

Whistle-Blowers in the Relational World: Three Guides through Childhood

Anita, eight years old, is wearing a green and blue plaid jumper with a crisp white blouse. She has just returned from recess, thrown her coat in her locker, and is ready now to begin her interview. The two of us sit in a corner outside her classroom; the murmur of girls' voices edge into consciousness whenever we pause. She is shy but interested. We remember each other from last year when I visited her class to describe the study, and she thinks she remembers something about the stories in the interview. Some of the questions are hard for her, nevertheless, and there are starts and stops, pauses and silences now and again. As we near the end of our time, she begins to fidget in her seat, her eyes wander to the pencil she holds in her hand, her ears to the sounds behind the door. She asks if she can hear her voice on the tape. Better yet, can she have the tape? After we finish, we listen to our voices for a few minutes. It's funny and a little embarrassing. It doesn't sound like us.

This memory of Anita captures our impressions of the seven- and eight-year-old girls we listened to. Before talking to each girl in the second grade class, we observed these girls for a short time, watched them work together and ready themselves for recess and dance class. Their brightly painted pictures and projects lined the halls, claiming this space in the building as their own. Bringing these small bodies to rest even for a short period of time seemed almost unnatural, so

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used were we to seeing them in constant motion, both at work and at play.

Anita and her classmates speak of their thoughts and feelings about relationships in direct ways, describing their willingness to speak out to those with whom they are in relationship about bad or hurt feelings, anger, resentment, or frustration, as well as feelings of love, fondness, and loyalty. These seven- and eight-year-old girls say matter-of-factly that people are different, that they may disagree, and, as a result, sometimes people get hurt. While they speak about the importance of being nice, they openly acknowledge that sometimes they do not feel like being nice; they know that they can hurt others, and they speak about being hurt by others. In this sense, their relationships seem genuine or authentic.

These young girls tell stories of times when they refuse to take no for an answer. If they think someone is not listening, they will try again; and if that doesn't work, they can find creative, though perhaps disruptive, ways to be heard. Tuning our ears to the voices of eight-year-old girls in this study and to the stories they tell about relational conflicts, we begin with Diana, who says that she feels bad because her brother and sister keep stealing her mother's attention at dinner, interrupting her when she tries to speak. One night Diana's response to this problem was to bring a whistle to the dinner table. When she was interrupted, she blew the whistle. Mother, brother, and sister, she says, abruptly stopped talking and turned to her, at which point she said "in a normal voice, 'That's much nicer.'"

Diana's classmate, Karin, tells of a time when she was so upset with her teacher for not calling on her that she walked out of the classroom. She explains:

She picked someone else, and the same thing happened yesterday, so I walked out . . . I just lost my temper, I guess . . . I don't do it very often.

Was there anything you were thinking about?

When people walk in [to class] and see me and think that I got in trouble and that's why I was outside [the room]. And I wasn't

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in trouble. I just couldn't take it. So, I guess I just left . . . because I didn't want people to make fun of me. I wanted to answer something, because she always chooses someone else and for once I wanted her to have chosen me for a problem that was really hard.

So your decision was to walk out of the room. And do you think that was the right thing to do?

[Yeah]. Because I just don't think that—if I want to do something, I should be able to do it, and I just lost my temper. So I guess that's why I left . . . I think I should have my chance to do . . . a hard problem.

Does [the teacher] know why you left the room?

She wouldn't listen to me, but I told her, so I guess she knows.

Karin, like someone explaining simple laws of physics, says that because she said what she was thinking and feeling her teacher knows it—though she may have chosen not to listen. These girls carry with them a strong belief that they know what is going on in the relational world and are willing to act on their knowledge. To ignore her feelings and ideas is a mistake, Melissa warns, "Because maybe you have something important to say . . . and if they don't listen to you, then they may miss out on something."

These seven- and eight-year-old girls blow the whistle on relational violations, such as interrupting, ignoring, hurting people's feelings, by dramatizing their experiences. Diana's whistle recreates in others what she feels when she is interrupted. By leaving the room, Karin suggests she might as well not be in class when her repeated efforts to answer a question are not attended to. These girls interrupt the surface calm and quiet of daily life with their insistence on saying what is happening between people. Tracy, who understands her parents' inattention and at times is even willing to make excuses for it, draws the line at a certain point. "I understand they're busy, but . . . if it was really important, I would have to say, grab them . . . even if they wouldn't listen to me then, I would be really mad . . . if it was really important." If "my mom . . . doesn't answer," Lidia explains, "I have to yell. Then she gets to hear me. I mean, I want her attention . . . I wouldn't have yelled . . . if she

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had listened." The capacity for these eight-year-olds to be openly angry—to be "really mad"—to be disruptive and resistant, gives them an air of unedited authority and authenticity, and reveals their simple straightforward relational desire to speak and to be listened to.

Yet these young girls are already intensely aware of the reactions of others to their voices and actions. Though she walked out of class, Karin is painfully aware of what her classmates will think and say about her: She fears "that someone will make fun" of her, "whisper about" her, "laugh at" her; they will "think that I got in trouble and that's why I'm outside." And so while Karin and her classmates speak directly to each other and frequently act on their strong feelings, they are quick to point out the risks of speaking up or acting on impulse. They know that in order to be accepted or liked or included by others, they must also be "nice girls" who heed the advice of their teachers and parents and friends to "wait their turn," "be polite," or "be patient." Nice girls "make more friends," Tina confides to her interviewer. "It's better to be nice than not nice—you get more friends . . . and relationships."

Anticipating the reactions of adults, these seven- and eight-year-olds begin to monitor each other and report on "nice behavior." Word of some misdeed or "rude" remark travels fast among the girls, at times revealing the dark underside of their relationships. Indeed, the demand for nice and kind can be oppressive, a means of controlling and being controlled. "Whispering," "telling secrets," "making fun of," and "laughing at" others are ways to prevent girls from risking too much or acting in ways that are too threatening, too different. And so, in the face of pressure to not know or not speak, these young girls sometimes retract their initial strong feelings rather than face the painful consequences. Stories with "happy endings" then emerge, revealing the power of "nice and polite" to cover over strong feelings and mask conflict. Lauren, for example, begins to tell her interviewer about a time when she was treated unfairly at school. "I had [the computer] first," she says, "and I'd just left to put my spelling book away and stuff. And when I came back she was there." "Another girl?" her interviewer asks?

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Yeah, that's in my class, and she said, "Well, I got here first," and I'd say, "No I did." And so our teacher . . . said we couldn't do it unless we both do it or we agree on doing it together or just not do it for like the rest of the day, so we decided to do it together, and that meant a lot to me, so I said, "Thank you for letting me play with you," and I felt very happy when it was time to leave and stuff.

What is, at first, a story of unfairness and Lauren's direct confrontation with the girl who took her place at the computer is muffled, in part by the teacher's influence, and turned into a story of happy cooperation. Lauren soon reveals, however, that much of what she has told the interviewer about her own actions and the actions of the teacher in this account actually took place in her thoughts. Her decision to cooperate, she tells the woman who sits with her, was in response to an inner dialogue that includes both her awareness that speaking politely will reflect well on her, and her appreciation of the wishes and the power of her teacher:

I said to myself, "Well, why don't I just ask her if I can?" I'd say, "May I please have the computer?" and she'd say, "No." And so the teacher would come and tell us that—those things—and that's why I decided to do it together, and she decided to do it together . . . cause I wouldn't want to get in trouble and have the teacher yell at me.

Was the other girl happy with the solution, do you think?
Sort of . . . but after, when I said, "Okay. You can do it by yourself," she was very happy, and she said, "Thank you."

