperoni. They are asked, for instance, to give the name of the current waitress of the month at the Denny's near the school. To collect a sample of sea water. To list their favorite brands of beer shown on the huge Great Bay Distributors sign off Ulmertown Road.

"That's easy," says Amy.

"Michelob," says YY.

They are asked to purchase a package of Marlboro Light cigarettes, since that's Troy Vaughn's favorite brand. To find a Barbie and sheathe it inside a condom. To identify the top six officers of the Starship Enterprise — a question right up these girls' alley, since they watch *Star Trek: The Next Generation* religiously.

By the time they call Wooter and tell him they're on their way, the girls have already acquired many items. But they're still working on the Barbie inside the condom. They have the condom. Just a few minutes ago, two of the girls ran inside a 7-Eleven and bought a pack of Trojans.

"Should we get lubricated or regular?" one said to the other as they stared at the prophylactic section.

"I don't care."

Laying their hands on a Barbie — a relic from days of innocence — turns out to be a far more difficult proposition. Most of the girls don't have theirs anymore. Meridith still had one until last year, when she and Karin and Louise used it in a little revenge scheme. They'd found out that Louise's boyfriend was allegedly cheating on her with some pale-skinned redhead, so they took Mer's Barbie and turned it into a voodoo doll. They dyed its hair red, painted its lips, sprinkled it with baby



## Toga Scavenger Hunters

■ They kidnap hapless freshmen. They tool about in the belly of the Beast. They even get a speeding ticket — the smart way. They're the Fearsome Foursome (Plus Two), clockwise from left: YY, Tracy, Amy, Meridith, Louise and Karin, the Beastmistress. (Times photo by Jonathan Wiggs)

powder — all so it would look like the wench in question — then hung it from a noose on the outside of the boyfriend's mailbox.

"The girl was really mad," says Meridith. "She never talked to us after that."

No one should be surprised to learn that sweet little Amy's Barbie is still around somewhere, packed away. So on their way to pick up Wooter, they drop off Amy at her house so she can dig around and find it.

Barreling toward the Buxton home, the girls wonder aloud how Wooter's mom will react. She might not take it well when she hears what these girls have in mind for her baby boy. Thankfully, when they arrive, the mother is off shopping. But Wooter's father is there to greet YY at the door.

"Excuse me," YY says, "can I speak to Wooter?"

Ken Buxton, who's as clueless as his son about the true nature of this outing, smiles and asks her in. Little Wooty is just getting out of the shower.

"He's almost ready," says the dad.

At this moment, YY takes a bold step.

"Do you guys have any rope?" she says.

Mr. Buxton looks confused. "Rope?"

YY apologizes, pulls him aside, tells him why they need it. Mr. Buxton laughs. Who says there are no fun-loving parents left on the planet? Of course he'll give her some rope to tie up his boy. How much does she need? Will 20 feet be enough?

Wooter, who has been getting dressed in the

other room, walks out. Before he has a chance to ask any questions, they hustle him outside. YY, bringing up the rear, carries the rope.

"We'll bring him back in one piece!" she yells to Mr. Buxton.

Only then, when Wooter is inside the van, with the doors closed, do they tell him why he is sitting on the floor beside all this rope.

"All right," he says, not batting an eye. "So where do you have to bind and gag me?"

"At the finish line."

Wooter grins. He doesn't mind. He's surrounded by older women, all fawning over him so they can tie him up and do who knows what with his freshman body. Are you kidding? He's in heaven.

"You're a buddy! You're a pal!" Karin tells him. "For this, you're blood! You're family for life!"

The Beast heads back to Amy's house. Karin leans on the horn. Amy comes running out, Barbie in hand.

"Do we *have* to put the Barbie in the condom?" says YY.

"Yeah," says Tracy. "It's a total waste of a good Barbie."

Wooter, who has been asked to lie on the floor so no other team can see him and try to snatch him away, watches as they perform the procedure. He looks even more ecstatic than before. Barbies! Condoms! Senior girls in togas! It's like he has been admitted into some secret female world full of more lustful promise than any boy's fantasy.

They're singing to him. His bevy of captors is actually serenading him with a song of appreciation.

*We love you Woo-oo-ter  
Oh yes we do  
We don't love anyone  
As much as you*



**Wooter**

■ Scot Buxton earned his nickname when, as a baby, he squirmed across the floor instead of crawling. So his family started calling him Worm and Scooter, which evolved into Wooter.

He stares up at them with an unmistakable look of love and gratitude. He is deeply impressed — he admits it — that a freshman is worth 100 extra points. After suffering so much abuse throughout ninth grade, it's wonderful to be wanted. When he hears that extra points are also given for elderly women, he volunteers his grandmother. Maybe they'd like to kidnap her, too? But no. They've decided to skip the grandmother option. It's 8:38 p.m. They're running out of time.

"Have you ever even come close to winning?" he asks them. He means the hunt.

"Nooooo," they say together. "Not even close."

Doesn't matter. Sure, they'd like to win. But on a night like this, when everything clicks, they don't have to care about anything. Their faces are glowing. They're screaming out the window at

other teams they see at stoplights. Singing more songs. Tossing the bag of Cool Ranch Doritos from one end of the van to the other, digging toward the bottom for the last chip fragments, not worrying about their diets. They are truly fearless. They are immortal. As long as they are together inside the Beast with their grinning fresh-

man and their 20 feet of rope and the bonds of their friendship, nothing can hurt them.

This is hubris, of course. YY and the others should know it, too, having read the ancient tragedies. Because this glorious night will end. Sooner or later, they will scavenge all they're going to scavenge, and then they will dance at the party that awaits them at the finish line — which happens to be the clubhouse of an apartment complex — and then they will go home. They will climb into their respective cars, head for their respective beds, and then wake up once more to reacquire themselves with mortal concerns. They will stare in the mirrors and worry about their waistlines and curse the makers of Cool Ranch Doritos. They will worry again about all the exams that await them. They will even have to deal, in one way or another, with the Heathers backlash, which is underway in full force these days.

And before they know it — before they have a chance to arm themselves or erect any fortifications — the split will be upon them. It will cut into their hearts and force them to acknowledge that nothing lasts forever. It will be one of the painful and predictable lessons imparted during their years at Largo High. . . .

Not tonight, though. Not while they're still inside the Beast, hurtling through the darkness and the rain, crossing items off the list. They do in fact obtain a speeding ticket — the smart way. It happens at one of their other stops, when they see a sheriff's deputy in a nearby parking lot, sitting in his cruiser.

Meridith walks up to him. She is a pretty girl, wrapped inside a toga. She barely has to smile. She tells the deputy about the hunt and how they'll earn extra points if they get a ticket. Can he help?

The deputy takes out his pad.

"What speed do you want to be going?" he asks.

"Sixty-two."

"Well," he says, not missing a beat, "make sure you slow down."

By now it's 9:36 p.m. They want to be at the clubhouse by 10, which means they'll have to hurry. The time has come to bind and gag their little freshman. They begin to chant his name.

"WOO-TER! WOO-TER! WOO-TER!"

He whistles while YY ties him up. He holds his wrists up together to make it easier for her.

"Twenty feet of rope your father gave me,"

YY tells him. "Twenty feet of rope."

"Your father loves you," says Tracy.

A few minutes later, when they pull up outside the clubhouse, they discover that their little freshman is too heavy to carry. So he hops across the finish line.

But wait. Who's that walking toward them along the sidewalk? Why, it's Doug, Wooter's big brother. He's got someone with him. An older woman with gray hair. A woman whose presence has won Doug so many extra points that his team will place first in the hunt, despite the kidnapping of Wooter underneath their very noses.

Doug grins.

"We got Grandma!"

**'G**ood morning. Our thought for the day is: He that lives on hope has but a slender diet."

As March heads into April, the inevitable acceleration has begun again. The second semester is blurring by. Spring break will be here soon. Then prom. Then suddenly it will be June and another year will have disappeared.

"Okay, take everything off your desks except a pen or pencil."

On the second floor of the AA building, a health teacher stares out at his class one Thursday morning. Time for a test.

"All talking will cease at this time. Please keep your eyes on your own paper."

A soft rustling fills the room as copies of the test are passed down the rows. All of the students begin writing. All of them, that is, except one. Jaimee Sheehy sits at the back, watching the others with a look of wistful detachment. She's not taking the test, she explains, because she was not here to learn all the material. She has only been back for a few weeks from Charter Hospital.

"It was weird coming home," she says softly, avoiding eye contact as she always does.

Still, she was so eager to return. Jaimee stayed at Charter from November until mid-February. For months, she begged her mother to be allowed to leave, vowing to change and improve and finally make good.

"I promise I'll go to school," Jaimee would tell her. "I really learned a lot here."

She hadn't meant to lie, she said. She'd only done it, she said, because she was afraid of getting in trouble. But now she knew better.

Laura Sheehy was never sure what to believe. She could hear something different in her daughter's voice, something that gave her hope that maybe this time Jaimee really had changed. But the people at Charter kept telling her it was too soon. Finally they said Jaimee was almost ready to come home. But first they transferred her to Tampa Bay Academy, a residential treatment center for troubled kids, where she'd live and study; she made the last few transitional steps toward returning home.

From the start, though, Ms. Sheehy didn't like the academy. She thought the other kids were scary. One day someone reportedly tried to commit suicide; another time, a boy tried to get Jaimee to duck out and smoke a cigarette with him. Ms. Sheehy decided to take Jaimee out early against the staff's advice.

"You're making the biggest mistake," they told her. "She's not ready."

Ms. Sheehy brought her home anyway. She didn't make Jaimee go back to school immediately. She'd stockpiled some days off from her job so she could spend a little time with her daughter. The two of them went to the beach, went out to eat, talked and talked. Jaimee said that when she returned to Largo, she wanted to be in regular classes, not GOALS. The kids in the pod, she said, were wild and lazy. They were a bad influence. Her mother, who already harbored similar suspicions about GOALS, agreed. But before she sent Jaimee back, Ms. Sheehy made sure she understood how crucial it was that she bear down on her studies. She'd been taking classes at Charter and at the academy; if she worked hard, she could still earn credits for the spring semester.

"Jaimee, this is really important," Ms. Sheehy told her. "You'll be able to salvage half a year out of this. All I ask of you is to go to school and get passing grades. I'm not asking for As."

So now here's Jaimee, once more at Largo



### Back in the Flow

■ Jaimee Sheehy (here clowning with friends) has returned to school and has told her mom that she wants to be in regular classes, not GOALS.

(Photo courtesy of Jaimee's family)



### Hard to Kill

■ That's the title of a movie John and Andrea went to see after one of his track meets. It also is a perfect description of their romance.

High, starting her way down the long road back. She has so far to go. But she's doing it. Over and over, she tells her mother how she's not skipping anymore, how she's truly attending class.

"I'm going," she says. "I'm really going now, Mom."

Slowly, Ms. Sheehy is allowing herself to believe it. She doesn't want to be overly optimistic; she doesn't want to raise her hopes only to have them dashed all over again. But Jaimee is obviously slipping back into the flow and learning things. At night she comes home and shows her mother her math assignments. She gives detailed accounts of what happened that day in English. Not

that she's chaining herself to her books or anything. That would be too much to expect. No, Jaimee is learning to bear down at school, but she is also enjoying her new freedom.

