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*To Mummy and Daddy*

*Marisa and Daniela—*

*Life is good because of you*

Also for my grandparents

Salvatore, Carmela and Maria

In memory of

Giovanni Marchetta, 1910–1991

Nonno, when are we ever going to

stop missing you?

One

**PANIC WAS MY** first reaction to the multiple choice options that lay on

my desk in front of me. I glanced at the students around me before turning back to question three. I hated multiple choice. Yet I didn't want to get question three wrong. I didn't want to get any of them wrong. The outcome would be too devastating for my sense of being.

So I began with elimination. D was completely out of the question, as was A, so that left B and C. I pondered both for quite a while, and just as I was about to make my final decision I heard my name being called.

“Josephine?”

“Huh?”

“I think you mean ‘I beg your pardon,’ don't you, dear?”

“I beg your pardon, Sister.”

“What are you doing? You're reading, aren't you, young lady?”

“Um . . . yeah.”

“‘Um, yeah?’ Excellent, Josephine. I can see you walking away with the English prize this year. *Now stand up.*”

So my final school year began. I had promised myself that I would be a saint for this year alone. I would make the greatest impression on my teachers and become the model student. I knew it would all fail. But just not on the first day.

Sister Gregory walked toward me, and when she was so close that I could

see her mustache, she held out her hand.

“Show me what you’re reading.”

I handed it to her and watched her mouth purse itself together and her nostrils flare in triumph because she knew she was going to get me.

She skimmed it and then handed it back to me. I could feel my heart beating fast.

“Read from where you were up to.”

I picked up the magazine and cleared my throat. “ ‘What kind of a friend are you?’ ” I read from Hot Pants magazine.

She looked at me pointedly.

“ ‘You are at a party,’ ” I began with a sigh, “ ‘and your best friend’s good-looking, wealthy and successful boyfriend tries to make a pass. Do you: A–Smile obligingly and steal away into the night via the back door; B–Throw your cocktail all over his Country Road suit; C–Quietly explain the loyalty you have toward your friend; D–Tell your friend instantly, knowing that she will make a scene.’ ”

You can understand, now, why I found it hard to pick between B and C.

“May I ask what this magazine has to do with my religion class, Miss?”

“Religion?”

“Yes, dear,” she continued in her sickeningly sarcastic tone. “The one we

are in now.”

“Well . . . quite a lot, Sister.”

I heard snickers around me as I tried to make up as much as I could along the way.

Religion class, first period Monday morning, is the place to try to pull the wool over the eyes of Sister Gregory. (She kept her male saint’s name although the custom went out years ago. She probably thinks it will get her into heaven. I don’t think she realizes that feminism has hit religion and that the female saints in heaven are probably also in revolt.)

“Would you like to explain yourself, Josephine?”

I looked around the classroom, watching everyone shrugging almost sympathetically.

They thought I was beaten.

“We were talking about the Bible, right?”

“I personally think that you don’t know what we’ve been talking about, Josephine. I think you’re trying to fool me.”

The nostrils flared again.

Sister Gregory is famous for nostril-flaring. Once I commented to someone that she must have been a horse in another life. She overheard and scolded me, saying that, as a Catholic, I shouldn’t believe in reincarnation.

“Fool you, Sister? Oh, no. It’s just that while you were speaking I remembered the magazine. You were talking about today’s influences that affect our Christian lives, right?”

Anna, one of my best friends, turned to face me and nodded slightly.

“And?”

“Well, Sister, this magazine is a common example,” I said, picking it up and showing everyone. “It’s full of rubbish. It’s full of questionnaires that insult our intelligence. Do you think they have articles titled ‘Are you a good Christian?’ or ‘Do you love your neighbor?’ No. They have articles titled ‘Do you love your sex life?’ knowing quite well that the average age of the reader is fourteen. Or ‘Does size count?’ and let me assure you, Sister, they are not referring to his height.

“I brought this magazine in today, Sister, to speak to everyone about how insulted we are as teenagers and how important it is that we think for ourselves and not through magazines that exploit us under the guise of educating us.”