Not wanting "to get in trouble and have the teacher yell at me," Lauren capitulates to the anticipated wishes of the teacher, giving up her desire to work on the computer alone. Thus what we are led to believe is a polite and happy ending turns out to mean that the other girl is happy because she finally has the computer all to herself, and Lauren doesn't actually say how she is feeling. Lauren, it seems, lost her chance to work on the computer alone, and thereby gave up her feeling that she could or should have the computer. The teacher, in this case, makes it impossible for Lauren and her classmate to work out their conflict in a way that responds to Lauren's

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perceptions and feelings. It is as if what Lauren saw never happened, as if her feelings were unacceptable feelings.

Such stories reveal the second grade girls' clear recognition of pressure not to want what they want if it brings them into conflict with others. Yet underneath talk of cooperation, or perhaps in spite of such talk, Lauren clearly says what happened: "I said, 'Okay. You can do it by yourself.' She was very happy, and she said, 'Thank you.'" The teacher who involves herself in assuring happy cooperation and sharing between the girls presumably does not protest or even interfere with Lauren's decision to give up the computer, and give over her strong feelings.

Other girls, like Lauren, talk about giving over their strong feelings—feelings of frustration, anger, fears of abandonment—to "happy endings." They offer and retract their desires, reconsider or dismiss or reframe their feelings and thoughts in ways that cover over their initial reactions. Sandra tells of her feelings when her sister was born. "I felt like I was left out of the family . . . 'cause I didn't get any attention . . . when my sister was born . . . She's three." When Sandra told her parents how she felt, she says they said to her, "Well, you're older . . . and you don't need as much attention . . . because you have more privileges." Sandra then concludes, "Well, that's right . . . to look on the bright side." Sandra's conclusion suggests there is no place in such a reformulation for her initial feelings, her thoughts, her observations that she was sometimes left out of the family. The distinction between her feelings of exclusion and the glib solution "to look on the bright side" suggests she may hear in her parents' response a message about her feelings—that they are negative, unacceptable, or ineffective and may, in fact, lead her to be left out of the family, her worst fear. The "happy endings" heard from other girls seem more like wishful thinking on their part, something heard in a fairy tale, a pleasing and acceptable cover-for experiences of feeling left out and fears of being abandoned.

These young girls are certainly conscious of the power of adults to affect their lives—to control them or support them or punish them, to love them or abandon them—and often express strong

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anger in response to what they perceive to be abuses of power. Dana was furious when her ballet teacher told her to sit down for talking in class. Her dark eyes flashing, she exclaims, "Well, I think she should have listened to me. It's not fair . . . I think she should have listened to me, 'cause it isn't fair that she listened to the girl that . . . was talking in class, but she wouldn't listen to me . . . She does the thing where she doesn't listen to your half of the story, she does that to everybody. She just doesn't let you tell your half of the story." "What would happen if she heard your side of the story?" the interviewer wants to know. "Well, I think that she might have understood more," Dana replies, "and she might not have—I might not have had to sit out and stuff." Frustrated by her teacher's unwillingness to listen to her or take her explanation seriously, Dana is rendered ineffective by "the thing"—unable to speak on her own behalf. Dana and her classmates are angered at what seems to them to be the adult "thing"—cutting off relationship or rendering girls helpless and powerless in relationships by not listening, and thereby making it impossible for them to speak. These girls repeatedly reiterate their wish for honest conversation and dialogue, conversation that would not always be pleasant or "nice" but full of genuine disagreement and feelings.

These seven- and eight-year-old girls speak clearly and at times passionately about their feelings of friendship. Strong feelings of loyalty and love for friends are matched only by the anger and pain of fighting and disagreeing with them. Experiencing face-to-face conflict with friends makes these girls feel "sad"—more often than any other experience they describe, an emotion that seems appropriate to the feelings of loss they talk about. While these girls have little recourse for action, except perhaps to cry "unfair!" when adults treat them badly, when their friends do so they react by expressing strong feelings, by asking questions, or actively protesting. And yet, though they tell of hurt feelings or exclusion, anger, and frustration, they tell us they are less likely to react with physical violence than verbal outbursts. Words seem, in some ways, more powerful to them. When these second-graders do complain of violent acts or bullying behavior, they almost always speak of boys, most often their

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brothers. Telling about her relationship with her sister, Carrie compares her fight with her sister to her brother's fight with her sister: "And once when my brother was in a fight with my sister, and he was hurting her real bad, I got real mad and I didn't know what to do . . . I felt pretty mad at my brother for hitting her. Then I decided I would go tell mom, because he was hurting her more than our fight, the fight that she and I had." "How could you tell?" the interviewer asks her. "Because she was crying and stuff," Carrie responds, "I was glad I did that to get my brother off of her." Carrie's decision to tell her mother is based on the evidence of her senses; what she sees and hears leads her to judge that her sister's distress has gone beyond the usual. Other girls talk about the importance of paying close attention, of observing carefully, in determining the existence or extent of another person's pain. Part of knowing how much another hurts depends on remembering their own painful experiences as well as the knowledge of the other person gained over time and in relationship.

Tessa tells her interviewer about how a group of boys, friends from her neighborhood, taunt her and her girlfriend as they walk home from school. "They all went in a group," she says, "and me and my friend [were walking home] from school. They were being really mean . . . and they just ganged up on us . . . We didn't do anything to them." Her wish is that "we could all play together and play a game of tag or something," but in order for that to happen the group of boys would have to say "we're sorry." The boys don't comply, and Tessa tries to understand their behavior, even excuse it—"Maybe," she says, "they were jealous that they didn't have another friend"—though she remains both indignant and uncomfortable. The only other recourse she can imagine is a private conversation: "We could talk to one of the kids by himself and ask him to say 'I'm sorry.'" But, perhaps after measuring her discomfort and the unlikely possibility of such a dialogue, Tessa and her friend leave the scene. "We just ignored them . . . We went inside and played our game," she explains, since she suspects that to stay around would invite more verbal abuse—"Maybe they'd get a little madder, and they'd start calling us names again."

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Tessa, willing to give the boys every opportunity to explain their behavior, first imagines that a private face-to-face dialogue has the best chance of being effective, offering her an opportunity to reason with one of the boys. But after surveying the situation and deciding that conflict would seem only to create more conflict, Tessa and her friend move their game inside. Choosing to ignore—to not know—what the boys are doing, Tessa and her friend allow themselves to be displaced. And yet, at eight years old, they are clear about what has happened and why, and how they feel about the situation.¹

These seven- and eight-year-old girls are aware that another person's emotional hurt is not always visible at first glance, and their response may change as stories of hurt or meanness emerge and become known. They understand that people are different and that difference can be the basis for real disagreement, but they also experience difference as a part of the life of relationships. The willingness of these girls to change in a relationship, to grow to like someone, to create common ground in relationships for the sake of staying together seems to reflect what psychologists and sociologists have documented in girls' play—their willingness to change the rules of the game rather than to argue over differences.² And yet, this is not to say these girls will back away from open disagreement, only that they judge which disagreements are worth having. Consider Marianne's story:

There was someone that was a new girl and moved into someone else's house . . . and I didn't really like her that much, but my friend did, but then I learned to like her.

How did you learn to like her?

Oh, I just played with her a lot. It was because she always was like the boss, but then I told her, "Hey, I don't like you being the boss," and so, "And I know another friend who played with you before, and she doesn't like you being the boss." And then she stopped being the boss and I liked her.

Marianne, who has clear reasons for not liking the new girl, says that she expresses her feelings directly and openly to her. By explaining what it was that she did not like, she was able to initiate

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a process of change in the relationship which also changed her feelings for the new girl. Disagreement does not have to jeopardize relationships for these girls. And friends can be friends, even if they have different opinions about someone, as eight-year-old Lily explains:

Well, different people have different feelings, like . . . there's some girls that I don't like, and my friends like that girl and I don't. I have this one friend who knows this really mean kid, and she—my friend—just because I like her, and I don't like that one certain person, and she does, it doesn't mean that the other person can't be friends with her, like, but, you know, different people have different feelings.