She's going to see Aerosmith when the band hits town in a couple weeks. She's already talking about going to see the Ramones. Just the other night, she says, she and a friend were at Tampa Theater, seeing a group called the Sneeze Beez. A camera crew was at the theater, filming a video, she says. She's not sure. But she might even be in it. She might actually be on MTV.

Andrea Taylor stands in the chemistry lab, goggles over her eyes, squeezing a few drops of chloride into a clear liquid mixture inside a test tube. She waits, watching to see if the liquid changes color, then scribbles her observations on a worksheet.

"Clear," she says. "Okay, it's just clear."

Andrea is doing well these days, both in school and out. It's official now. She and John are quite the hot couple. They had to wait for a month or so, but finally the time came to stop worrying about other people.

"I don't care what anyone says anymore," Andrea told John. "I want you to be mine."

Their first real date was on March 12, the day before John's 18th birthday. It was a Monday, and that night, after one of John's track meets, they went to see *Hard to Kill*, which was perfect, since the title could have been written to describe their romance. Andrea was surprised she was allowed to go out that night — she almost never gets permission to go anywhere on school nights — but then, her mother really likes John. Like everybody else, she senses how solid John is. She thinks he and Andrea are good together.

She's right, too. Talk about a pair that was meant to be. If John's and Andrea's lives were a movie, this would be the part where the breezy love song comes up on the soundtrack and plays over the montage of the two of them walking hand in hand, tickling each other at their lockers, feeding nuts to the squirrels in the park, staring up at the stars at night. Because they're doing all those things. In fact, they're already talking about the prom. Sure, it's corny. But happy couples are always corny. It's their right.

The best part is, Andrea is still on speaking terms with Alyma. Not that there wasn't a bumpy moment or two when Alyma first confronted her on the romance. It happened on the phone one day, before Andrea had worked up the courage to tell Alyma herself.

"How's John?" Alyma asked her.

"Fine," said Andrea, trying not to sound cornered. "Why?"

"You like him, don't you? You can tell me. I'm your best friend. You can tell me anything."

Andrea took a deep breath, then stepped off the cliff she'd been skirting for so long.

"Yes," she said. "I do like him."

Turns out Alyma already knew. In fact, she'd suspected for some time. Ever since that day she saw John's photo on Andrea's bedroom wall and almost gave Andrea a heart attack. What started the wheels turning in Alyma's head was not the photo. It was the look that flashed on Andrea's face when Alyma first noticed the photo.

Of course, it wasn't until the phone call later when the two girls brought the whole thing out into the open. The funny thing was, Alyma — an independent girl whose life does not revolve around any boy — didn't care that much. She liked John,

but she didn't feel as strongly about him as Andrea did. Andrea, in other words, had been torturing herself all this time for nothing, worrying about her friend's feelings. True, Alyma was a little hurt. But once she and Andrea talked it out, everything was okay between the two of them.

"You do what you think is best," Alyma told her. "I hope we can still remain best friends."

In the pod, the names are disappearing off the rolls again.

Eric the Dragon just dropped. In the weeks before he left, Eric kept hinting about the presence of cocaine conspiracies; he claimed to be forming some sort of vigilante group that patrolled the streets on motorcycles. One day he had a confrontation with Ms. Westfall. She saw him walking on campus, and she asked him where he was going.

"Go f—k yourself," he told her.

Eric withdrew from school in February. Valentine's Day, actually. Before he left, he told his teachers he planned to become a gourmet chef.

Then there's the girl in Mrs. O'Donnell's third-period class. The one who keeps talking to other kids about the advantages of suicide.

"Aren't you afraid of death?" Mary O'Donnell asks her.

"Nothing's as bad as this."

One day just before spring break, when her math classes are almost empty, Ms. DiLello rewards the kids who did show up by giving them a ridiculously simple quiz. She asks them to tell her the name of their favorite comic strip. To say what month it is. To add two plus two. To identify the color of the pants she's wearing that day. To look at the clock and identify the correct time. Then she tells them to correct their own papers, to mark at the top that they've scored a perfect 10 points — two points for each of the five questions and turn the papers back in. To her surprise, one kid gives himself only eight points. Turns out he wrote down that the current month was June.

"I guessed," he tells her.

Ms. DiLello can't believe it.

"You can't even give away points to these kids," she says afterward. "You just can't do it."

She is particularly frustrated these days with Mike Broome. Only a couple of months after he made his spectacular turnaround, Mike has slipped back. In the early part of the semester, he had a solid A in Ms. DiLello's class; even now, if he bothers to show up, he usually gets every question right on her quizzes and assignments. The problem is, he almost never bothers.

"Where have you been?" she asks him one day. "You always did so well in math."

He just shrugs.

Mike has given up. He's stationed on the auditorium steps almost permanently now. Unless one of the administrators chases him away, he'll sit there for hours.

Occasionally Mrs. O'Donnell will take her fourth-period class, Mike's class, on a mini-field trip to the steps to try to coax him back inside. These forays aren't too complicated; with all the kids who've dropped out or simply never go to class, there are often only five or six students in her room that period. Mrs. O'Donnell leads them out across the patio and over to Mike's scowling presence on the steps. They tell him they miss him. They ask him to please come back. It never

works, though. Usually he either runs away or curses them.

"I don't even know the kid," another student says one day as she leads them off on another attempt. "Who is he?"

Sometimes, probably just to keep the teachers guessing, Mike will mysteriously appear in class. Friday, March 30, finds him sitting inside the classroom of ms. trimm, who still does not capitalize her name and who is still fighting a losing battle to maintain even a semblance of control over her students. At this instant, in fact — in the middle of her fifth-period class — Mike is ignoring her and that day's assignment. He is bouncing a tennis ball on his desk. He stops just long enough to call out to her across the room.

"Can I get a drink of water, ms. trimm?"

"No."

He scowls. "Dumb bitch."

Perhaps she does not hear this. Perhaps she chooses to ignore it. But a few seconds later, she is forced to take action when Mike tosses the ball at the ceiling.

"Put it away," she says. She is smiling, but it is a rigid, nervous smile.

The past two months have been a long and bitter lesson for Laura Trimm. She has watched 23 of her students — almost a third of them — withdraw from school. She knows she has made mistakes. She admits she was not prepared for what these kids were like. As cruel as they can be to her, she thinks they're even more cruel to each other. She's astonished at their apathy. Watching them, feeling the sting of their scorn, she can't believe that before these kids entered GOALS they signed contracts pledging to work hard.

"I was under the impression," she says, "that the students voluntarily came into the program with a desire to graduate."

She is appalled at how much the other teachers here are asked to give of themselves and how little they are paid in return, both in respect and money. She's not talking about herself. She's talking about the veterans such as Mr. Klapka and Mrs. Hay and Mr. Feazell and her mother, Mrs. Badders, the longtime math teacher.

"Defense contractors can make more money building bombs than you can for educating students," she says. "I think that's ludicrous."

Smile at her idealism if you want; ms. trimm does not care. She knows she's right on this. She also knows that the time has come for her to leave Largo High. Next week will be her final week. She has had enough of teaching for, oh, maybe a thousand years. She says she needs to figure out what to do with her life. She plans to spend the next couple of months joining some activists on a cross-country march for peace and justice. Until then, she has a few more days of riding out the storm. Predictably, the level of chaos in her classes is rising almost by the hour.

On this Friday, for instance, she has asked Mike Broome — who has deigned to make a rare appearance — and the others to write a paragraph. Almost none of them is doing it. Instead, they are doodling on the board, sleeping, scooting around the room in their desks, toppling the desks onto the ground and, in Mike's case, hurling his tennis ball at a kid who's talking loudly.

"Shut up," says Mike.

He turns to ms. trimm, who is staring at him, clearly trying to hold her patience.

"Why are you giving me that psycho look?" he says.

She does not reply. What could she possibly

say to this boy that would make a difference?

For the record, Mike is not looking too healthy. He has grown increasingly thin, his hair has become scraggly and dirty. It's not just that he doesn't care about school anymore. He doesn't seem to care about anything.

One of the other kids looks at him and remarks on how rare it is to see him in class.

"You're hardly ever in school," the kid says.

"You can't get a license."

Mike scoffs. "Who said I need a license? I'll drive anyway."

What no one in the class probably knows is that yesterday, March 29, was Mike's 15th birthday. He's hurting this afternoon, because so far he has not received a birthday card or a phone call from his father in North Florida.

A few days go by, March officially crosses into April, and Mike keeps waiting to hear from his father. With spring break almost here, Mike's hoping his dad will come get him so they can spend the week together. Finally, when he hasn't heard anything, Mike phones up there himself. His dad tells him not to worry; he did in fact remember the birthday, he says, and has already mailed him some money for a present. As for the two of them spending the week together, Mr. Broome says he's busy — he's working seven days a week at his convenience store job — but he'll try to find a way to make it happen. Mike should call him back, he says, on the Friday when spring break starts.

Friday comes. Mike calls, and his dad tells him he's still trying to work it out.

Next morning — Saturday morning now — the phone rings.

"Tell Mike I'm not going to be able to come and get him," Mr. Broome says to his ex-wife. "He's old enough to understand."

Later, when asked about this sequence of events, Mr. Broome would explain that he truly wanted to spend the week with his son, but that he couldn't get a day off work to drive down and pick him up. He offered to send bus fare, he says, but his ex-wife told him Mike was too young to ride a bus. Mr. Broome also says that he did send the birthday money, but that the envelope was returned because he mistakenly put down a wrong address. But he mailed it again, he says.

Either way, say Mike and his mother, the money never arrives.

Something nice has happened. Something that tells Laura Trimm maybe all her good intentions weren't wasted after all. On one of her last days, she gave her students another writing assignment. She asked them to do a paragraph describing her.

One girl wrote:

*Ms. Trimm is not a hippie or a freak. Ms. Trimm is an art form. I guess it's okay if I say I look up to her and the ways she sees life.*

A boy wrote:

*You're my favorite teacher. I may not do much work, but I care about you. Don't leave or I will kill you.*

They gave her carnations, a balloon, guava juice. And a card, too. A card that showed a bunch of animals in a zoo, looking sad.

*We got this card because it is just like us (Goals) Have a great time*

They signed it, of course, with their names. And with tiny peace symbols.

The nicest thing of all, perhaps, was the note this one girl wrote. A sweet girl named Amanda Hill. Amanda said she hoped her teacher had a wonderful adventure on the peace march and told her to write if she needed money.

*P.S. By the way, if you ever run out of toilet paper, everything in this note is biodegradable. The paper is unbleached to my knowledge. The ink is edible green food color. And the glue is flour & water. So use it wisely.*

### A Turn for the Worse

■ Mike Broome has turned around again. He's given up.



**T**he dart fires away, slicing through the air.

Thunk.

The kids standing inside the AB-12 darkroom let out a cheer. On the dart board hanging from the far wall, Amy Boyle has scored a direct hit on the photo of a boy she dated last year. The Prom Date from Hell, she calls him.

Another dart goes flying.

Thunk.