Sera, another friend of mine, poked her fingers down her mouth as if she was going to vomit.

Sister and I stared at each other for a long time before she held out her hand again. I passed the magazine to her knowing she hadn’t been fooled.

“You can pick it up from Sister Louise,” she said, referring to the principal.

The bell rang and I packed my books quickly, wanting to escape her icy look.

“You’re full of it,” Sera said as we walked out. “And you owe me a magazine.”

I threw my books into my locker and ignored everyone’s sarcasm.

“Well, what was it?” Lee grinned. “A, B, C or D?”

“I would have gone with him,” Sera said, spraying half a can of hair spray around her gelled hair.

“Sera, if they jailed people for ruining the ozone layer, you’d get life,” I told her, turning back to Lee. “I was going to go for the cocktail on the Country Road suit.”

The second bell for our next class rang, and with a sigh I made another pledge to myself that I would be a saint. On the whole I make plenty of pledges that I don’t keep.

My name, by the way, is Josephine Alibrandi and I turned seventeen a few months ago. (The seventeen that Janis Ian sang about where one learns the truth.) I’m in my last year of high school at St. Martha’s, which is situated in the eastern suburbs, and next year I plan to study law.



For the last five years we have been geared for this year. The year of the HSC (the High School Certificate), where one's whole future can skyrocket or go down the toilet, or so they tell us. Personally I feel that the HSC is the least of my problems. Believe me, I could write a book about problems. Yet my mother says that as long as we have a roof over our head we have nothing to worry about. Her naïveté really scares me.

We live in Glebe, a suburb just outside the city center of Sydney and ten minutes away from the harbor. Glebe has two facades. One is of beautiful tree-lined streets with gorgeous old homes, and the other, which is supposed to be trendy, has old terrace houses with views of outhouses and clothes-lines. I belong to the latter. Our house is an old terrace. We, my mother Christina and I, live on the top. We were actually renting the place till I was twelve, but the owner sold it to us for a great price, and although I've calculated that Mama will have it paid off when I'm thirty-two, it's good not to be renting in these days of housing problems.

My mother and I have a pretty good relationship, if a bit erratic. One minute we love each other to bits and spend hours in deep and meaningful conversation and next minute we'll be screeching at each other about the most ridiculous thing, from my room being in a state of chaos to the fact that she won't let me stay overnight at a friend's home.

She works as a secretary and translator for a few doctors in Leichhardt, a suburb unfortunately close to my grandmother's home, which means I have to go straight to Nonna's in the afternoon and wait for her. That really gets on my nerves. Firstly, the best-looking guys in the world take the bus to Glebe while the worst take the bus to where my grandmother lives. Secondly, if I go straight home in the afternoon I can play music full volume, whereas if I go to Nonna's the only music she has is *Mario Lanza's Greatest Hits*.

My mother is pretty strict with me. My grandmother tries to put her two cents' worth in as well, but Mama hates her butting in. The two of them are forever at loggerheads with each other. Like whenever school camp comes along, it's fights galore. My grandmother thinks that if a member of our family isn't looking after me I'll get raped or murdered. She accuses my mother of being a bad mother for not caring enough and letting me go.

Mama almost gives in to her each time, and some days when the three of us are together it's World War III.

So not being able to go out a lot is one of my many problems. My biggest, though, is being stuck at a school dominated by rich people. Rich parents, rich grandparents. Mostly Anglo-Saxon Australians, who I can't see having a problem in the world.

Then there are the rich Europeans. They're the ones who haven't had a holiday for twenty years just so their children can go to expensive schools and get the proper education that they missed out on. These people might have money, but they're grocers or builders, mainly laborers. However, they were smart. They moved out of the inner west and inner city and became "respectable." Being respectable has made them acceptable.

I come under the "scholarship" category, and when I say that, I would rather be the daughter of a laborer.