Differences aside, name calling, whispering or keeping secrets, laughing at someone or poking fun, are viewed as mean or hurtful behavior, behavior many have been victimized by and so, it seems safe to assume, behavior in which many engage. Often those who act in such ways are able to do so because they have some kind of advantage in status or power, such as some of the girls in Dana's class who, she explains, "have a lot of friends. I mean they're older than most of the kids, and they probably think they could, should, rule the whole class, and they're really mean, and they call everybody names and stuff, and they make fun of people just because they're older."

In addition, these seven- and eight year-olds are adept at telling the difference between a sincere and an insincere response by watching and listening for clues. Isabel tells of a time when she knew her friend Lori was not paying attention to her. Lori was helping Isabel's little brother retrieve a ball he had thrown on the garage top while Isabel was trying to tell her something she felt was very important. "[Lori] was too busy," Isabel explains, "and, like, I knew that she wasn't listening to me because I told her something bad, and she said, 'That's nice.' And I knew she wasn't paying attention to me . . . I was telling her about . . . my dog was gone, 'cause I forgot to tell her that he ran away . . . But I said, 'Lori, Stanley ran away,' and she said, 'That's nice.'" Isabel knew that Lori

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"would be sad like if she was listening to me" since "she liked Stanley too, 'cause she had a dog of hers and it got cancer and then it—they had to put it to sleep." Had Isabel said, "Look, I have something bad to tell you" or "Listen, 'cause it's something real bad," she is confident Lori would have really listened—"She would say, 'What?' and then she would turn to me and listen."

These seven- and eight-year-old whistle-blowers call attention to violation and relational wounds. In their interviews they speak directly and clearly about what is happening in relationships. They believe that what they have experienced and seen is happening and is important to listen to. When their wishes, ideas, or feelings are not attended to, they can become resistant, frustrated, and openly angry. Speaking out about what feels bad or wrong in relationships sometimes means they risk relationships, and they speak not without awareness, even fear, that they will be hurt, excluded, or ridiculed for doing so.

While these girls speak poignantly about their understanding of others, they do not have a romantic or idealized view of relationships. In fact, they are quick to point out that in their relational world people can be hurt greatly by whispering, telling secrets, or poking fun; just as people can be responsive and loving, they can also be thoughtless and cruel. These girls speak about differences between people as fact and expect that, because people have different thoughts and feelings, they will disagree.

Speaking openly about how they feel and what they think about themselves and their relationships, however, brings these girls into conflict with adults—especially adult women who have learned to cover over their own feelings and hide what they know. Listening to seven- and eight-year-old girls, we hear a beginning awareness that their teachers and parents—and in some instances even the girls themselves—use the injunction to "be nice" as a way to control girls' expression of feelings and thoughts and, in this way, to orchestrate their behavior to keep them from saying too much or speaking too loudly. The fact that these girls voice the full range of their feelings and thoughts and hold to their experiences of relationship is a sign of their psychological health.

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In summary, the seven- and eight-year-old girls we listened to only partially reflect more common descriptions of children their age: while they can be egoistic and concrete in their thinking—the most common view put forth by psychologists in this culture—they also reveal psychological capabilities we have not seen explored fully.³ These young girls know how they feel and what they want; they also know what others want them to do and be and so they anticipate others' reactions to their voices. They have a capacity for careful attention and concern for others, as well as strong voices and a clear sense of both the pleasures and the pains of relationships.

Having listened to this chorus of lively, outspoken, psychologically astute seven- and eight-year-olds, we turn to three girls—Jessie, Sonia, and Lauren—to be our guides through childhood. We choose these three girls because they represent three very different pathways, three separate journeys through childhood, and yet even in their distinctiveness we can follow the broad outlines of similarity. Jessie is European-American; at eight she is both somewhat shy and boldly expressive; she is direct about her strong feelings. Sonia is African-American; as she talks to a white woman about what is happening in her relationships, she is wary, quiet, but clear as she narrates the difference between what she feels and what others, including her interviewer, seem to expect. Lauren is European-American; she is lively and outspoken, a performer whose physical and emotional energy are difficult to contain, even as she herself anticipates how others will react and tries hard to control herself. As we follow these three girls from one year to the next, we wonder what they will come to know about themselves and their relationships over time, and how what they experience might inform our understanding of girls' and women's development.

Jessie: The Tyranny of Nice and Kind

Jessie, a slender eight-year-old with wavy brown hair and white skin, exemplifies with particular clarity the characteristics of the other eight-year-old girls in this study by offering a poignant description of girls' willingness to voice difficult and painful feelings.⁴ Jessie talks

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with her interviewer about her feelings when "sometimes my friends have friends over when I'm playing with them and I feel left out." Such exclusive treatment is unfair, she says, "because you should like all your friends together. If you had a friend over, you shouldn't just play with one and leave the other one out . . . and feeling down and out of the game." What could she do to make things different? the interviewer wants to know:

I would just go over to them, and go in the other friend's ear, I would kind of take them over somewhere else where the other of her friends couldn't hear, and I would say, "This is really making me feel bad, for leaving me out. Can you please play with me too?" That "I will go home if you don't, cause this isn't any fun for me, just sitting here."

Have you tried that?

Yeah, but one friend just said, "Just go home."

Jessie does go home, but she does not let the issue rest. "It takes me a couple of weeks to understand it," she says, but in time she devises an elaborate plan to teach her friend a relational lesson by treating her friend the way she was treated, to make them, as she says, "even." In the end, she explains, "I would have a friend over and also have her over . . . I would show her how I felt." For Jessie, being "even" meant her friend would know the bad feelings of being left out. "If we're even," Jessie says—meaning the friend knows what she knows about exclusion and abandonment—"then we could start being friends again."

As we have heard, Jessie and her classmates describe a human world in which feelings are spoken directly. These eight-year-olds voice a full range of human feelings and thoughts. What can we learn if we begin here with Jessie, in her directness and with her strong feelings and with a sense of her own authority, and follow her as she moves from one year to the next in order to see what she comes to know about herself and how her relationships change over time?

Jessie, like the other eight-year-olds in this study, is aware that people are different, that they may disagree, and, as a result, some-

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times people get hurt. Jessie's appreciation of differences is apparent when she responds to a common relational problem initially posed by D. Kay Johnston in the form of an Aesop's Fable⁵—a story about a large and stubborn porcupine who has been invited to spend the winter by a family of well-intentioned moles, who then discover that living with a porcupine is essentially unbearable.

It was growing cold, and a porcupine was looking for a home. He found a most desirable cave, but saw it was occupied by a family of moles. "Would you mind if I shared your home for the winter?" the porcupine asked the moles. The generous moles consented, and the porcupine moved in. But the cave was small, and every time the moles moved around they were scratched by the porcupine's sharp quills. The moles endured this discomfort as long as they could. Then at last they gathered courage to approach their visitor. "Pray leave," they said, "and let us have our cave to ourselves once again." "Oh no!" said the porcupine. "This place suits me very well."

Jessie says, "The mole is asking him to leave, but the porcupine doesn't want to, because the porcupine is comfortable; but [the mole] keeps on forcing him and [the porcupine] keeps on saying no." "Porcupines and moles," Jessie decides, "shouldn't be together because they make a really bad combination." And so it would be best, she says, to make the cave larger and to "make bigger paths" for the animals to walk. While Jessie's solution would make the animals happy and the forest "settled," it also takes the differences between the animals, and the ways they are hurting one another, seriously: "They could make their own tracks," she concludes, "they could make their own paths."

A full year later, at nine, Jessie returns to the story of the porcupine and the moles. We begin to hear her speak about what she thinks and feels in different voices, voices that co-exist but do not at this time speak directly to each other. In one voice Jessie says she would have the moles say to the porcupine, "I'm sorry, but please get out. This is my house. I'm not going to let you in anymore, so leave." And then, in another quite different voice, she ponders the situation: "It's the only shelter they have. If it's snowy

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they would be so cold and they would freeze . . . and they can have a hole to be warm in . . . it's like having a baby in your house."