More cheers as Karin Upmeyer nails a picture of her least favorite assistant principal, the one who stopped Karin in the hall a few months ago and gave her detention because she was wearing a skirt that was supposedly too short for the school dress code. To this day, Karin denies that charge. Vehemently.

"It was a nun skirt," she says. "A skirt a nun could wear."

Thunk. Meredith Tucker lands one on her irritating little brother. Thunk. YY nails Ms. Westfall. One of the boys on the yearbook staff puts up a photo of his mother — he calls her Bonnie Ballistic, on account of her temper — and lets her have it, too. Meanwhile, other AB-12 rats are outside, knocking at the door, begging to be allowed inside so they can nail their own favorite targets.

"As long as you don't tell anybody," YY and the other Heathers say as they open the door.

By now, the hurling of the sacred darts has become one of the most beloved of all AB-12 rituals. Though Ms. Westfall's photo is still up, the whole thing's not really about sticking it to Judi anymore. The dart board has become more of an all-purpose escape valve, designed to let off all sorts of frustrations. A way of maintaining one's sanity in the middle of the stressed-out sweepstakes.

Not that YY and Amy and Karin and Meredith are exactly ready to kiss and make up with Ms. Westfall. The Fearsome Foursome still rips her whenever possible; they still gag and roll their eyes every time she comes over the P.A. system and delivers her pep talks. But the old fire has died away. When they skewer Judi these days, it's like they're simply doing their jobs. Why, even YY is mellowing. Despite what she wrote in that editorial, Miss I-Want-Nothing-To-Do-With-The-Shorts-Program has broken down and applied for an honor card so she can wear shorts like all her friends, many of whom, for the record, never understood why she objected in the first place. It was easy taking a stand back in October, when winter was on the way. But now that it's April and the heat and humidity are creeping back up, well . . .

"Leave me alone," says YY, laughing wearily when someone calls her on it.

Karin's still hopelessly lost in Algebra II. She sits right in front of Bret Harper, the senior boy known as Elvis, the King of Suede. Despite his success in other subjects, Elvis is doing even worse in algebra than Karin is. The King is so far gone, he sometimes doesn't even bother doing the worksheets. He just sits calmly at his desk — he seems to have achieved a kind of inner peace about this business of failing algebra — and leafs through an old issue of *Baseball Digest*. He's no help at all to Karin, who has not achieved inner peace. She stares in bewilderment at the teacher, sighs, rubs her eyes, tries without success to understand the finer points of synthetic division and inverse variation and parabolas.

"Say that again," she asks the teacher. "Huh? Wait!"

Good news, though. The other day, Karin dis-

covered that she'll be going to college after all. She opened her mailbox one afternoon, and there was this nice letter of acceptance from a real live institution of higher learning. Florida Southern College, actually, which is just fine with her, especially since her good buddy Jason Davenport is also going to Southern.



**Cyclops**

■ At the state Latin Forum, kids try hard to prove that Latin, and its history and mythology, are very much alive. A costume contest inspires Bud Jeffries — from Lake Gibson High School in Lakeland — to come as a Cyclops, complete with human victims dangling from his belt.

All things considered, this is not a bad time for the Heathers. They don't even seem to be letting the backlash get to them anymore.

Earlier in the year, when Karin and Amy and Meredith and YY started hearing the snide remarks, it did hurt. They admit it. They didn't like it at all that one day when they wrote the words "Fearsome Foursome" on the lectern in AB-12 and someone scratched it out and replaced it with "Breakfast Club Bitches." Who knows why the person chose those words. If someone wanted to slam them, why do it with a reference to *The Breakfast Club* instead of *Heathers*? Did they get their movies confused?

"Just forget it," YY tried to tell the others. Whoever was doing it, she said, was being stupid. "They're geeks."

But it was hard to forget, because it didn't seem to want to go away. The girls decided that it all probably started in the fall, when the four of them dressed up as the Heathers on Character Day and adopted the Heathers attitude and fired away with all the beloved Heathers quotes. As the year went on, people started saying nasty things behind their backs, calling them stuck-up wenches and Breakfast Club Bitches. One day, on the AB-12 blackboard, someone even took a crack at their friend Jason.

*Jason is a Breakfast Club geek.*

That was unfair. The whole thing's unfair. And now it's escalating into crank calls. Karin and the others will pick up the phone at home, and they'll get these insults or the clicking sound of someone hanging up on them. There's vandalism, too. Some anonymous jerks kept burning Amy's lawn, spinning their tires in neutral over the grass until they ripped it up.

"It's because people don't know us," Karin said. "They think we're snobs."

That's the frustrating part. If any of these little snipers would just come out and take their shots in the open, the girls could defend themselves. They could explain that the Heathers act was supposed to be a joke. It's okay, though. Because Karin and the others are getting used to it. They're learning to laugh it off and walk away. In fact, they seem to be holding up remarkably well under all their competing pressures.

Except for YY. She's started to get sketched these days. She's getting that look in her eye. Especially that weekend in late April when she and the Latin club head for the annual state Latin Forum. That's the weekend when YY finally cracks. When the fragile order that she and the others have maintained, even through the backlash, finally begins to collapse.

The weekend when everything starts to go wrong.

**I**t starts small, of course. Latin students, who immerse themselves in the history of ancient Rome, should know that the decline and fall of any empire usually starts with some small incident that hardly seems worth worrying about at the time.

Like Elvis and the tennis ball scandal.

This particular incident occurs on Friday, April 27, the second day of the Latin Forum. YY and Elvis and a few other members of the Latin club are at the big Hyatt hotel near Disney World, where more than 1,000 Latin students have gathered from high schools across Florida. Under the watchful eye of the state's Latin teachers, these kids are taking part in an astounding array of activities, all dedicated to proving that Latin, and the history and mythology surrounding it, are very much alive. The students compete in academic tests, slip into togas and run themselves ragged in chariot races, dress up like a Cyclops so they can carry clubs and stalk their way through costume contests. On this Friday evening, they're going to let down their hair at a huge video dance, put on by none other than LAMP Productions, the same gang of audio-visual wizards from Lakewood High that produces Largo's lip syncs.

The incident with Elvis and the tennis ball, in fact, occurs shortly before the video dance. All afternoon, Elvis and the other Largo kids have been wandering around in their togas, watching the chariot races and posing for photos and getting disgusted by the annual slave auction. Officially the auction is known as "Rent-a-Roman," but when it starts, the auctioneer himself refers to selling off the "slaves." The whole thing is this throwback of a fund-raiser — Zelda Troiano, Largo High's Latin teacher, can't believe they still do it — in which the Florida Junior Classical League makes money by selling off various kids. Most of them girls, naturally. Girls in togas, usually wearing very little underneath.



"We're going to start the bidding at \$10," the student auctioneer says, directing the crowd's attention to one of the first slaves, a girl named Angie. "This is a fox here."

Angie is indeed attractive. And with some coaxing from the auctioneer — "take off the toga," he tells her — she gradually reveals her bikini-clad body. In the crowd, boys hoot and whistle.

"Take it off! Take it off!"

Soon Angie is sold. Other girls are sold, too, with the repeated suggestion from the auctioneer that as slaves they will be required to do whatever their masters desire.

"You got to make them want you!" someone yells at a blond girl named Sara whom no one seems interested in.

"She don't put out!" says a guy who knows her. "One dollar!"

The amazing thing about the auction is that it's put on by the junior classical league, which is overseen by teachers. The same teachers, mind you, who throughout this three-day convention are repeatedly reminding the kids that no boys are allowed in girls' motel rooms or vice versa.

Which is where Elvis and the tennis ball come in. Late that afternoon, Elvis and this other boy from Largo High walk into the second-floor room where the Largo girls are staying. They're not doing anything. It's still daylight, the door is open and everyone's fully dressed. But before YY and the girls can really stop them, Elvis and this other boy head out to the balcony and start tossing a tennis ball to another kid on the ground.

This is the breadth of the scandal. Unfortunately, a teacher from another school sees them, and instead of doing the human thing, which would be to simply tell the boys to get out, she reports them. Late that evening, after the video dance, two adult investigators from the league show up and question the kids. Actually, it's more of a grilling. First they interrogate the girls, then the boys. They write down their names; they inform them that in the past, when kids were caught in a similar infraction, they were suspended for 10 days.

"Let me tell you the size of the embarrassment and the hurt that you caused your adviser," the chief investigator tells the boys, nodding toward Mrs. Troiano, who can't believe these investigators are making such a fuss. "She brought you in good faith, and she trusted you."

Once the investigators leave, the boys slip out. If they're suspended for 10 days, they'll go over Pinellas County's nine-day semester limit for absences and automatically flunk all their courses.

Elvis is beside himself.

"If they suspend me for 10 days," he says, "I swear to God I'd kill them all. I swear. I would kill them all. I would blow up this hotel."

The final hearing — the hearing at which a disciplinary board will decide how to punish these kids — is set for the next morning at 7. Maybe, says one of the boys, they should plead insanity. Or maybe, says someone else, they could cry real pitifully. Perhaps they could even rent *Old Yeller* tonight, they say, so their eyes will already be red and puffy when they walk in there and plead for mercy. . . .

Out in the parking lot, sitting on the trunk of the Y-mobile, YY has already been crying. If she weren't so tired and stressed out, she'd probably see how ridiculous this whole thing is. But she can't see it. For all the barbs she directs at Ms. Westfall, YY is a good kid who tries to act responsibly. She is exactly the type of kid who takes it to heart when someone in authority feeds her the kind of guilt-trip lines just stuffed down her throat

by these investigators.

So now, knowing that as president of the Latin club she has just brought dishonor to her school, YY loses it. She knows she's overreacting, but she can't help it. It's not just this stupid Latin thing. It's all her papers and deadlines and exams, which are hitting faster than ever. It's everything.

YY can't make herself stop crying. She sits on the Y-mobile, letting it all flow out of her.

The next morning, they go into the hearing to meet their fate. The boys are disbarred from the league. The school is placed on probation.

Back at Largo High, where Mrs. Troiano gives her a full report of the incident, Ms. Westfall listens carefully for the big kicker. She keeps waiting to hear what it is her students have done that's so terrible. But it never comes.

Whether YY knows it or not, Ms. Westfall does recognize the difference between a real disaster and a manufactured one. Just like Mrs. Troiano, she doesn't think the incident was that big a deal. True, the boys shouldn't have gone on to that balcony. But suspend them? For 10 days? Please.

No. All Ms. Westfall wants is for the boys to write letters of apology to Mrs. Troiano and to the teacher who headed the disciplinary board. And for them to use their heads the next time they want to play catch with a tennis ball.

**T**he message is waiting on the machine one afternoon when Laura Sheehy comes home. It's from the school. From one of the assistant principals. When she hears it, she feels the bottom drop out of her stomach.

"Jaimee has been missing classes," says the voice on the tape. "She has missed nine days of school. Can you call me back?"

Ms. Sheehy is stunned. All this time, she'd thought things were going so well. She'd heard Jaimee talking about everything happening in her classes. And now this. Ms. Sheehy can hardly stop herself from losing it. After the months at Charter, hasn't Jaimee learned anything?

When her mother confronts her, Jaimee denies it. She says it's all a big mistake.

"They're getting me mixed up with a different Jaimee," she says.