I felt disadvantaged from the beginning. Maybe because I hadn't gone to the same primary school as them. Or maybe because I received the six-year English scholarship. I don't know why I tried so hard to win it. But it backfired on me because I ended up going to a school I didn't like. I wanted to go to a school in the inner west where all my friends had gone. They were Italian and Greek and we ruled primary school. They were on my level. I related to them. They knew what it meant not to be allowed to do something. They knew what it meant to have a grandmother dressed in black for forty years. I looked like them. Dark hair, dark eyes, olive skin. We sounded alike as well. It felt good being with other confused beings. We were all caught up in the middle of two societies.

I think I had it worst. My mother was born here, so as far as the Italians

were concerned, we weren't completely one of them. Yet because my grandparents were born in Italy we weren't completely Australian. Despite that, primary school was the only time I was with people I could compare notes with and find a comfortable place alongside. We'd slip our Italian and Greek into our English and swap salami and prosciutto sandwiches at lunchtime and life was good in the school yard. Life outside school, though, was a different story.

The reaction of the Italian mothers to my mother being unmarried drove me crazy at times. There is nothing terribly romantic about my mother's supposed fall from grace. She slept with the boy next door when they were sixteen and before anything could be decided his family moved to Adelaide. Although he knew she was pregnant he never bothered to contact her again. We do know that he's alive and is a barrister in Adelaide, but that's about it. I don't know where the logic is but back then no one was allowed to come and stay at my house. I knew they wanted to, yet I never understood why they couldn't. God knows what their parents thought my mother would do or say to their children.

I think things got worse when I started at St. Martha's because I began to understand what the absence of a father meant. Also there were no Europeans like me. No Europeans who didn't have money to back them up.

The ones like me didn't belong in the eastern and northern suburbs.

I used to hear my illegitimacy mentioned during the first years at St.

Martha's, but nobody has spoken about it for ages. Still I wish someone else at school had a Bohemian mother who believed in free love back then. It's an embarrassing contradiction when your mother gets pregnant out of wedlock because her Catholic upbringing prohibits contraception.

Even though the girls at St. Martha's don't mention it, I bet you they're talking about me behind my back. I can feel it in my bones. It makes me feel I will never be part of their society and I hate that because I'm just as smart as they are.

Anyway, the other day, after the magazine incident, I couldn't wait to get out of St. Martha's. When I went to see Sister Louise, she handed me back the magazine and asked me to write a two-thousand-word conversation between myself and the editor of *Hot Pants* magazine.

I took the bus straight home instead of going to see my grandmother, deciding that I'd use the HSC as an excuse not to see her for most of this year.

I was relieved to be going home because it was so hot. The temperature must have been in the high nineties. I just wanted to put on my shorts and sunbake on the balcony.

I could see the English guys who live on the bottom floor of our terrace house sitting on the front veranda, stripped to the waist and drinking beer. They used to be backpackers, living in the youth hostel up the road, before deciding they wanted more privacy. I get on really well with one of them.

His name is Gary and he's from a place called Brighton in England. He always invites me in for a cup of tea, which is so strange. I mean, Australian

guys don't really sit around drinking tea, yet he seems as comfortable sipping his tea and talking about his mother as he does drinking his beer and

chanting Tottenham soccer songs.

"My mother wants to know when you're going to mow this lawn," I asked them, taking the mail out of the box.

Our front lawn is tiny. The deal is that my mother tends the garden and the guys look after the lawn. They're usually pretty good about it. They even painted the wooden fence and front door a beautiful deep green, which looks great because the outside of the house is yellow.

"How can you bear that uniform in this heat, Jose?" Gary asked, handing me his can of beer.

I took a sip and handed it back.

"Believe me, I'm melting."

Later on, when I was down to a T-shirt and shorts, I made myself a sandwich. I didn't hear Mama when she came in. She could have been standing at the kitchen door for at least five minutes before I noticed her. She looked worried.

"You okay?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Let me guess. You're wondering how a beautiful specimen like me could have an ugly mother like you," I said, putting the butter back into the fridge.

