

HOME. WORK.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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