It must have happened when they changed her class schedule, she says. Or else the school computer messed up somehow. But she is going to class. She swears it.

There's only one way to find out the truth. Ms. Sheehy calls the assistant principal — his name is Mr. Wagar — and makes an appointment. She wants to sit in his office and watch Jaimee's face when the allegations start to fly. If she can look into Jaimee's eyes, maybe she'll understand.

The appointment's set for one morning, first thing. Ms. Sheehy doesn't want to give Jaimee any warning. She just tells her that she's taking her to school that day. They arrive, and Jaimee says goodbye and starts to get out of the car.

"No," her mother says. "You're coming with me."

They walk into Rick Wagar's office, where he makes it clear that Jaimee has been skipping almost since her return to school in mid-March. Mr. Wagar calls up her attendance records on the

computer screen on his desk and confirms it.

"Are you sure?" Ms. Sheehy asks him.

He turns the screen so she can see all the zeros forming a line after Jaimee's name. Each zero is an absence in each class; in many of the classes, she has more than 20 of them.

Jaimee is caught. She is being forced to stare at the truth. But still she refuses. She says the computer is wrong.

"But I did go," she says, pointing to one of the zeros. "I was at that class. I know I was there. In fourth period, three days ago, I was there."

"No, you weren't," says Mr. Wagar.

It is painful for Laura Sheehy to watch her daughter clinging to her story. After Charter and all her other ordeals, the only thing Jaimee has apparently learned is how to tell a more elaborate and convincing lie. The mistake, Ms. Sheehy realizes now, was putting her into regular classes instead of back in GOALS. Down in the pod, there's

an attendance clerk — a wonderful woman named Lois Welch, she's like a den mother to half the kids and teachers down there — who checks hourly to make sure that GOALS students show up for all of their classes in the pod. If a kid disappears for even one period, Mrs. Welch is immediately on the phone, calling that child's mother or father at work to let them know. But in the regular classes, there are far too many kids and far too little time to always pay such close attention. Once she was in regular classes, in other words, Jaimee found it easy to slip through the cracks.

She still won't face the truth. Sitting in Mr. Wagar's office, Jaimee keeps insisting they've got the wrong person. She keeps talking about how she was excused for the days she missed.

"I have a pass," she says. "I have a pass."

Jaimee has already piled up enough absences to fail two or three semesters, and all she can talk about is her hall pass. Her mother stares at her daughter as though she is studying an alien creature. She watches Jaimee, lying over and over. Maybe, her mother wonders, she really believes it. Maybe Jaimee doesn't even know she's lying.

**A** luminous Saturday night in early May. Ghostly vapor trails stretch across the sky. The glow of the moon bounces off the polished exteriors of the limousines as they pull up in front of the hall.

Inside, the music is pumping, the mirror ball is swirling, the LAMP kids — they're working backstage tonight, too — already have the videos playing across the huge screen behind the parquet dance floor. And in the center of it, moving effortlessly through a sea of other couples, Andrea Taylor and John Boyd are enjoying their first and last prom together. She is wearing a white gown with a ruffled hem. He is wearing a white tuxedo and carrying a white cane, which he holds behind her as he pulls her close and dips her backward.

They are easily the most dazzling pair on the floor.

They danced like this last October, on that night after Homecoming, when Andrea leaned against John and smelled his cologne and realized with a start that she did not want to ever let him go. But tonight is different. Tonight Andrea does not have to worry about anything. It's wonderful.

"I still get goose bumps," says Judi Westfall, standing happily by, watching all the kids swirl across the floor.



Tonight is turning out to be a relatively easy prom. No one appears to be chanting any obscenities, as the crowd did last year during one song; if there's alcohol about, it's well hidden. The kids all seem to be enjoying themselves and following the rules; it would not be an exaggeration to say that there's a hint of something magical floating about the room. A suggestion of unlimited possibilities. Just look at the makeup of the crowd. YY and her pals are on hand, as are most of the patio people and many of those from the rail and even a few GOALS students, all looking beautiful in their gowns and tuxes. Actually, most of the boys — John Boyd's an exception — appear slightly uncomfortable, tugging at their cummerbunds and pulling at their ties. But the girls have all been transformed into these elegant and graceful creatures who seem to have catapulted into their early 20s. Which is all the more reason for the boys, who still look like boys, to get nervous.

Toward the end, they announce the king and queen. The king is the same guy who won at Homecoming, and this time, his girlfriend — the one who was so disappointed at losing the earlier crown — wins along with him. Now, all these months later, they finally get their dance together, swaying in each other's arms. Other couples join them, pulling close and whispering to each other and even kissing. Before things get too sappy, though, out come the pounding rhythms of Salt-n-Pepa's *Push It*, which gives the boys a good excuse to finally toss away their jackets and gets the girls to kick off their shoes. Now it's time to really dance. . . .

**T**he next step in the collapse of the Fearsome Foursome comes two days after the prom. On Monday, May 7, which is the first day of the split between Amy and Meridith. The opening salvo in the War between the Heathers.

There wasn't really any way to avoid it. Amy and Mer are like two sisters who have spent too

#### Amy and Meridith

■ A snapshot from happier times.



#### A Memory in the Making

much time inside the same room. And for the past few weeks they've been getting on each other's nerves, gradually building toward this moment. Toward the blowup. Naturally, it comes over something silly. The ostensible reason for the fight has something to do with dinner before the prom. Amy and her date had planned to go to dinner with Mer and her date, but Mer had backed out, saying her date preferred that the two of them go alone. Technically, this wasn't true. Mer was the one who wanted privacy. Mer admits it. She was trying to be polite, she says; she didn't want to hurt Amy's feelings.

Unfortunately, Amy has found all this out by asking Mer's date about it afterward. And on this Monday, as the two girls sit out on the patio together at lunchtime, selling tickets for the senior picnic, Amy lets it be known that she's angry.

"I know that you lied to me," she tells Mer.

"I'm sorry. I thought it would hurt you. I thought it would ruin your night."

In better times, this little exchange might have been enough to take care of things. But as the minutes drag by, both girls grow angrier and more distant. They don't say another word to each other through all of lunch. In fact, they barely exchange a word the rest of that day. Or the next day. Or the day after that. Walls of ice have descended between them. They won't even look at each other when they pass in the halls or in AB-12. It's extremely uncomfortable.

"I'm fine," says Amy, not very convincingly. "I'm just acting like she was never one of my friends."

As the days go by, with no signs of a thaw, YY and Karin start to get desperate. They have to do

■ Most of the boys at the prom appear slightly uncomfortable. But the girls — including GOALS student Maria Readey, above — have been transformed into these elegant and graceful creatures who seem to be in their early 20s.

something. They don't know what, but this has to stop. Because if it doesn't, sooner or later the two of them will be pushed into choosing sides.

Which could mean the end of all their friendships.

**T**he mean stretch has begun. As the school heads into the final frenetic weeks of the year, rushing toward graduation, a grim inevitability seen to be taking hold. Everything appears to be falling apart.

Even Andrea and John are looking shaky. After all they've been through, John still can't seem to rid himself of other entanglements. Andrea has just discovered that he's been hanging out with another girl, kissing her; even worse, he lied to Andrea when she asked him about it.

So one night, when all this comes up, Andrea tracks him down at the house of another guy and pulls him out into the yard to talk it out. It's raining — first just a sprinkle, then hard — but Andrea doesn't want to budge. She makes him stand right there in the middle of this downpour, demanding an explanation.

"I just want to know," she says. "Are you just playing games with me?"

John pauses, watching the rain wash across her face.

ST. PETERSBURG TIMES

TUESDAY, MAY 21, 1991

**S**o many students are gone. So many have already vanished, one by one. But many others are still here at Largo High. Still learning. Still moving forward with their lives. And on that glorious night in June 1990, when the dark clouds part just in time for graduation, the seniors walk across the stage in their caps and gowns, their hearts pounding in their chests as they step into the future.

DAY 7

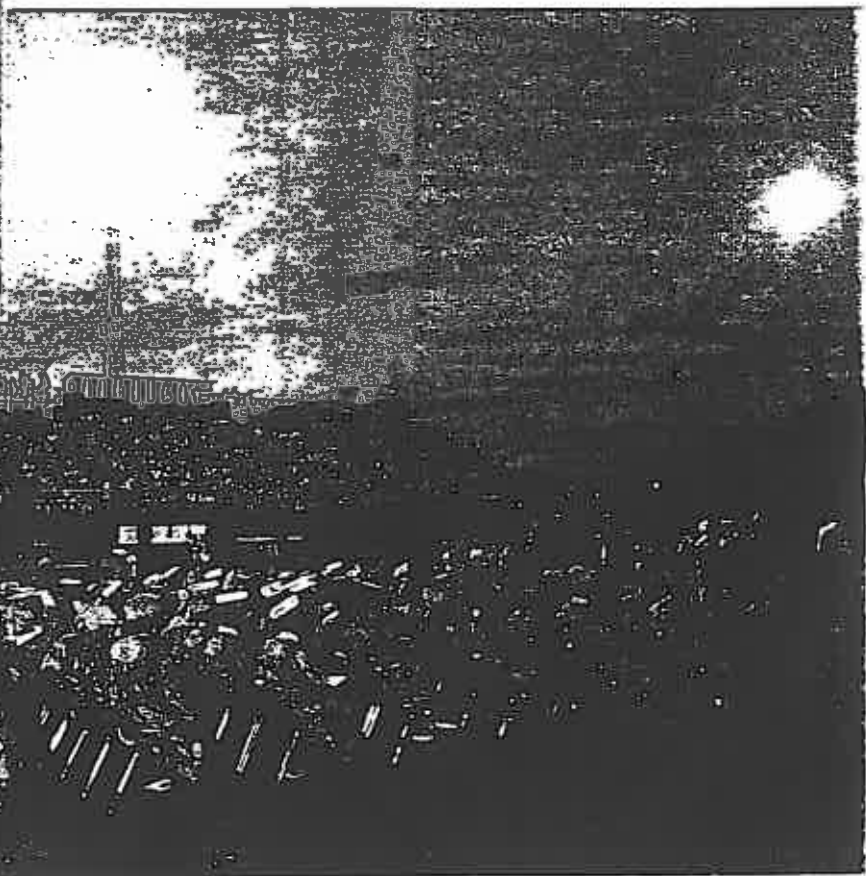
# Solitaire

of

A YEAR IN THE LIFE  
OF A HIGH SCHOOL

## Night of Miracles

■ On a rainy graduation night, as blue-clad seniors crowd the football field and their parents and friends crowd the stands, the clouds part and the ceremony starts.



Bodies bumping past one another in the hall. Fists pounding on the walls, if only for the sake of making noise. Inside the pod, the bell for third period has just rung, and Mrs. Frye has handed her critical thinking class a list of unfinished sentences.

You are like an untraveled path when ...  
You are like starlight when ...  
You are like a mountain when ...  
You are like a flower when ...

"Wayne," she says, looking at one of the boys, "you are like a flower when what?"

He says nothing.

"What is a flower? How would you describe a flower?"

"Ugly," he says.

"Wayne, finish the sentence. You are like a flower when ..."

"It smells."