Jessie's world is one of complicated feelings, a prism of feelings, from anger and feeling wretched to love and warmth—"like having a baby in the house"—a world of emotions that has a sense of edge and color and distinction. She holds all these feelings, moving from one to the next, speaking in one voice then another. Along with these voices we hear what sound like disembodied lines from parents and teachers that drop into Jessie's ears and into her world about what to know and what not to know, what to say and what not to say: "Cooperating is better than fighting," Jessie says, referring to the porcupine and the moles, and with this blanket statement the complexity of what she has felt and thought about their differences seems to dissolve. In the end, she summarizes, "You should be nice to your friends and communicate with them and not . . . do what you want." And her wish for the porcupine and the moles is that they "are happy and they don't have to fight anymore. They could just be friends and they could stay like that forever."

But despite this idealized vision, which covers over strong feelings and earlier distinctions, conflict and disagreement are commonplace in Jessie's relationships, part and parcel of the ordinary. As Jessie says of herself and her best friend in third grade, "We usually get in fights, because she wants to do one thing and we don't know what to do and we get all bored. And then finally she goes, 'Are we friends?' So we are and we try to find something to do."

Jessie has changed in subtle ways between second and third grade. As one might guess, she is more articulate, she describes her thoughts and feelings more vividly. Yet, there is an emerging awareness of the knowledge and the danger in authentic encounters. Having taken in the message "cooperating is better than fighting," Jessie begins to equate fighting with trouble from authorities, with anger, meanness, and noise, and cooperating with praise, niceness, calmness, and quiet. She is, it seems to us, undergoing a bit of ear and voice-training. Though she claims that people "can keep their different ideas and . . . still be friends," she struggles with disagreement, recognizing early the dangers in speaking directly or express-

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ing anger. Jessie is now sometimes willing to be nice to make the relationship "calm" and her friends happy so they will play with her, rather than because she feels like being nice. "Cooperating" in this way is better, she says, because "you don't get into fights and it's just calm and so it is not noisy and you can play." The interviewer asks her to explain:

Why don't you feel good about [getting into fights]?

That you are losing a friend and that you are both unhappy.

If you said, "no" to her, "I don't want to do that," would you risk losing her?

Yah.

How do you know that she might go away?

Because she always, well, I am not going to lose her for a long time, because always the next day at school we hug and say we are ready and say hi, because we both forget about it. I think I would lose her because she's very easy to lose, you know. If I say no and I walked out the door, she would come and drag me in again and she would start screaming at me. And she would start crying and I don't want that to happen.

The irony of this story, it seems to us, is that Jessie has not described a friend who is "easy to lose" at all. In fact, if Jessie were to say no, her friend would not let her go; "she would come and drag" Jessie in the room again and "start screaming" at her. Jessie, it seems to us, has presented the most authentic and gripping scene of relationship yet, and has almost in the same breath ruled it out as an example of relationship at all. Yet, at the same time, we can understand her fear. The risk is real and substantial to her. Losing a friend is "horrible," Jessie says, "because you wouldn't have a best friend to play with all the time . . . and I don't think you could find a friend just like that person."

Indeed, in her third-year interview, Jessie is consumed with what is and is not a relationship. Her strong feelings, spoken directly and with passion, can be dangerous since they are disruptive. Signs of disruption—anger and noise, getting riled up and anxious—are cause for being "ignored," left out, abandoned. Repeatedly Jessie speaks about her discomfort with anger, with noise, with yelling,

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and about the value of "talking quietly," of being "calm," and of dealing with disagreements in private. This is a good way to handle disagreements, she says, "because it doesn't get anybody mad . . . everybody doesn't get all riled up . . . so that you are mad for the rest of the day and your mom starts yelling at you because you are so mad and you get anxious and do things you are not supposed to do." From such situations, Jessie says, "I learn to agree with people . . . and don't get nervous and all riled up because it will just start more trouble." And so what once were the signs of authentic relationship for Jessie, the possibility of feeling another's pain as well as their joy, and the potential for difference and disagreement, are now withdrawn as too dangerous and risky.

Jessie, now eleven and in the fifth grade, responds to the porcupine and moles fable. Whereas, at eight, Jessie considered that perhaps the moles and porcupine were "a bad combination," at eleven, Jessie wishes to make the hole bigger because "it would be nice to have a neighbor in the house." It would be possible, she says, for the moles to say to the porcupine, "I really don't want you here . . . and tell him to get out," but that would not be "a nice way to do it . . . because the porcupine would feel left out." What sounded like advice from adults at nine—"cooperating is better than fighting"—is replaced by a stronger message with a similar ring: "Always be nice to a friend." Unlike her self at eight and nine, Jessie at eleven no longer mentions the moles' discomfort as they are struck by the porcupine's sharp quills, but speaks only about the porcupine's loneliness and hurt feelings. The moles no longer say no to hurt or inattentiveness; they do not confront the porcupine directly or with any sense of anger or indignation. Differences and potential conflict between these animals who once "made their own tracks" is now covered over by a sole concern for niceness and neighborliness as prerequisites for friendship.

Speaking up about her feelings, no problem at all for Jessie at eight, and of some concern for her at nine, is now, at eleven, the basis for real trepidation. If a girl doesn't like another girl, Jessie says, she "should pretend that [she] likes her." The source of this new fear is the "perfect girl." In white middle-class America she is

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the girl who has no bad thoughts or feelings, the kind of person everyone wants to be with, the girl who, in her perfection, is worthy of praise and attention, worthy of inclusion and love. Jessie describes her as the girl who is "so good in math." Other girls describe her as the girl who draws perfectly. The girl who speaks quietly, calmly, who is always nice and kind, never mean or bossy. The girl, Jessie implies, she wished she could say she hates. And sometimes, Jessie says, "your attitude just goes bonkers because you are really jealous of [her]."

In the presence of the perfect girl, Jessie, who has strong feelings, who says, "Sometimes I have to just get my anger out of me," cannot speak, since strong feelings, spoken or acted-on, carry severe consequences. Saying the wrong thing or saying something in the wrong way, Jessie says, is "terrifying." Asked to tell about a time when she wanted to say something but didn't, Jessie explains:

When you are really mad at somebody and you want to say something really bad, but you can't, you just can't. It's like it comes out of your mouth and you forget what you are going to say . . . or I don't say something because . . . somebody says a real good idea and everybody agrees and mine is like the exact opposite and you don't want everybody to leave you out and say, "Oh, that's horrible! Why, we don't want to do that." Because you sort of feel bad when that happens.

Can you say more about that?

Sometimes when you have friends and they are being real nice to you and you are trying to be nice to them and usually when you are nice to them, they are nice to you and sometimes when other people say something that everybody likes, and they say, "Oh, that's a good idea," and you have the exact opposite, you feel like "Oh oh, they really won't want me to do this, or they won't want me in the club since I don't have good ideas," and you sort of get afraid to say it. And sometimes you get afraid to say things like "I hate you" when you're mad at somebody.

Why are you afraid to say that?

Because a lot of times they get really mad and it really terrifies you because you feel like they are going to tell somebody and they are going to get almost the whole class on her side and it would

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be one against, I don't know, ten.
In those situations, how do you feel?
I don't feel very good. I feel like I'm making this whole fight, that it is really turning out to be a mess.

Jessie's choice-to-speak will upset the precarious "nice and polite" scene with her friends—will, in fact, reveal it as a false scene since people will not be nice to her if she is not nice to them, that is, if she says what she thinks. This gives her "a weird feeling," makes her "confused sort of," and "really terrifies" her. Jessie, who at eight would tell her friend "this is making me feel bad, I'm going home," is now at eleven "afraid to say" what she thinks, "terrified" of what might happen if she says what she feels.