That is a joke because my mother is absolutely gorgeous. She has a beautiful olive complexion. I have a few blemishes. (I hate using the word "pimple.")

She's tall and slender with very manageable hair. I'm average height and probably will never be able to get away with wearing a bikini in this lifetime, and my hair is a legacy from my father. It's curly and needs restraining at all times.

People say I look like Mama and Nonna, yet somehow I missed out on the beautiful part.

"No, I was just wondering how someone as tidy as your mother could rear a child as untidy as you."

“I tidied up, thank you very much,” I said, walking past her into the living room where my schoolbooks were scattered all over the dining table. Because the terrace is so small, the dining room and living room are all in one. It’s not squashy, though. It just means that you can eat in front of the television, study in front of the television and do anything recreational in front of the television. Suits me fine.

The room isn’t like the living rooms of my friends. There aren’t any wedding photos of my parents. The only photo of someone dressed in frilly white is my communion photo. There aren’t any pieces of china that were wedding presents. No ugly vase that you have to keep on the mantelpiece because your great-aunt gave it to your mother for an engagement present. No masculinity. No old tighty whiteys to keep the furniture clean. But I like it. Because my mother and I are stamped all over it. I just have to walk into the house and I smell her even though she’s not there. The pictures or tapestries on the walls are done by us. The photos on the mantelpiece are of us, give or take a few of my cousin Robert’s family.

On the wall near the television there’s a poster we had done at a St. Alfio’s feast when I was seven. It reads “Josephine and Christina’s Place.” It’s a bit worn at the sides but I know that it’ll have to fall off the wall in tatters before we ever get rid of it.



Mama was poking round in the kitchenette.

“And I suppose you couldn’t cook anything?” she asked, looking into the oven.

“Maaaa,” I wailed. “I am studying, or has that escaped your attention?”

She opened one of the top cupboards and I closed my eyes, knowing that the pots and pans I had crammed in there were going to fall out.

“All I ask is that you have something ready in the afternoons. Even something defrosted,” she snapped, placing them back tidily.

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Don’t ‘yeah, yeah’ me, Miss. Now clear that table and set it.”

“You went to Nonna’s, didn’t you? You’re always in a crappy mood when you go to your mother’s.”

“Yes, I went to Nonna’s, Josephine, and what’s this about you and your friends driving around Bondi Junction half-dressed last week?”

“Who told you that?”

“Signora Formosa saw you. She said you and your friends almost ran her over. She told Zia Patrizia’s next-door neighbor and it got back to Nonna.”

The telephone company would go broke if it weren’t for the Italians.

“She’s exaggerating. We’d just come from the beach and Sera was driving us home.”

“How many times have I told you that I don’t want you riding around in Sera’s car?”

“The same number of times that Nonna has told you to tell me that.”

“Don’t answer back, and clear the table,” she snapped. “Now. This very minute. This very second.”

“Are you sure you don’t mean in an hour?”

“Josephine, you are not too old to be slapped.”

It mostly ends up that way in the afternoons. My grandmother’s meddling could put Mother Teresa in a bad mood. As much as Mama says that she doesn’t care what Nonna says, she takes every word to heart.

I don’t exactly help out much, but sometimes I do decide to start anew and do the right thing with her. Though just when I want to sit down and have my time with Mama, she’ll be too tired or she’ll want to go to bed or, worse still, she’ll want to spring-clean the house. Sometimes I wonder if my mother loves housework more than me.

“Don’t open that cupboard,” I said, too late. Tea bags, onions and potatoes came tumbling out.

So we’ve got a tiny kitchenette. Is it my fault?

We were pretty quiet as we ate that night. I could hear the guys downstairs playing some crazy music and the cicadas outside. I desperately

wanted to open a window because it was sweltering inside, but there's always the threat of a cockroach or some horrific insect flying in, and until we buy screens we can't really have the windows open at night.

I didn't feel like eating. It was too hot for baked potatoes.

While we were sitting there I felt Mama looking at me again.