Mrs. Frye turns to a boy wearing a Metallica shirt that shows someone writhing in an electric chair. A boy who has not bothered coming to her class in many days.

"Mike?"

Mike Broome scowls. "I ain't a flower."

"I didn't say you were a flower."

"I don't feel like no flower, either."

Kim Frye, a young teacher with a soft voice and deep reservoirs of patience, has this fantasy. Sometimes, when her students are like this, she imagines walking into class wearing a hockey mask and carrying a chain saw. She sees herself ripping out the cord, kicking the saw into an ominous growl. She sees the looks of fear on the kids' faces. She even hears the words she'd use on them: "Now you're going to pay attention."

But now, facing the indifference of Mike Broome, Mrs. Frye does not have the option of waving a chain saw. Not unless she wants to end up on the 6 o'clock news. So she moves on, handing out another worksheet.

Mike puts his head down on his desk.

"What's wrong?" she asks him.

"I'm tired."

"Why are you tired?"

"I don't know."

"Why are you here?"

"I don't know. So I can get my license."

He tries to put his head back down, but Mrs. Frye won't let him. "You're not going to sleep."

"Fine. I'll just go home."

He gets up, moves toward the door. "I'm fixing to leave," he says.

Mrs. Frye is up front now, working with another student. She's trying to ignore Mike; she has no time for this. Maybe a month or so ago, when there was still a chance for Mike to turn it around again. But not now. Not on this Thursday in early May, when there are only a few weeks left of school.

"Can I leave?" he asks.

No answer.

"Can I leave then?"

He storms out, slamming the door as he goes. Outside, Mike tries to walk off his rage. He's almost running. He goes from one end of the school to the other, finally ending up on the auditorium steps, where he lights a Marlboro.

"I just didn't feel like sitting in that class," he says. "I didn't see no use in it. I've already failed this year."

He's right. He could file an attendance appeal, but he's skipped so many days there's almost no way the appeal would be approved. What's the point, he says. So now he's destroying anything tangible he'd managed to build early in the semester. His grades. His credits. His chances of passing any of his classes. He's tearing it all down, kicking and clawing and stomping on even the smallest blade of hope.

His teachers have tried. But sooner or later, there comes a point where it's up to him. It's like someone was saying one day in the pod. Teachers, this person was saying, cannot save anyone. They can't just throw their students a rope and lift them out of whatever hole they've fallen into. The kids have to grab the rope and put one hand over the other and start climbing.

Mike has decided to stay deep inside his hole. He sits on the steps, smoking his cigarette and feeling the wind in his face.

"I've never skipped a day of school in my life," he says, serious all of a sudden. "I've never skipped a full day."

At home he's acting the same. One night not long ago, when he was told he couldn't go to a party, Mike went into his room and threw his radio. Then his mother came in with her cane and a fiery look in her eye, and he started backing up.

"You may be taller than I am," she said, "but I think I could still knock you through a wall."

Jewelene Wilson is at the end of her endurance. She's so sick of the school calling her, telling her the latest mess Mike's gotten into. For months, he begged her to get him a dirt bike, like he thought she had all this extra money lying around. Finally she gave in. She told him that if he stopped skipping, she'd buy him the bike. So he got his wheels and headed back to class. But a few days later, the phone was ringing again. Now Mike has a dirt bike he's no longer allowed to ride.

"You know what I feel like sometimes?" Mrs. Wilson says one day in her living room. "Packing my bags, getting in my car and high-tailin' it."

Money won't solve everything. Mike Klapka knows that. But as a social studies teacher at Largo — a veteran who has taught in honors classes, in regular classes and now in GOALS — he also knows that schools are stretched to the breaking point. Classrooms are overflowing with kids, basic supplies are running low, teachers are fighting to make a living on their salaries. It's amazing. In a country that supposedly values education, movie stars get millions of dollars for one action thriller and professional quarterbacks get millions more for hurting a ball down a field. But Mr. Klapka, who's 33 and has been teaching for nine years, makes an annual salary of about \$24,000.

One time, at a party, someone asked him what he did for a living.

"I teach."

"Gee," said the other person. "I'm sorry."

Mr. Klapka isn't sorry about the profession he chose. When he steps into the classroom, he is obviously a man who loves what he does. He gets a kick out of the kids; it thrills him to see those lights turning on in their eyes. Still, something has to be done.

Which is why one Tuesday in early May finds Mr. Klapka in Tallahassee, prowling the halls of the Florida Capitol, trying to encourage legisla-

tors to put more money for education into the state budget. Officially he's lobbying for the Pinellas Classroom Teachers Association — other teachers from the county are there, too — but he's only an amateur. He's in a different league from all those professional lobbyists who keep charging out of the elevators with their power suits and power ties and power attitudes.

"You know what we need right now?" says Mr. Klapka, talking to another Pinellas teacher working with him. "We need those cellular phones."

He joins hundreds of other teachers in a rally on the steps of the Capitol, waving signs and cheering for Florida Education Commissioner Betty Castor when she complains that schools are being sold short. Under the proposed budget, she says, teacher salaries and the amount of spending per student would actually decrease when adjusted for inflation.

"You deserve better," Castor says, stirring the crowd into a frenzy of fist pumping, "and the children of Florida deserve better."

It's a rousing moment, but when the rally breaks up and Mr. Klapka and his partner head out to lobby individual legislators, reality sets in.

"I wish it could be better," one state representative says, "but . . ."

"I'm as supportive of education as any legislator," says another, "but . . ."

"We're down to the bare bones. . . . Our hands are tied."

Mike Klapka doesn't argue with them. He knows that what they are telling him is correct. Unless the voters are willing to pay more taxes, there's not much their legislators here in Tallahassee can do. So how can Mr. Klapka and the other teachers make people understand? What can they do to show them how much of the future is slipping away in the schools every day?

**'G**ood morning. Our thought for the day is: Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there."

There's nothing quite like the last weeks of class at a high school. A feeling of inevitability has settled over the campus; the days are whizzing by. Kids are burrowing into their books, making one last push before finals.

Down in the newspaper office, the AB-12 rats are flipping into altered states of consciousness, without the aid of any chemicals other than No Doz. They're hurling paper wads at each other, dragging forks across the blackboards, practicing their best forged signatures on hall passes.

"Have you ever thought of becoming a professional criminal?" one of them says, watching a girl scribble away on a pass. "Because you're awesome. Really."

At the back of the room, a thin boy walks around with a sign around his neck. A sign that says:

*I will soon achieve perfection.*

Across the way, a group of boys stands at a table in the first-floor hall of the AA building, playing a game of cards called tonk. It's like gin rummy, they say, as they slap cards on the table and drop coins into the pot.

"We're gambling," one of them says, smiling. "With money. In school."

Suddenly a teacher spots them, but before she has a chance to get their names they flee.

In a classroom over in A wing, a radiant girl —

a girl who belongs to a Bible studies group that meets before class every morning to pray — feels the first stirrings of a new life inside her womb. What will the others say when they find out? What prayers will they offer for her and her baby?

Over in C wing, in a speech class, a dark-haired boy gives a speech on the care and feeding of Elie, his pet python, which he has brought with him today in a cage. He speaks calmly about the history of snakes and their habits and their anatomy. Then he reaches the demonstration portion of his speech.

"You're not going to feed it, are you?" asks the teacher, a nice woman named Mrs. Adler.

The boy smiles. He reaches into a separate box and pulls out a live rabbit. A big black one. Before Helene Adler has a chance to object, the boy puts the rabbit into Elie's cage.

The rabbit wiggles its nose, gets its bearings, hops over toward the snake to say hello. Lunchtime. In a flash, Elie strikes, wraps her coils around the rabbit and begins to swallow it whole. The rabbit goes slowly, kicking its hind legs as the rest of its body disappears headfirst.

Mrs. Adler shakes her head and sobs. "Oh my God, no!" she says. "No!"

Some of the girls jump up from their seats and run from the room. The boys move up front for a better view and begin beating their desks and chanting.

"Yes! Yes! Yes!"

When Mrs. Adler grades the boy's speech, she gives him a B+. He loses points for his choice of topic — "not the best!" she writes on his paper — but earns high marks for "clarity of purpose" and "use of visual aids."

**J**ohn Boyd, who happened to be in that speech class, tells the whole story afterward to Mr. Feazell.

"I knew it was in there," John says, meaning Elie's main course. "But when he pulled it out of the box, I couldn't believe how big it was. I thought it was going to be a baby rabbit. I was stunned."

He smiles, shaking his head. "The rabbit, he didn't know what time it was."

Mr. Feazell laughs. "He found out real quick, didn't he?"

John's working hard these days. He spends most class periods buried inside his notes. At the top of one paper, he writes a single word.

**STUDY!!**

One day, when he's hanging around in Mr. Feazell's class after seventh period, Andrea Taylor rushes in all excited.

"I got an A in chemistry," she tells John. "I was so happy."

"How much did you pay your teacher?"

She hits him. "I didn't pay the teacher anything."

Still smiling, Andrea notices that the sweetheart necklace she gave John is tucked inside his shirt. She reaches over and pulls it out, so everybody can see it and know that John is taken. The two of them are still a couple, even after the big fight in the rain, when Andrea found out John had lied to her about kissing another girl. John felt terrible that night, seeing how much he'd upset Andrea. He's crazy about her. He may like other girls — he keeps telling himself how young he is, how there's no need to get too serious — but Andrea's special.

"You can break up with me if you want to," he told her. "I just want you to know that I didn't do any of that to hurt you."

So they're still going out to the movies, flirting with each other in the halls, enjoying their last few weeks of high school together. Actually, it's only Andrea's last few weeks of high school. John's still a junior, which means that next year he stays at Largo while she heads for Florida State.

Andrea's already talking about how she's going to drive down from Tallahassee on the week ends, just so she can sit in the Largo stands at the football games and cheer for him.

"You going to drive down here every Friday someone asked her the other day.

"Not every Friday," she said.

John tells her there's no way. He says she'll be too busy, hanging out with her college boyfriend. Andrea hugs him.

"You're still going to be my boyfriend," she says.

**J**aimee Sheehy is wandering again. One foggy morning, she and a friend named Tiff meet before first period and roam the campus together, ignoring the bells as they float down the halls.

"My parents are getting divorced again," says Tiff. "I've had, like, 45 parents."

The two of them glide past Jaimee's first-period class, past Tiff's first-period class, past friends in other classes who wave through the open door. If they see someone they know, floating just like them, they scold them in their best teacher voices.

"Stephanie! Get to class!"

Dipping is what they call this. They keep saying they're on their way to class. They really should go today, they say. Especially Tiff. She has a test to take. But no. They decide instead to head down to the office. Down to guidance, where they can ask for schedule sheets and ponder what classes to take next year. Or maybe what classes to drop next year. Like Mike Broome, Jaimee has thrown away the entire year. Only for her, this is the second wasted year in a row.

Jaimee's mother doesn't know what to do anymore. Everyone at school keeps reminding Laur Sheehy that the year is almost over, that Jaimee's about to turn 16, that they've tried everything they can think of. But Ms. Sheehy isn't ready to give up. If she gives up, who's Jaimee got? Maybe Jaimee's stuck. Maybe she's gotten so far behind that she's paralyzed. Because it's not like she's destructive or anything. She's a good kid who just got lost somewhere along the way.