Thus, what seemed matter-of-fact, ordinary life to Jessie at eight—people play and people get angry, they have strong feelings, people wish to speak and expect to be heard—has become momentous to Jessie at eleven. Faced with the potential to "upset the whole class" and afraid of being ignored, embarrassed, ridiculed, Jessie carefully chooses when to speak. Talking about a time when "a whole group of friends are mad at one of my really good friends," Jessie illustrates the conflict other girls describe between speaking up or choosing to remain silent. If she chooses to stay out of the disagreement, Jessie risks herself and her feelings. She says, "I usually just stay away and I know how I act when that happens, I can tell . . . I am not really me. I can tell when it's not really [me]." On the other hand, if she stays with herself and her feelings and gets involved in public confrontation, she risks the "terrifying" feelings of starting fights she cannot stop.

When can Jessie afford to stay with herself and speak? When should she distance herself and "stay out of it," "forget it," choose to "agree" for the sake of relationships with others? Like her other classmates, Jessie shows an emerging propensity to separate what she knows and loves from what she believes she ought to do in order to be seen as cooperative, kind, and good—the kind of girl others, she thinks, want to be with. If she stays with what she wants and says what she thinks, she fears she may be the cause of social

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chaos, abandoned by others in her undesirable feelings, her messiness. If she "pretends" and "agrees" and is nice when she does not feel nice, she abandons herself, her thoughts and feelings, and becomes, as Jessie says, "not really me."

Jessie, like the other girls her age in this study, seems caught between speaking what she knows from experience about relationships and increased pressure to negate this knowledge for an idealized and fraudulent view of herself and her relationships—the view rendered credible by the possibility of being a perfect girl. In a world of cliques and in-groups, the image of the perfect girl is powerful—being her can assure Jessie of inclusion, love, attention. The terrifying or terrorizing nature of this image lies in its power to encourage Jessie to give over the reality of her astute observations of herself and the human world around her—or at least to modulate her voice and not speak about what she sees and hears, feels and thinks, and therefore knows. Voice-training by adults, especially adult "good women," undermines these girls' experiences and reinforces images of female perfection by implying that "nice girls" are always calm, controlled, quiet, that they never cause a ruckus, are never noisy, bossy, or aggressive, are not anxious and do not cause trouble, and also by implying that such girls exist and are desirable. And so Jessie becomes preoccupied with what is and is not a relationship, consumed with the difference between what she knows from experience and what is taken increasingly by other girls and by the adults around her to be reality.

This impending division that arises for Jessie, between what she feels and thinks, and therefore knows, and what is said to be reality, leads her to pay close attention and to describe the relational world like a naturalist, carefully portraying the changes caused by her every move, revealing with remarkable clarity the motives and intentions and perspectives of others, and also listening to the way this world is named and described. Yet the model of the perfect girl threatens to keep Jessie from seeing what she is looking at and listening to what she is hearing.

And so we mark losses and gains for Jessie over time. While she is more subtle, cognitively more sophisticated in her understanding

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of herself and the social world, Jessie is also more willing to forget what really happened or to say that what she knows through experience probably didn't happen, than to feel out of touch with what others say is reality. Jessie, at eleven, is still able to name the spectrum of feelings and hear the range of voices. But she is able to integrate these voices and these feelings and thus to blur their distinctiveness. At eleven she is more cautious, more aware of what it means to know what she knows, perhaps more likely to stay in relationships in which she is hurt, more willing to silence herself rather than to risk loss of relationships by public disagreement.

Sonia: Genuine Relationship, Real Conversation

Wiggling about in her chair, swinging her legs back and forth, eight-year-old Sonia first looks at her hands, then glances around the classroom, and finally focuses her large dark eyes on the woman asking her questions. "Can you tell me about a time when you didn't know what to do?" her interviewer asks her. "I don't get that," Sonia replies. "Any times when you didn't know what was the right thing to do?" the woman asks again. A pause, and then Sonia begins, "When I pick someone, like to do something, I don't know who to pick . . . Sometimes I just pick . . . I don't know . . . sometimes I just pick people that I don't like so I don't have to like decide who I'm going to pick." "Now why would you do that?" the woman wants to know. "I don't know," Sonia responds. Her interviewer asks whether other girls also find it hard to pick between friends. "I don't know," Sonia again replies. "I never watch them."

In this way Sonia, one of two African-American girls in her second grade class of twenty-seven, begins her interview. The woman who sits with her, like all the teachers and administrators in the school, is white, and Sonia, tiny in comparison with her classmates, reveals in a rather shy and quiet way a modicum of wariness and resistance to the questions she is being asked. "I don't get that," Sonia responds to the first question, and as the interview proceeds she sprinkles phrases like "I don't know . . . I don't know" or "I don't get the question" throughout the interview, creating in

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her soft-spoken but determined manner a sense of space, of distance, between herself and the woman who interviews her.

Yet as we listen we find that Sonia does know, though she seems uncertain about whether or how much she wants to tell this woman. She goes on to explain the tortuous nature of her dilemma: who to pick when there is no choice that will keep her from being left out or talked about by the other girls in her class. "They tell secrets, like mean things about me, so that's why I just don't pick any of them," she says. "And if I don't pick any of them, they tell secrets too." "And these are your close friends? What do you think about that?" her interviewer wonders, trying to understand the nature of such friendships but also, perhaps, shying away from the logical next questions: "Why do they treat you this way? Why are they mean and what are they saying about you?"—questions that might raise painful feelings and bring to the surface what Sonia experiences and knows about being a black child in this mostly white school. "Well," Sonia responds—offering, in kind, only the slightest hint of what might be going on with these so-called friends or perhaps pointing to her means of self-protection—"they're not really, really, really close."

As Sonia's interviewer reads to her the porcupine and moles fable—a story about differences and, for some who hear it, a story about the painful feelings of being hurt or excluded—Sonia continues to move about in her chair, listening and yet visibly unsettled. "What do you think the problem is here?" the interviewer asks, referring to the conflict between the animals. Identifying with the moles and speaking in a direct, straightforward way that echoes other eight-year-old girls in her class, Sonia says, "I would just tell [the porcupine] the truth, that your pines are scratching me, and we don't like that." "And . . . if the porcupine says, 'No, I'm not going to leave?'" the interviewer wonders. "I would just say, 'If you don't, we'll push you out.'"

In the safety of this imagined fable Sonia speaks directly and frankly, perhaps having the animals say what she wishes to say but feels she cannot to the girls in her class who whisper and tell secrets about her: "I would just tell [them] the truth, that your [words] are

[hurting] me, and [I] don't like that." For Sonia, playing the role of the uncomfortable moles living in a closed space with an abrasive porcupine, there is a limit to the pain she will endure. If necessary she would push the intruder out of the cave and admonish him for his short-sightedness—"You should have found a home in the springtime that you could've stayed in the wintertime." Perhaps recalling her own experiences of exclusion, Sonia would, however, treat the porcupine with a measure of "kindness": "I'd give him a blanket and some food." But then Sonia pauses, and in a voice that does not seem to reflect what she has said about her feelings and her experience—that sounds to us like the voice-over-her-voice Jessie, too, has taken in, a voice that speaks of nice and selfless behavior—Sonia says to her interviewer, "because if you're not kind to other people, you won't have any other friends."

Real life for Sonia is similar to the life she imagines in the fable. Sometimes people are kind and listen, sometimes they hurt others and are unfair. "Sometimes," Sonia confides—perhaps wondering if this woman who sits with her will listen to her astute observations of the relational world—"sometimes I get in fights with other people, and the teacher blames me when other kids start it." Again her interviewer does not invite Sonia to speak the unspeaken—to say how this feels or why she thinks the teacher responds this way. Instead of staying with Sonia's experience, the woman—who is a good woman and a good researcher—dutifully recites the next question as it is written on the paper in front of her: "Can you tell me about a time when that happened?" Sonia, perhaps sensing that this experience may not be very much different from the experience she had with her teacher—that here, also, her feelings may not be heard or responded to—replies simply, "I can't remember."