"What are you looking at, Ma?"

"Nothing."

"What else did Nonna have to say?"

"She . . . she had guests."

I eyed her for a while before I picked up a bread-roll and toyed with it.

"How was your day?" she asked.

I shrugged, rolling my eyes. "Reasonable. Father Stephen came in for religion class. The attention span was unbelievable. If he was a teacher he could do heaps for HSC results. Pity he's a priest."

"He'd probably make a horrible husband."

"Well, he decided to ask questions. Picked on me, of course, because he sees me at church. He wanted to know what we think of when we come back from communion and kneel down. Like do we pray or what. I told him that I check out any good-looking guys in church."

"You did not?" she asked, horrified, looking up at me.

“Did so. He laughed. Sister told me I was a pagan.”

“Oh, Jose. Couldn’t you just have lied and told him you pray for your poor mother, or something?”

“Lie to a priest. Sure, Mum.”

She grabbed the bread-roll from me and I watched her butter it, noticing her hands trembling.

“Something’s worrying you. I can tell.”

“I’m getting old.” She shrugged dramatically.

“You only say that to cover some horrible truth,” I said.

“Really?”

“And truly.”

She leaned forward and tucked a piece of hair behind my ear.

“How would you like to go away for Easter? Just the two of us. Cairns or someplace.”

I don’t know why I got scared then. Something had to be wrong for her to suggest that. I had begged for a holiday for years. There had always been some excuse.

“I don’t want to go anywhere at all for Easter,” I shouted at her.

“Why are you shouting?”

“Because.”

“Great defense. I can see you in a courtroom one day, Jose,” she laughed.

“I thought you’d *want* to go on holidays. Remember how you used to go on about trips when you were young?”

“I’ve got homework to do,” I said, picking up my books.

As I lay in bed that night, I tried to keep the worries about Mama at the back of my mind. I knew something was bothering her. She seemed upset and preoccupied. We’re pretty good that way. We tune into each other very well. Maybe because it’s always just been the two of us.

Just lying there gave me an uneasy feeling. Nighttime scares me. I hate the complete silence of it, especially when I can’t sleep. I feel as if everyone could be dead and I would never find out until morning. When I was young I would stand by my mother’s door to make sure she was breathing.

Sometimes now I pretend to get a glass of water and do the same.

The worst thought struck me as I lay awake.

I leapt out of bed and ran to her room, yanking open the door.

“It’s cancer, isn’t it?”

“*What?*” she asked, sitting up in bed.

“Don’t hide it from me, Mama. I’ll be strong for you.”

I burst out crying then. I didn’t know what I would do without her.

“Come here, you silly girl. I have *not* got cancer and I’m not dying,” she

said.

I threw myself on her bed and lay beside her.

“Where do you get these silly ideas from?” she asked, kissing my brow.

“Holidays at Easter.”

“Whatever happened to those great speeches after watching *Lost in Space*? If Will Robinson’s father could take him to space, I could take you on a short holiday.”

“I was young and foolish then. Anyway, his dumb father never did find Alpha Centauri and they’re still floating around because they can’t find Earth.”

“Well, I do not have cancer.”

“You’ve been staring all evening and your attitude has been weird. It’s something terrible, isn’t it?”

She shrugged and looked away and then glanced up at me again with a sigh.

“Your grandmother went to the Fiorentino wedding.”

“Yeah, I heard the bride wore a pink dress and now everyone is going on about how she wasn’t a virgin.”

She laughed and then sobered up quickly.

“The groom’s cousin is Michael Andretti. He and his sister’s family were

at your grandmother's."

I was shocked. Dumbfounded. My mother had told me about him once and once only. I'd never heard his name mentioned since. Just "your father" or "he."

But for her to actually see him and worse, for him to actually exist, was mind-boggling. Sometimes I think he is a myth. My mother told absolutely nobody except me. As far as the world is concerned, Michael Andretti was just the guy next door.

But for him to be a myth means that I'm a figment of the imagination.