Only now, she's starting to sneak out her bedroom window again. Her mother wakes up, finds her gone, wonders what's happening. Is Jaimee at some friend's house? Is she driving around in a car? What if there's an accident? That's when the dream comes back. The one where Ms. Sheehy gets the phone call in the middle of the night . . .

Back at the school, Jaimee and Tiff are still sitting in the guidance area, filling out the schedules. Suddenly Tiff sees her English teacher.

"Hey," she says. "Is that paper due today?"

The teacher smiles politely. "No. Friday."

"Does it have to make sense?"

"Yes."

"I mean, does it have to be like a paragraph that goes together?"

## A Trying Time

■ When teacher Mike Klapka (right) goes to Tallahassee to lobby legislators, they can give him sympathy but little else. After teaching for nine years, he makes \$24,000 a year. One time, at a party, someone asked Mike what he did for a living. "I teach," he said. "Gee," said the other person, "I'm sorry."



"You have a good mind . . . I know you can do it."

Another friend — her name is Dawn — takes a seat beside Jaimee and Tiff and begins working on her own schedule. Dawn's thinking of taking floral design. She's heard there's good money in arranging flowers.

"That stuff pays off, man."

Tiff stands up and announces she's leaving. She has to go to class, she says. Really.

"I love you," says Jaimee.

"I love you, too. Ciao."

Dawn stays at the table with Jaimee and flips through next year's curriculum book. "I don't know," she says. "I could take basic gasoline engine mechanics . . . I mean, these hands look like they were meant to work on engines, don't they?"

"Definitely. It's definitely the class for you."

**T**he War between the Heathers rages on. Almost two weeks have passed since it began — it's mid-May by now — and still Amy Boyle and Meridith Tucker are not speaking to each other. YY and Karin Upmeyer, the other half of the Fearsome Foursome, can't believe it. After all, Amy and Meridith are in class together, eat lunch at the same time in AB-12, constantly hang around with the same friends. They must spend at least several hours a day within a few feet of each other. So how can they avoid talking?

As for the Wild and Wonderful YY, she's still wrestling with her perpetual career crisis. One morning in May, she talks about it in Mrs. Hay's English class. Mrs. Hay has asked each of them what they plan to do after graduation. One girl says she wants to become a neurosurgeon. Another

says she's joining the Coast Guard. Another says she'd like to become a nun, but she doesn't think she could handle a vow of silence.

YY, however, says she does not know. She wants to write, but her parents, she says, continue to push for a math-related career.

"It's getting confusing," she tells Mrs. Hay.

"How are you going to handle that?"

"I don't know."

At that moment, Mrs. Hay decides it's time to give the speech. Every spring, just before graduation, she makes the same speech to her seniors.

"Maybe I need to share something with you," she tells them. "Maybe now's the time."

She pauses and gazes into their faces.

"When I was 34 years old," she says, "something happened to me."

It was spring 15 years ago. She was already at Largo High; at that point in the semester, she was teaching her kids *Richard III*. Anyway, she says, she went to the doctor one day. And for some reason, she asked him if he'd do a Pap smear. She doesn't know why she requested it; she'd had the test only a short while before. But something made her ask, and that's when they discovered she had cervical cancer.

"I was 34 years old," she says again, "and my daughter was what?" She thinks a second. "Seven?"

Before Mrs. Hay knew it, she was on an operating table in the hospital, with a surgeon ready to cut inside her. As she was fading out under the anesthetic, she remembers looking at the clock on the wall — it was a little after 10 a.m. — and thinking about how she was supposed to be in class, working with the kids on *Richard III*. In fact, the doctor would later tell her that as she lost consciousness she'd been quoting from that play

and from *The Tempest*.

When she came out of it, she asked the doctor if she was going to live.

"I don't know," he said.

They had to wait two days before they could be sure, she says. So she lay in her hospital bed, thinking about what it would be like if she died and her 7-year-old daughter were left without her. What would her little girl do? It was then, says Mrs. Hay, that she realized how lucky all of us are to be alive. How every hour we are given is a gift. And when the two days passed and she learned she was going to live, she told herself she would never forget that realization.

"I swore I was going to hang onto that feeling."

Which is why she is so delighted, she says, to still be alive — she's 49 now, she tells them proudly — and to still be doing what she loves, which is to teach. Especially with kids like the ones in this class. She wants them to know that. She wants them to understand how wonderful it is to sit here and be surrounded by kids who give her such joy. And she wants the same for them. She

wants them to understand, she says, that each of them is given only one life, and that they need to do whatever it is that brings them joy.

"I love you, you know."

This is her lesson for the day. It is her lesson, she says, for the year.

"What could be more important that I could say to you than to take care of yourself and be true to yourself and love one another? . . . After all, what is life anyway but today? We don't have a guarantee on tomorrow. We have today."

She pauses again. She's crying a little. She's also smiling.

**L**ook at this year's graduating class. Back in 1986, when they started, there were 571 kids in that class. Today, there are only 334. And each of those kids who left is remembered by teachers who tried, and failed, to keep them in school.

"I'm going to have enough time to seize it," she says.

Amy Boyle is not so sure. Amy was in that class, too, and when she listened to Mrs. Hay, what occurred to her was that time is running out. At least, it's running out for her and Meridith. Once the year's over, what's left for them? How are they supposed to work it out then?

**M**ike Broome is not about to walk away without some fireworks. The year is finished for him. With all his absences, there's nothing Mike can do except wait for the semester to end.



"I get paid for this," she says, shaking her head with wonder. "I get paid today to sit with you. It's incredible. An incredible thing." The bell rings.

Some of the kids walk up and hug Mrs. Hay. Fighting back tears, they slip away out into the hall, then start to sob. Not YY.

YY, who knows how directly this speech was aimed at her, leaves quietly without allowing herself any outpouring of emotion. YY loves Mrs. Hay. But the girl's still in survival mode, still rationing her emotional energy during this final onslaught of exams and papers; she can't afford, she says, to think about anything else right now. She can't worry about graduation, she says, or about what she's going to make of her life, or about any of that seize-the-day stuff.

#### The Loner

■ As principal Judith Westfall talks to a group of students, she holds the attention of all but one: Mike Broome, who is wearing shorts even though he does not have an honor card.

So he wanders from one end of campus to the other, threatening to punch the fire alarms, slipping over to the Wendy's next door, wearing shorts and hoping someone will ask him for the honor card he does not have, sitting on the steps and working himself up into a rage.

One day he explodes at Ms. Westfall. He's just discovered that the bike he rode to school — he borrowed it from a friend — is missing from the campus bike rack. Furious, he looks around and sees Ms. Westfall standing nearby, trying to comfort a girl who's just seen her ex-boyfriend arrested after he got into a fight on campus. Mike walks up, seething.

"Somebody stole my bike," he says. "This f---ing school sucks."

Though she's already busy, Ms. Westfall turns to Mike and hears him out.

"Was the bike locked?" she asks him.

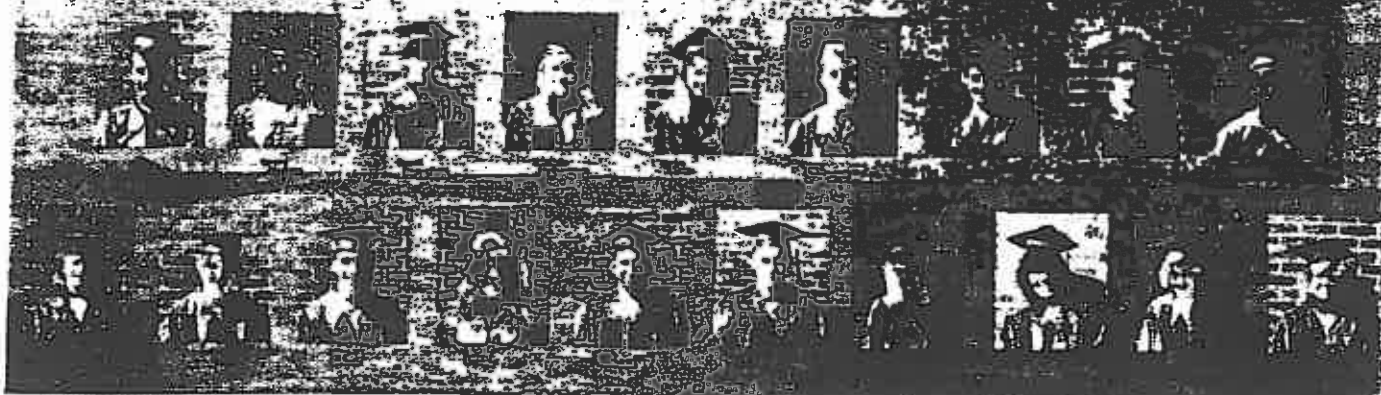
"No."

"Well, Mike, that's like leaving money out. You can't leave your bike unlocked."

She does what she can. She suggests that Mike report the theft to the Largo police officer assigned to the campus. Mike walks away, cursing.



# LARGO HIGH GOALS CLASS OF '90



"This f---ing school," he says.

Ms. Westfall calls out to him. She doesn't like his profanity, but if she can get him to calm down, she won't write him up for it.

"Mike," she says. "Don't make things worse for yourself. Come back."

"F---k you."

As he disappears across campus, Ms. Westfall picks up her walkie-talkie, hails another administrator near the area where Mike's headed, and asks that he be given a suspension.

That's what he's after. He admits it. He's not old enough to drop out, but he can get thrown out.

Another day, after another blowup and another suspension — this one for a grand total of 10 days, which is almost the rest of the semester — he stops by Ms. DiLello's room before he leaves. After all, Annette DiLello was his favorite teacher. She was the one who stood there with Mrs. O'Donnell at the beginning of the year and put her arm around Mike and told him she cared about what happened to him.

"Goodbye, Ms. DiLello," he tells her. "I won't be back."

She asks him about the suspension. "Were you looking for a permanent vacation?"

"Yeah."

**S**o many other kids are already gone. By year's end, 228 Largo kids will have dropped out. That's about 12 percent of the student body. Multiply that by four, for every year between ninth and 12th grade, and that means that close to 50 percent of the kids who enter as freshmen are gone by the time their classmates reach graduation.

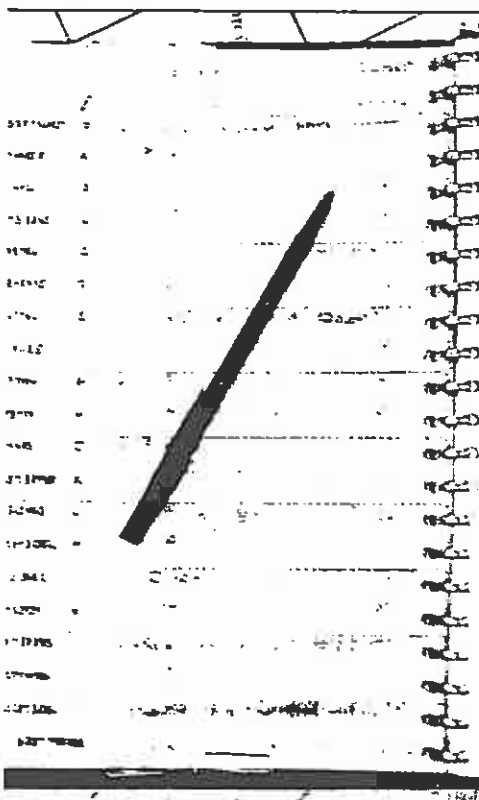
Just look at this year's graduating class. The class of '90. Back in 1986, when they started, there were 571 kids in that class. Today, there's only 334. It wouldn't be so bad if it was just numbers. But each of them is remembered as names and faces and personalities by the teachers who tried, and failed, to keep them in school. It hurts the teachers to think about how hard they worked and still lost all those kids.