Instead Sonia shifts the focus of her complaint from her teacher to her classmates and, in a move both creative and astute, introduces the word she knows has the greatest power to please the women in this private girls' school: "nice." When other girls are mean to her, or when they start fights, Sonia says, "I don't keep on fighting." Instead, she says "nicely": "I don't like to be in fights, so can we please stop fighting." If people continue to be "mean" or to

fight, Sonia—who earlier said she would push the defiant porcupine out of the cave rather than endure discomfort—now says, "I would just ignore them and just walk to another place." Outwardly aligning herself with the powers that be—with her interviewer, her teachers, the unwritten code of favorable behavior in her classroom—Sonia gains the approval of adults, in this case, the white women who wield power in her life. Adapt at reading subtle relational cues, Sonia learns that if she is to give these women no good reason to be dissatisfied with her, she will need to remain silent when her teacher blames her for things she did not do and she will have to ignore—that is, come not to know, or at least not to speak about—what is really happening around her and what she is really feeling and thinking.

A year later, we listen as the patina of niceness that settled over Sonia's second grade interview seems to permeate her third grade responses. Now nine years old, Sonia, her black curly hair pulled back with purple barrettes, again speaks with a white woman, and still she struggles to express her feelings of exclusion. This year Sonia is a member of a triangle; she and two girls in her class negotiate their friendship on a daily basis. "Well last week we were on the bus and Julie wanted to sit with me and then Melissa wanted to sit with me," Sonia explains, "and I didn't know who to sit with." Melissa "didn't want to sit with all three of us," Sonia adds. "So . . . I decided to, I don't know, I sat with both of them . . . I said why don't we all sit together?" "And what did they say?" the interviewer asks. "Well one said 'no' and one said 'okay' and I said, 'I can sit in the middle and then you can sit on both of my sides, so if you don't want to sit together you don't have to see the other person or talk to them.'" Putting herself in the middle, becoming both the nucleus of this relationship and a barrier to sight and sound, Sonia tries her best not to have anyone "sit alone" or hurt anybody's feelings, since "you could lose a friend and it could make them feel bad," or worst of all "they could tell everyone what you did . . . It would be a rumor," Sonia replies. "Then it would hurt my feelings . . . Because she said she would start a rumor."

Sonia is still terrorized by the whispering and secret-telling of the

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year before, afraid that someone—presumably one of these two friends—will “start a rumor” and “tell everyone” how Sonia hurt them if she fails to make them happy. And so when Sonia says, “I felt weird . . . I didn’t know what to do,” her feelings of confusion seem a realistic response to a truly perplexing relational scene, a scene in which things are not what they are called: friends are not really friends since they will spread rumors; relationships are not really relationships since one false move will jeopardize them. Unable to walk confidently on such a slippery surface, Sonia, echoing Jessie, says, “I could go bonkers.” Exasperated with the whole scene, Sonia figuratively throws her hands up in frustration and exclaims: “I will sit with anyone! Anyone can sit with me . . . I don’t want them fighting against me.”

Sonia, who the year before seemed to speak her strong feelings clearly and directly through the porcupine and moles, now brings her response to the fable in line with what she has been saying about her relationships. The porcupine, she explains, “should try and look for another place of his own, because then that wouldn’t bother anyone.” “Is that important?” her interviewer wonders. “Yes,” says Sonia, “because then no one will get mad at you, they won’t be complaining about you. And you can have your nice little home.” Not wanting to be a bother herself, to be complained about, to have people mad at her, Sonia seems willing, at least in the presence of the woman who interviews her, to be a living representative of the nice and kind.

But Sonia also seems to feel the pressure of her own difference in this school. The porcupine, she suggests, could “go with other porcupines, so then they couldn’t be scratching each other, because they all have quills, so it wouldn’t matter.” Hinting at what she knows about the dangers of being too different, Sonia tells her interviewer how important it is that the animals “agree on one thing” so “they don’t have to fight over it,” since if the porcupine got “real mad” he could overpower the moles. Ignoring their own discomfort and agreeing in this way—perhaps like Sonia agrees to let anyone sit with her—allows the moles to “have peace.”

Difference, for Sonia, is a relational issue with real consequences

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in her life. Like the porcupine and moles, people disagree about how they feel about different things and different people, but, Sonia states firmly to the woman who interviews her, no one should judge another person by “just how she looks.” “It doesn’t matter how you look, it just matters how nice you are,” Sonia says. The undercurrent of race, hidden well beneath the sugary glaze of nice and kind, now ripples to the surface. But the opportunity for real conversation comes and passes quickly. The woman interviewer does not ask what would seem, in hindsight, so obvious: If it doesn’t matter “how you look,” but “just . . . how nice you are,” why must Sonia, who is always so nice and kind, worry about rumors and whispers? If she is so nice and looks don’t matter, why are the other girls mean to her? Why does she “feel weird” or “go bonkers” in her relationships with her so-called “friends”? Is it possible that nice and kind aren’t enough, or worse, that they cover over disruptive feelings and dangerous thoughts? In the context of this interview—a conversation in which there are differences in power on a number of levels—nine-year-old Sonia is willing to profess her faith in perfectly nice behavior. Even if someone is mad, Sonia goes on to say to her interviewer, she should “try to make up still and try to get her to like her”; even if someone thinks another person is “not nice, she should still be nice to her.”

But covering over real feelings and thoughts can be extremely trying, as Sonia can attest. Revealing a wry sense of humor, Sonia describes another classmate, Wendy, who “tells me everyday a story about a half-hour long, and I try, I am listening to her, I half-listen, because she tells me these stories that I don’t know what she is talking about, so I listen, but if I ask her what is happening, she will tell the whole story over again.” Wendy not only goes on and on but, even worse, Sonia says, she “mumbles” and Sonia feels held hostage by these incomprehensible harangues. It’s hard because “I can’t hear what [Wendy] is saying,” Sonia explains, “I try to listen . . . because if I [ignore her] and she is talking to me, then she might get mad at me for not listening and she might say I’ll never listen to you or something . . . or she might act nice to listen.” Trapped daily in the confines of a car-pool driven by Wendy’s mother, Sonia

is truly held hostage to Wendy's stories. Not only would Wendy get mad if Sonia said, "I can't hear you, you are mumbling"—"I have said it before to her and she got mad"—but Wendy's mom would hear and she might get mad too because, as Sonia points out, "she doesn't like anyone telling [Wendy] what to do." And so, Sonia, who knows about nice appearances and doesn't want to appear not nice, suffers through her friends' stories "pretend[ing] that I am listening."

Thus Sonia at eight and nine, speaking to white women interviewers of the virtues of nice and kind, also points to the difficulty of being nice to her friends and still knowing what she knows, speaking what she feels and thinks, addressing what is happening around her. In a mostly white school, Sonia hints at her feelings about difference, but it is her commitment to the nice-girl image that her interviewer, her teachers, and her friends seem to respond to. But being always nice seems exhausting for Sonia, who feels the craziness of "friends" who say mean things, who threaten to spread rumors, or who fight against her when she says what she feels and thinks. Not wanting to bother anyone or to have anyone mad at her, Sonia walks a delicate line in which she can only hint at what she knows about differences in power and the consequences of disagreement.

Two years later, now in the fifth grade, Sonia sits in a chair across from her interviewer, fiddling with the silver bracelets she wears on her wrist. This year Sonia is interviewed by an African-American woman, and her voice carries the sound of a self-assured, clear-headed, and confident eleven-year-old. While her earlier interviews were peppered with such phrases as "I don't know" or "I don't care" or "I don't remember," Sonia no longer hesitates or resists—such phrases are all but absent in her responses this year.