I touched Mama's hand.

"How did it feel? To see him, I mean. Did you hate him? Love him?

Anything?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"No . . . that's a lie." She sighed, lying on her back and looking at the ceiling. "I did hate him sometimes. When he was in Adelaide I could forget he existed. But now . . . can you believe it, Josie? He's going to live in Sydney for a year. To work in some law chamber here. MacMichael and Sons, I think. Your socialite grandmother will make sure we see plenty of him. She'll be his surrogate mother."

“But we can handle it, Ma,” I said, shaking her. “There’s no big deal.”

“Josephine, you can’t handle it. You think you can, but I know you.”

“That’s bull,” I exploded angrily. “I don’t care about him. I wouldn’t care if he was sitting in this room with us now. I’d look straight through him.”

“He asked me how life was. When we were alone he even told me he had no regrets.”

“What did you say?”

She turned to me and smiled. My worry lifted then. My mother may look like a delicate soft, woman, but the strength in her eyes is such a comfort to me when I’m scared. She would never ever fall to pieces on me.

“I said I had no regrets either.”

“Did he ask if you were married?”

“He asked if I had a family. I said yes.” She laughed bitterly. “His sister said that Michael is great with her kids. He loves kids, she said. He’d love to have some of his very own. I wanted to spit in his face.”

“Spitting? Very impressive. My serene, lovable mother has become aggressive.”

“I don’t know what I’m scared of, Josie. Maybe I forgot he existed after all this time.”

“We don’t need him.”



“What we don’t need and what we get are two very different stories.”

“Well, I’ve got a wonderful idea. How about we never go over to Nonna’s place again so we can’t ever bump into him?”

“You’ll have to meet him sooner or later, Miss, and you’ll go to your grandmother’s as per normal.”

“Maaaa,” I groaned. “She drives me crazy. She’s starting to tell me all those boring Sicily stories. If she tells me one more time she was beautiful, I’ll puke.”

“I want you to try and get on with her more.”

“Why? *You* don’t. It’s not fair to expect me to.”

“Our circumstances are different, Josephine. I’ve never got on with her. When I was young she used to keep me at such a distance that I used to wonder what I could possibly have done wrong. My father was much worse and it was only after he died that she took a step toward me. By then I kept *my* distance. With you, it’s different. She’s always wanted to be close to you.”

Mama looked at me and shrugged.

“I envied you that.”

“Five, Jozzie,” I mimicked. “Five men came to ask for my hand in marriage when I was your age.”

Mama laughed and I lay back content. I like to make her laugh. It’s weird

that I've spent my whole life trying to impress her and out of everyone I know she's the only person who loves me the way I am.

"What does *he* look like?" I asked later, trying to act uninterested.

She thought for a moment and then looked over at me, amusement lurking in her eyes. "He looks like a male Josephine Alibrandi."

Because it was the easiest thing to do, we both began to laugh.

Two

**SPENDING HALF YOUR** morning trying to pull Sera away from a mirror is one of life's mundane tasks.

Thankfully I don't have to go through it every morning, but two days after Mama told me she'd met Michael Andretti, we had the annual "Have a Say Day" in Martin Place. Sera volunteered to drive. She and Anna are the only ones of us who have a license.

For two days I just couldn't help thinking about my father. I felt sick at the idea of meeting him, though at the same time I desperately wanted to. But I couldn't tell my friends about it yet. I just wanted to keep it to myself until I figured out how I felt.

There are four of us who hang out together and we make the most unlikely group. Most of the other students in the school are in clone groups. They all look similar. Either blond yuppies or European trendies. Either

intellectuals or the “beautiful people.”

Our group represents all types, yet we hadn’t fitted into any of them in Year Seven.

Anna Selicic is your typical Slavic-looking girl. Long blond hair and blue eyes and that healthy red-cheek look. She’s the most nervous person I have ever known. She puts her hand up in class and whispers the answer with dread. It’s as if she thinks that if she whispers the wrong answer a blade will come hurtling across the room and decapitate her. She stands like a stunned mullet if guys approach us and still hasn’t been kissed, despite her good looks.