It hurts especially down in the pod. Ruth Riel and the other GOALS teachers try not to get too discouraged, though. With the kinds of problems their students are dealing with, it's a victory to keep any of them in school. And for all the ones who have quit, there are still dozens of others who are responding to the one-on-one attention in GOALS. They're learning, they're turning around, making the honor roll. In a few days, the school's first graduating class of GOALS kids will

be walking across the stage in their blue caps and gowns and picking up their diplomas. Altogether, there'll be 19 of them, each living proof of what GOALS can accomplish.

## Some Make It . . . And Some Don't

■ GOALS celebrates its successes with a tribute to its graduates (above). But one teacher's gradebook (below) shows the losses. Every yellow line marks a kid who has left Largo.



There's Craig McCray, a sweet kid who's talking about heading for junior college and possibly studying to become a TV cameraman. Without Mrs. LaVassaur and the others teachers in the pod, it's unclear what would have happened to Craig.

"The teachers in here," he says, "are like parents."

There's Cathy Turner, who started skipping school in fifth grade and who was planning to drop out before she entered GOALS.

"If I wasn't in there," she says, "I don't think I would have made it."

Then there's Donny Campbell. Donny's a great kid, with long curly hair and a perfect tan. He's one of these surfer kids who loves to watch the weather reports on TV, so he knows when the waves will be kicking up. Back in his sophomore year, when he first came into GOALS, he was a handful, getting into fights, skipping constantly, failing classes. Today, his attendance and grades are so solid he's earned an honor card; he wears shorts to school almost every chance he gets. Mrs. LaVassaur and the other GOALS teachers, he says, have made all the difference in the world.

"The teachers in here have a better attitude," he says. "They have a sense of humor."

Donny's aware of how many other kids have crashed and burned along the way. One of his best friends is a GOALS student who dropped last year. They're both surfers, and one Sunday night a couple of months ago, after the two of them had been out at Sunset Beach, Donny got a call from his friend. He'd had a fight with his girlfriend; now he sounded odd.

"You can have my surfboard," he said. "I don't need it anymore. I don't need anything."

"Don't do anything stupid."

"I already have."

Donny raced over to the friend's house and found him sitting in front of the garage, slicing his wrist over and over with a kitchen knife. Donny grabbed the knife, threw it off into the yard, then drove his friend to a hospital. Both of them were covered with blood; both were crying. But the friend lived.

"He still talks about doing it sometimes," Donny says. "I tell him to shut his face. I don't want to hear it."

Donny doesn't want to hear negative thinking these days. He's moving forward with his life, talking about going to junior college and maybe studying to become a veterinary technician.

"I just can't wait to get out of here," he says, echoing the words of nearly every senior in the school.

As a graduation present, he says, his parents are sending him on a trip to the Caribbean. Donny's still deciding where to go. Maybe Barbados. Maybe Costa Rica. Someplace where the waves are just right . . .

On the evening of Thursday, May 24, the GOALS graduating seniors and their parents gather in the library for an awards ceremony. Ms. Westfall gives an emotional speech about the strength of the kids and about the tireless efforts of all their teachers.

"If caring and love came in bushel baskets," says Ms. Westfall, "we'd be able to fill semitractor-trailers by the miles."

The room is electric with enthusiasm. Awards are handed out. Hugs and presents are exchanged. Kristina Hadley, another senior, stands up to talk about how she probably wouldn't have stayed in school without the program.

"On June 7th," she says, her voice wavering a little, "I will proudly receive my high school diploma and be ready to face the challenges of tomorrow. Thank you."

**T**hat same evening, over in the auditorium, another glittering ceremony is under way. Out in the audience, the rows are filled with beaming parents. Up in front, sitting under the lights, are some 50 of Largo High's most accomplished students. YY is here to pick up her PRIDE writing award; Amy Boyle is here, too, ready to receive a citizenship award from the Daughters of the American Revolution. So's Carolyn Hanson, the valedictorian, who has honored the school by being selected as a Presidential Scholar, one of the highest academic honors available to a high school student in America; next month, in recognition of her achievement, Carolyn will visit the White House.

Meridith Tucker is sitting next to YY, who is sitting next to Amy, who is sitting next to Andrea Taylor. Andrea does not know what award she is to receive; the school has simply sent her family a letter, informing them that Andrea will be honored in some way. Her mother and John are out in the audience now, waiting to see what she gets.

They find out once the man from St. Petersburg Junior College stands up and begins reading off the names of students who qualify for scholarships to the college. He begins with the ones awarded to students with GPAs of 3.8 or higher. Then he reads off the list of those who have qualified for the next type of scholarship, which is given to students with GPAs above 3.5. Then he comes to the final list, which includes those who have won the college's Black Incentive Award.

"For students that have received a 3.0 or better," the man explains.

Andrea hears these words and blushes. She feels the heat rising in her cheeks — feels the other kids staring at her — because she is the only black student seated in this group at the front of the auditorium. When Andrea began high school, her class included many other talented black students, but now most of them are gone. Either they've dropped out or gotten pregnant, or they've gotten sidetracked some other way. For whatever reason, Andrea is the only black senior in the school with a GPA above 3.0.

And now this man has slapped her with that fact in public. This is what she and John and her mother came for tonight?

She hears the man call out her name, and no other name. She laughs, because the only alternative would be to cry. Burning, she walks up on stage, shakes the man's hand and politely accepts the patronizing little certificate.

"I don't believe this," she says.

A few minutes later, when the ceremony is

over and they're driving away, Andrea rips up the paper and tosses it out the window. She doesn't need sympathy. She's already going to college.

Only a few days before the end of the semester, the yearbook comes out. Kids pass them up and down the rows, signing their names for the ages. The book is filled with pictures of the patio people and the AB-12 rats. Though none of the Fearsome Foursome had anything to do with it — they're all on the newspaper staff, not yearbook — YY and Amy and Meridith and Karin are all shown repeatedly. YY's in there at least eight times, Amy at least nine times.

Jaimee Sheehy is in there only once, with her name spelled wrong. Mike Broome doesn't show up at all, as though he's invisible.

Other kids around the school wonder why they're not pictured more. Some black students approach Ms. Westfall to complain. The pages of

**"If caring and love came in bushel baskets," says Ms. Westfall, gazing out at the teachers, parents and future graduates at the GOALS awards ceremony, "we'd be able to fill semitractor-trailers by the mile."**

the yearbook, they point out, are crammed with white faces. White kids at their island parties. White kids showing off the stereos in their boom cars. But where's everybody else? Are there any shots of black kids hanging out at their parties? In the entire book, is there one shot of kids sitting on the rail? No. In fact, some of the most prominent black faces are shown in a section on students who are sent to the office. "Breakin' the Rules," the section's called.

Ms. Westfall agrees these kids have a point. She finds the editors for next year's book and shows them the problem.

"What this would say to me," she says, flipping through the pages, "is that no black kids have parties, no black kids have jobs, no black kids have cars. What are they doing? They're in the discipline office."

Ms. Westfall knows the editors are good kids who mean well. But when they put together next year's book, she says, she wants them to make sure they step outside their own lives and show what Largo is like for other kids, too.

"We've got to do a better job," she says, "about fairly representing everybody in the school."

**O**n the same Friday that Gorbachev and Bush are meeting up in Washington for their arms control summit, YY and Karin stage a little summit of their own. When fifth period rolls around and all four of the Heathers are in AB-12, YY and Karin drag Meridith and Amy inside the darkroom and tell

them the war of silence has got to stop.

"This is totally uncool," Karin tells them, wrapping an arm around YY for moral support.

"We're tired of it," says YY.

Amy and Mer are seated at opposite sides of the room. Amy is playing with her hair; Mer is hugging a pillow, looking the other way. Karin says she can't believe how petty they're being.

"You guys deal with it," she says. "I have to sign a yearbook."

With that, Karin and YY step outside, leaving the two combatants to work things out. A few minutes later, the darkroom door opens, and out they come, smiling bashfully, with the traces of a few tears glistening on their cheeks.

"Guess what," says Mer. "Amy and I made up!"

Apologies have been exchanged; a truce has been declared. But it's not like they're suddenly back to being soul mates. If they're going to regain their friendship, it's going to take a lot of time and effort. But at least they're on their way.

Just in time, too. Graduation is almost here.

**T**hursday, June 7. The big night. Laura Sheehy is not thinking about graduation. She's thinking about Jaimee. Laura hasn't seen her daughter for almost a week.

Jaimee hasn't exactly run away. She's around somewhere. But never in a place where her mother can find her. She visits the house during the day, when she knows her mom's at work; she leaves messages on the answering machine, saying where she has gone.

"I'm at the beach," the messages say. "I'm going to Melissa's house."

Laura Sheehy checks. She goes to the beach, she calls the house where her daughter is supposedly staying. But Jaimee is never where she says she'll be. She came home one night last week for a change of clothes, then climbed out her window in the early morning hours and disappeared again.

So now, on this Thursday evening, Laura Sheehy sits alone at home, searching through Jaimee's yearbook, looking for some familiar face or name to call and ask for information. She listens to all of the phone messages from Jaimee's friends, hoping she'll hear some clue as to where she might be...

Thunder rolling in the distance. Rain falling in waves. Black clouds hanging above the school.

It's 6:50 p.m., exactly 40 minutes before the class of '90 is supposed to walk out onto the football field. Inside the auditorium, the seniors sit in their bright blue caps and gowns, praying for the downpour to stop. Because if it doesn't, they'll have to come back tomorrow morning.

No way. They've waited four years for this. They are not prepared to wait a moment more.

A couple of the assistant principals are up front, trying to calm them down, but it's no good. Now that these kids are about to graduate, there's nothing left to threaten them with. They're exchanging jungle bird calls; they're chanting.

"WE WANT BEER, YES WE DO! WE WANT BEER, HOW 'BOUT YOU?"

It's looking grim. The clock is ticking, families and friends are arriving, and yet the rain still falls. The chanting grows more fervent; the kids are

## Oh, What a Night

■ Graduation Night 1990 at Largo High is full of memories for John and Andrea (right), Amy (far right), YY and her parents (below right) and Karin (bottom). GOALS graduate Cathy Turner (below) smiles during the ceremony.



(Photo below courtesy of YY's family)



stomping their feet on the floor.

**"WE WILL, WE WILL, ROCK YOU . . . WE WILL, WE WILL, ROCK YOU . . ."**

By the grace of some higher power, the clouds part and the rain dies down at almost exactly 7:30, which happens to be the ceremony's starting time. The seniors are ushered into two lines that begin moving across campus, heading for the stadium. Suddenly someone looks up and notices.