Speaking about the porcupine and moles fable, for example, Sonia would now have the moles say directly to the pushy porcupine, "Beat it! Because he won't listen you've got to do something about it." If the porcupine still refuses to listen, Sonia adds, then the moles in "the middle of the night . . . could have shoved the porcupine out . . . so then he can't come back again." Unlike the

previous interviewers, the woman who talks with Sonia this year does not shy away from this response, does not imply that the moles' solution, carried out in the safety of darkness, is unspeakable or unknowable: "So in the middle of the night, just deal with it?" she asks Sonia. "Yes," Sonia replies.

This year, talking about relationships between friends who disagree, Sonia and her interviewer engage in a dialogue that has all the signs of a real conversation, a conversation in which two people seem genuinely interested in each other. When Sonia explains that people "have different feelings" because they have different "personalities," her interviewer asks, "How do you know this?" "Because everyone has feelings," Sonia says, bringing what she knows firmly into the interview. And later, when Sonia barely responds to the question, "Who is right when two people disagree?" her interviewer wonders aloud: "Is that even a good question to ask?" "Yes," Sonia replies, explaining her silence and perhaps assuring the woman of her interest, "because it makes you think."

This year Sonia is ready to talk about differences and what happens when people disagree, and she is willing to bring herself, her thoughts and feelings, into this relationship. "Not everyone in this school is going to like one person," she says with a kind of self-assurance absent in the previous two years, "different people like different people." "When people disagree about who they like, can they come to an agreement?" her interviewer asks. "Some people," Sonia explains, "that's why they have wars." "Tell me more about that?" the woman presses. "Why did you say that?" "Because," Sonia says, "people, one side, they don't agree with the other side."

Sonia, an African-American girl coming of age in a white society, casts disagreement in the light of war, making it a life-and-death issue, an issue of violence and control. And Sonia speaks openly about disagreement and hurt when she tells about unfairness in her life. It's unfair, Sonia says, now speaking what before she only hinted at, "when someone treats other people better than they treat you and they are your friends." Speaking about a time when "both my friends . . . were playing together and they weren't including me" and "I wanted to play, too," Sonia now tells of her refusal to retreat

in the face of such unfairness. "I started playing with them," she says, figuring if "I played] with them . . . then they [would] start to play with me." Her plan worked, but Sonia, reflecting on the scene, is aware that there was another way to solve the problem. "Somebody could have said, if somebody was left out, 'You are not playing with me at all.'" "Somebody like who?" her interviewer asks, again pressing Sonia to say what she knows about the benefits of power and privilege. "Somebody," Sonia says again, "somebody could say, 'you are not playing with me at all.'" Perhaps Sonia, who has had the experience of speaking and not being listened to, of saying what she feels and still being left out, takes a different route because she senses she is not one of the somebodies.

This story of unfairness and exclusion, the interviewer says—speaking into the tape recorder after Sonia has left the room—has really moved her. And it seems that Sonia, too, has felt the sense of an opening, of familiarity with this woman, since immediately after she finishes this story of exclusion she offers, in quick succession, two more. Now seemingly encouraged by an attentive listener, Sonia tells the story she began but did not finish the year before—a story about being blamed for something she did not do: "One time [I was] standing next to these people who always fool around . . . and [my teacher] thought it was me, and I didn't say anything." Afraid that this teacher, who, she says, "is real mean," would "yell at me for talking out in class" rather than listen to her side of the story, Sonia says she decided to say nothing. "What would you have said if you had spoken up?" her interviewer asks. "I would have said, 'That wasn't me who did it,' and that she shouldn't blame me until she knows who it is." Though Sonia is silenced by what sounds like the same old dilemma—"If I had said something, then she would yell at the other people and not me" and her friends would end up mad at her—for the first time we hear her say what she wants and what she would have said if she thought someone would listen.

Sonia then tells her interviewer the third story in her trilogy, a story that finally, openly, clarifies the struggle she has experienced in various forms since she was eight: how to stay connected with

herself—what she feels and thinks and what she knows from experience—and also stay in relationship with others. "The teacher," Sonia begins, "told me I couldn't read this one book . . . because she only likes [books that have won awards]." Sounding very much like eight-year-old Karin who feels she should be able to choose to answer a hard problem, Sonia adds, "I didn't want her to choose my books, I wanted to choose something." In conflict with her teacher, Sonia wonders, "should I tell my mom about this book that I want to read and [about] the teacher [or] should I not tell my mom." "It wasn't right for her to choose my books," Sonia says, but "I shouldn't have to go through getting a note and all that." "I understand," her interviewer responds. "How did you feel about it at the time?" "I was sort of mad at the teacher," Sonia explains, "because she chose my book . . . Because we should all have to read our own book, read a book and decide, and not have to read it like with the whole class . . . And I think it's important to know which books you want to read because I think it's important that you should choose which books you want to read because maybe you don't like one."

Though Sonia does not tell her interviewer what book she did not want to read or why, her resistance seems healthy, even admirable given that awards and prizes in this culture are more often handed out by those to those who would reflect and sustain the privileged status quo.⁷ Sonia's struggle, however, focuses less on her choice of books and more on whether or not to tell her mother about the conflict with her teacher: On the one hand, she says, "I wanted to choose something . . . and I shouldn't have to suffer with that book"; on the other, "I didn't want my mother to know . . . because she might get mad at the teacher and I didn't want her to get that mad."

For Sonia to speak what she knows and be heard—for her to stay in relationship with herself—she would have to bring her mother into this relational drama. But her mother, Sonia tells her interviewer, "has gotten mad at the teacher before," and to bring her mother into the conflict will put Sonia in a very difficult situation:

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"My mom doesn't get real mad, but she would call the teacher and then I'll get embarrassed because the teacher likes to say stuff, she would say something about it."

Afraid that the teacher would say something out loud in class, Sonia struggles not only with potential embarrassment but with the possibility of more rumors and whispers among her friends. And upsetting the teacher might mean "bad grades" and risking what she and her mother most want, for Sonia eventually to go to "the best college in the United States," where she can get "the best education." If Sonia's mother does not get involved, Sonia's voice may be drowned out; but if her mother responds and expresses her feelings, Sonia will be out of sync with her teacher and her classmates, left all alone to deal with her teacher's anger and her classmates' whispers when her mother leaves.

"I told my mother," Sonia confesses finally, "and she wrote a note to the teacher saying that it was a fine book . . . and I got to read another book that I liked." Doubling her voice and vision, Sonia tells her interviewer that she learned two lessons from this experience: One about the public world of school—in this teacher's class, she says, "I always have to choose award-winning books"—and one about herself, with the support of her mother—"I shouldn't let the teacher choose what I want."

Though Sonia begins her interview at eight years old less outspoken and bold than Jessie and most of the other girls in her class who are white, she is nonetheless determined and resistant. Through her silence and hesitancy Sonia effectively creates a space between her and the woman who interviews her. This woman, perhaps because of her own discomfort with Sonia or with what this young girl calls attention to and says is happening, does not ask Sonia what she is feeling when she is whispered about or excluded, does not seem to notice when Sonia chooses to ignore cruel behavior and silence herself in the face of conflict, does not comment when Sonia, in the name of nice and kind, decides not to speak her thoughts and feelings.

As Sonia at nine becomes less likely to speak publicly about what

LAUREN: PLAY AND COURAGE

is really happening in relationships, words like friendship and relationship begin to lose their meaning. Like the porcupine and moles, if she wants "peace" she will ignore what is happening and agree, she will be nice to people who are not nice to her, pretend to listen to long, boring stories mumbled to her, she will not start fights or fight back. But Sonia knows if she does these things, if she pretends not to know what she knows to be true from her experience, she could go bonkers.