At fifteen, she was the last of us to get her period. I remember the three of us standing outside the toilet cubicle instructing her on how to put in a tampon. She went through two packets of Tampax before she was successful.

We tend to mother her a lot, and if we’re ever in a risky situation, like being squashed at a concert or terrorized by the students of Cook High, she’s the first person we try to protect.

Then there’s Seraphina. It’s pretty difficult describing her. She has to be the most brazen person I’ve ever met. She can look a person straight in the eye and lie her heart out. She can bitch about a person for three hours

straight and then turn around and crawl to them. Winning them over with what they see as sincerity. The three of us tend to look on in disgusted fascination. She has black roots and blond hair teased from here to eternity. She's skinny yet voluptuous and tends to dress in whatever the latest rock or pop star is wearing. Since she was fourteen she has never been without a boyfriend for more than a week and she's the only one of us who's slept with a guy. Her father, like most Italian fathers, thinks she's the Virgin Mary and like most Italian fathers is dead-set wrong.

I have a funny relationship with Sera. As the only two of Italian ancestry in the group we have a thin bond, and I find that when I'm in her home I crawl more to her parents than to anyone in the world. I'm charming and kiss them on both cheeks, knowing deep down as they kiss me back that they'd think nothing of tearing my family or myself to shreds. I'm not sure why I put up with it. Maybe for acceptance, because I think that if you're an outcast with your own kind you'll never be accepted by anyone.

Sometimes I really don't like her. But other times she makes me laugh more than anyone I know. Those times are mostly in church or class or places where you have to control yourself but can't. I envy her, I think. People really bitch about her at St. Martha's. She's a yuppie's nightmare. Her father's a fruit grocer. She's the stereotype of a wog yet she doesn't

give a damn. She just gives the finger.

And last, but never least, is Lee Taylor, whose main objective in life is to hang out with surfers down at the southern beaches and who thinks it's cool to come to school with a hangover.

God knows why, because her father is an alcoholic. That's why she's with us and not them. Because she went to primary school with them and her father came to pick her up from a birthday party once, blind drunk. Nobody was allowed to go to her place after that.

Lee and I have a weird relationship. We pretend we have nothing in common, yet we can talk for hours on any subject. We pretend we come from two different parts of society, yet both of us are middle-class scholarship students. We pretend that our families have nothing in common because people in her family use words like "wogs" and mine happen to be "wogs." Yet I respect her more than any of my friends, although I couldn't tell her that because we both pretend we don't know the meaning of the word.

One day we'll pass each other in the street, pretending our lives have gone in different directions, but I can guarantee that our adult lives will be as identical as our school lives have been.

Guys go for her a lot. My cousin Robert, though he won't admit it, has

had a crush on her for six years. She's one of those people you think is quite plain until you're sitting in front of her and realize just how attractive she is. Straight brown hair streaked gold by the sun, freckles on her nose and hazel eyes that never look directly at you when she speaks. Yet you can't call her a coward. I think she has so much emotion she doesn't want to show, she makes sure nobody sees it.

We grew up in the midst of the snobs of St. Martha's and discovered that somehow brains didn't count that much. Money, prestige and what your father did for a living counted. If your hair wasn't in a bob or if your mother didn't drive a Volvo, you were a nobody.

That's where the problem lies between me and our school captain, Ivy Lloyd, who we call Poison Ivy. I was awarded the insulting task of being her deputy. We hate each other's guts, probably because we've been competitive all our lives. She's one of those girls with perfect white skin and not one split end in her strawberry-blond hair. She's a bore, though. She's obsessed with schoolwork, and whenever we get assignments back she looks over to me to try to find out how well I did. Sometimes when she's looking and I know that I've probably received the highest mark, I shake my head in a sorrowful way as if I'm devastated. Then as we're walking out of the classroom and she has an ecstatic grin on her face, I'll