**"You guys! We have a rainbow."**

Not just any rainbow. A monster rainbow. A mega-rainbow. It hangs shimmering above them as they file through the locker rooms and onto the field, all to the familiar tune of *Pomp and Circumstance*, which the band is already playing.

When the two great lines of blue come into view, the crowd in the stands lets out a roar. Moms are crying and waving. Dads are firing off their Instamatics. Grandparents are grinning. Joyous pandemonium.

Everything is moving so quickly. Not just because it's such a happy occasion, but because Ms.

Westfall, seated up on stage, has discreetly picked up her walkie-talkie and sent out the word to keep up the pace in case the rain returns. The national anthem is played, and some of the kids actually sing. Introductions are made. Speeches are delivered. Then, before anyone knows it, names are being called out, and one by one, the kids walk carefully across the stage, their hearts pounding



as they step into the future.

YY walks. Karin walks. Andrea Taylor and Amy and Meridith and Elvis and Carolyn Hanson and Jennifer Belzel and Donny Campbell and Cathy Turner and Craig McCray and other GOALS seniors . . . All of them walk. They shake Ms. Westfall's hand, take their diplomas — actually just their diploma cases, since the real documents are waiting inside, where they won't get wet — and hand their principal an honor card, which is their gift back to her.

It's incredible. All these months later, after the guerrilla warfare and the hurling of the sacred darts at Judi's smiling mug, YY and Amy and all

the AB-12 rats who have ever aligned themselves against Ms. Westfall now end up shaking her hand, staring into that same face, being forced to acknowledge, if only for a second, that she has always wished them well.

"Oh my God," says one girl, stepping down from the stage. "I don't even believe this is happening."

Across the field they go, down a reception line formed by the teachers, who are giving hugs, handshakes, whispered words of advice.

"I love you," Mr. Fezell tells Andrea, squeezing her tight.

A few minutes later, when the last student has gone through the line and returned to his seat, the band plays the alma mater. The song that the kids have ridiculed for four years now sets them gently swaying, tears forming in their eyes.

Then, suddenly, they are done. Without any warning, they are officially high school graduates, hooting, screaming, posing with their parents for one quick shot before they dash off into the night and head for all the parties that await them.

"You ready to fly now?" says one grinning boy. "I'm flying like the wind."

That same night, Mike Broome sits in his mother's easy chair, coughing and smoking another Marlboro and staring at the TV.

Everyone else in his family has already gone to bed. Mike is up alone, watching *Trinity Is Still My Name*, a poorly dubbed Italian western. He has already seen one movie tonight; when *Trinity* is over, he plans to sit through another.

Quietly, he watches the screen. He hears the gentle creaking of the overhead fan, hears the traffic cruising by on Belleair Road, hears his mother getting up so she can drink some milk to soothe her ulcer. He waits for a slow stretch in the movie, then finds a deck of cards. Without turning off the TV, he begins to play a game of solitaire. He lays out his seven piles, then starts flipping cards and searching for places to build.

He turns up the king of spades.

Nothing.

Jack of spades.

Nothing.

Queen of hearts.

Nothing.

## EPILOGUE

Since that night in June 1990, another school year has passed at Largo High. In a couple of weeks, the school's class of '91 will march onto the same field, hearing the same roar from the stands. At high schools across the state, other seniors will be attending their own graduations.

Florida's dropout problem has not magically disappeared; with 30,000 dropouts a year, this state continues to have one of the worst graduation rates in the country. Still, GOALS and other dropout prevention programs are spreading through the schools, trying to turn back the tide.

In Pinellas County, the GOALS program is now in place in seven high schools as well as at two technical educational centers. So far, since the program began, approximately 300 GOALS students have graduated in Pinellas — 300 that may well have dropped out had it not been for the program. Next month, another 24 of Largo's GOALS students are expected to graduate; four others received diplomas at mid-year.

Helene Adler, the speech teacher so distressed by the snake demonstration, is now often referred to by her students as "Thumper."

Largo's shorts experiment is no more.

There's no need for it, since the county school board decided several months ago to revamp the dress code, allowing students to wear shorts to school.

Judith Westfall, Largo's principal, received a major promotion at the beginning of this school year when she was named the county's associate superintendent for curriculum and instruction.

Meanwhile, the education budget crisis has worsened. Until a compromise was worked out a short time ago, hundreds of Pinellas teachers — including Ms. DiLello, Mrs. O'Donnell and Mrs. LaVassaur — were scheduled to lose their jobs.

Jaimee Sheehy, almost 17 now, remains an elusive figure. An assistant principal at Largo High reports that only a few weeks ago he withdrew Jaimee from the rolls after she stopped coming to school. Jaimee, however, says she is unaware of her official withdrawal and insists she is still going to class. Her mother, once more, does not know what to believe.

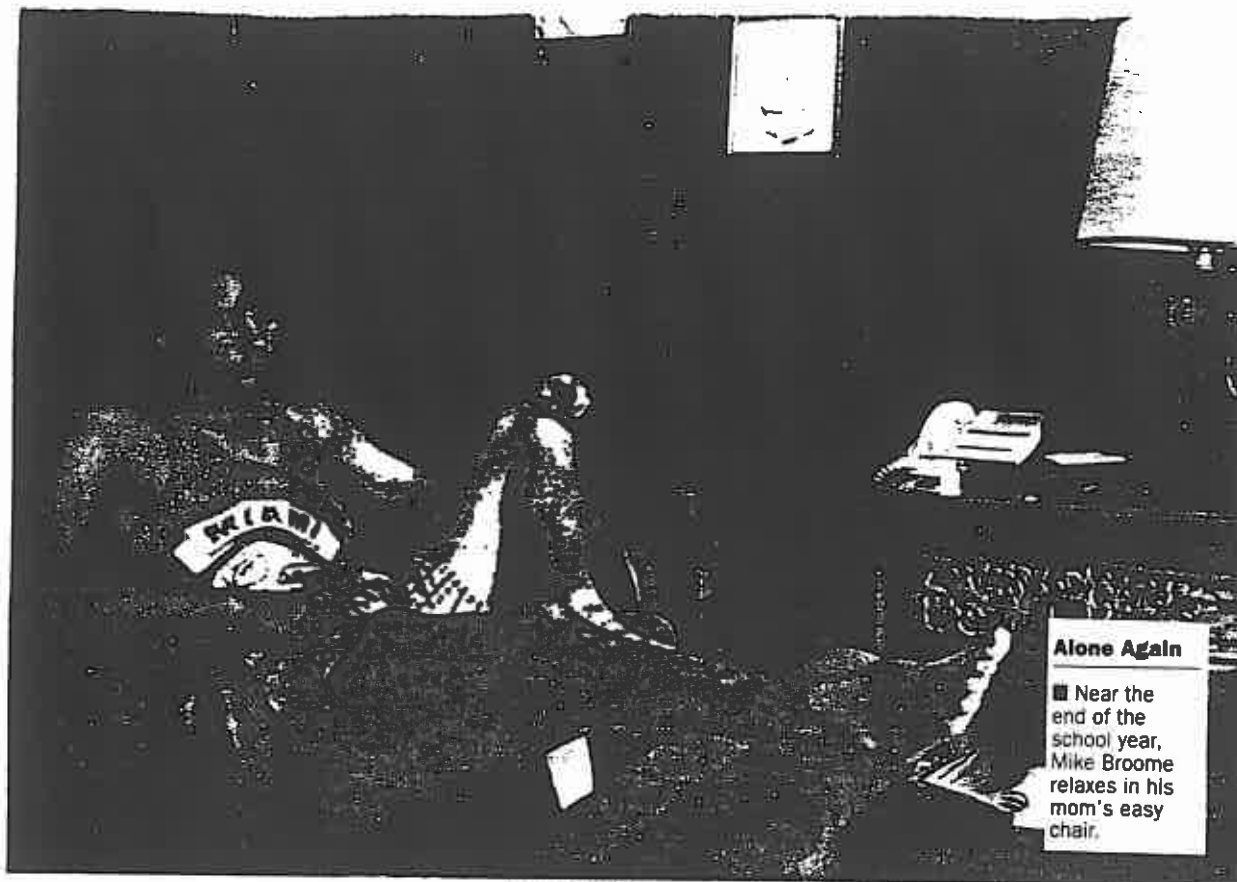
Even so, Laura Sheehy thinks her daughter has made real progress in the past year. Jaimee, she says, seems more calm and reliable, has found herself some nice friends, has returned to playing baseball and is talking about working for her GED, then possibly studying to become a respiratory therapist like her mother. Jaimee even speaks now of how much she misses Shoney, the horse she cared for in better days.

Sometimes, Ms. Sheehy asks her daughter what happened.

"I don't know," Jaimee says. "I don't know."

John Boyd and Andrea Taylor broke up soon after the 1989-90 school year ended. They're still friends, though. Andrea has just finished her first year at FSU; she's majoring in business and can't wait for next year, when Alyma, who also remains a close friend, will join her at the school.

For John, it's been a busy year. He was a captain on this year's Largo High football team and was just named prom king. This fall, he's scheduled to attend the University of South Dakota, which has promised him a football scholarship.



### Alone Again

■ Near the end of the school year, Mike Broome relaxes in his mom's easy chair.

The Fearsome Foursome have just finished their first year of college. Karin Upmeyer is attending Florida Southern College. YY, Amy Boyle and Meridith Tucker are at the University of Florida. In recent months, YY has decided that maybe her parents were right in encouraging her to pursue a math-related profession with a stable income. She still loves English and has continued writing in her spare time, but she's decided to major in computer science.

"It just seems like the sensible thing to do," she says.

After failing his entire freshman year at Largo, Mike Broome drifted from one school to the next. This past fall, hoping a change of scenery would do some good, his mother sent him up to North Florida to stay with her brother; then Mike went to live with his father for a while. In both places, he struggled in school, skipping class and straining against the rules. Mike returned briefly to Largo High and then was transferred to the IBIS Program in Safety Harbor, a special school for disruptive students. Finally, just this past April 8, exactly 10 days after his 16th birthday, he formally dropped out of school.

Today Mike lives with his brother Wade and his mother and stepfather in their home in Largo. Mike works at a pizza parlor; he's doesn't know what he plans to do with his life.

"I haven't really thought about it much at all," he says.

His mother, Jewelene Wilson, still sits in her chair in the living room and tries to figure out what happened with Mike.

"I know he's messed up his future," she says. "Ever since he quit school, he doesn't seem all that happy."

Mrs. Wilson says she would like to find a kid who has never in all his life gotten in trouble. She would like to see a perfect child. Just one, so she could know what they look like.

### THE END

## FEEDBACK

■ What are your impressions of high school today? *South of Heaven* is the result of the observations of reporter Thomas French, who spent a year in a local high school. At a time when attention is focused on the quality of American education, the editors of the Times believe this series gives a valuable insight into high school today. We also hope *South of Heaven* will provoke discussion of education issues. What is your reaction? Please write to: *South of Heaven*, c/o Managing Editor, St. Petersburg Times, P.O. Box 1121, St. Petersburg 33731-1121. We'll publish a selection of the letters.

— THE EDITORS