It is not fully clear whether Sonia has simply become outspoken at eleven, whether the change from white women interviewers to a black woman interviewer has affected Sonia as much as it seems, or whether both things have happened. In any case, eleven-year-old Sonia sounds confident and clear. Speaking with an African-American woman who, like her mother, will listen to her—will respond more to her than to standard questions written on a page—Sonia says both what she wants and what she knows to be true from her experience. Though Sonia and her interviewer do not talk explicitly about race, about what it feels like to be left out or drowned out because of skin color, there is, it seems to us, a palpable communication, a shared knowledge. Sonia and her interviewer are moved by each other, by familiar language and experience, and when her interviewer breaks from the structure of the interview to respond to Sonia's feelings and thoughts, when she invites real conversation and genuine relationship, Sonia tells a story of courage and resistance in bold, straightforward terms.

Lauren: Play and Courage

When we meet Lauren she is kneeling on her wooden chair, her ankles and feet sticking out between the slats in the back, her body draped rather lazily over the table-top, one long red braid coiled on the table as her head rests on her outstretched arm. Within this group of second-graders, Lauren claims a rather substantial space for herself. She plays with a pencil through most of this preliminary group interview—she rolls it, drops it, taps it, first close to herself

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and then, impishly, closer and closer to the microphone placed carefully in the middle of the table. Grinning and rolling her eyes, moving about and poking those near her, Lauren is a handful.⁸

Later eight-year-old Lauren reveals her lively, creative mind as she speaks out in a clear, if not abruptly direct, voice to the woman interviewer who sits with her. Talking about her relationship with her mother, Lauren tells of a steady inner dialogue in which she tries to anticipate how her mother might respond to her direct questions: "I decide before I ask," Lauren explains. "I say to myself, 'yes' and 'no,' because I think maybe she'll say something . . . so . . . if I said like 'no' or something to myself, then I'd go and ask my mom, and after that, if she said, 'maybe,' then I expect it would be 'no.'"

Lauren, we discover, has been encouraged by her mother to consult with herself in this way, to anticipate others' reactions to her voice, to think before she speaks or acts. Lauren describes how this works when she is in charge of "bossing my sister around." "Sometimes my grandmother and my mom and dad are gone," Lauren explains, "and [my sister] like goes in places that she's not supposed to, and I say, 'No, you're not allowed,' and then I say to myself first, 'Well, I don't know, I'll have to think about it.'" But Lauren does more than "think" before she acts; she tells her interviewer about a book she refers to, a concrete reservoir for her continually evolving observations and impressions of right and wrong, good and bad: "Well, see, I write like a book for myself, when I have something to do and my parents go out, and my grandmother . . . and then what I do is I just read the book and stuff and I just talk to myself a while and then if my sister's going to do something . . . I find the right page and go and do what I wrote there, 'cause my mother helped me write that book."

In relationship with her mother, Lauren writes a book "of like what I should do while my parents are gone," a book in which she writes: "Decide first what you're going to do before you tell someone what you think or should do or something." Lauren's inner dialogue, which she makes so apparent to her interviewer, reveals how surely

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she has taken in her mother's voice and her mother's advice to think (of what her mother says to do) before she acts.⁹

But Lauren also remains very much her own person—lively, funny, dramatic. Swinging her legs back and forth in rhythm with the conversation, she tells of running "as fast as I could" after her sister: "I'd say 'Stop!' and she'd freeze like a statue." Later she creates a vivid impression of herself, her sister, and her grandmother together in a thunderstorm, "outside with our umbrella . . . we'd sit under the patio, and it would be so fun, we'd play games and all sorts of stuff." Lauren's pleasure in herself and other people is both physical and deeply relational. But her voice, firmly grounded in her experience and her senses, may be too bold, too uninhibited to go unchecked by those around her, and we begin to wonder whether Lauren's "book" is meant to guide her into herself, to help her hold onto her thoughts and feelings, or whether it is meant to keep Lauren in connection with what her mother wants her to do, a way to contain her lively and impulsive expression. Will it be possible, we wonder, for Lauren to stay in connection with herself—with her thoughts and feelings—while she is taught by her mother and other women how to read and anticipate the relational world she is entering?

Lauren's pleasure in her own voice and vision, her insistence on naming the relational world as she experiences it, and also the response her sometimes irreverent playfulness evokes in others, are apparent when she and the woman who interviews her talk about the porcupine and moles fable. The porcupine, like the "pencil-holder" Lauren has at home, has sharp quills and is prickly and, Lauren explains, is "stabbing" the moles, "hurting them with his things." It is striking to us that Lauren, like Sonia and Jessie, speaks clearly about the fact that someone is being physically hurt in this story. The mole and porcupine fable depicts a scene of domestic conflict—potentially a scene of violence. And eight-year-old Lauren, like many other girls her age in this study, names the physical hurt the moles experience—that they are being stuck by the porcupine's quills.

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The "uncomfortable" moles, Lauren tells her interviewer, "could have moved out" in response to the constant "stabbing." But, she adds, "since they had baby moles . . . they couldn't." Her interviewer, rather than respond to Lauren's depiction of the intolerable situation the moles and their babies face, echoes Lauren's mother by reminding Lauren of what she should know—in this case, the details of the story she has been told: "How do you know they have babies? . . . I don't think it says [that]," she says to Lauren. But Lauren holds to her position: "Because they have little ones!" she exclaims, and continues: "If I had babies, I would want them not to be pinched. . . . So, I'd just move out."

Lauren, who imagines the mother, father, and baby moles, and who is interested in playing with different solutions, also envisions that, like her pencil-holder's quills, which are, of course, pencils, the porcupine's quills are removable. "The porcupine, when he goes to sleep, could stick his pines in the dirt," she suggests. "Oh," her interviewer responds, seemingly caught off guard by such an unorthodox idea. "Stick his pines in the dirt!" Lauren squeals louder, delighted in this possibility and undaunted by the interviewer's hesitant reaction. In fact, Lauren's exuberance seems to increase as her interviewer hesitates, and when her interviewer asks for the one best solution to the problem, Lauren resists: "I'd say 'yes' and 'no' to this leaving!," she replies. "No" would mean that he should go out and 'yes' means that it would be very unkind, because it's very cold in the winter."

Although concerned with not being unkind, Lauren is not preoccupied with being nice and polite or, for that matter, with delivering a docile performance in her interview. People can disagree because, she exclaims, "it's a free world!" Confiding in her interviewer that she had overheard part of the porcupine and moles fable that very day in the toilet, "while I was changing," we hear in Lauren's voice a mix of candor and playfulness. Delivering her thoughts and feelings with gusto and also impishly playing to the edges of appropriate behavior, Lauren appears to enjoy being interviewed—or perhaps just being herself and speaking her thoughts and feelings—immensely.

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But so far as we can see up to this point, the women Lauren encounters, except perhaps her grandmother, do not seem willing to play with Lauren, to enter into a conversation that bends the rules or into a relationship that plays to the imagination. Unlike her grandmother, who plays games outside with Lauren and her sister in a storm, her mother and the interviewer choose to play by the rules rather than with Lauren. While her mother helps Lauren write a book of what she should know and her interviewer checks her voice and calls her back to the story, eight-year-old Lauren, who is, it seems, a little wild and a little hard to contain, reacts, maybe at times even overreacts, to this effort to control her.

Given Lauren's joyfulness and candor and also the response it calls forth, the story we described earlier, about her teacher and the computer, seems key to understanding the changes we see in Lauren, especially Lauren's realization that, while women are made uncomfortable by her outspokenness, they—her teacher and also her mother—will look away from Lauren's choice to give up what she wants. As Lauren learns to anticipate what her mother will say—to say to herself, in her head, her mother's response—she also has learned how her teacher responds to her if she says what she feels in the moment. Knowing from experience that speaking up will surely mean that she will "get in trouble and have the teacher yell at me," Lauren, in effect, silences herself—"decides before [she] asks" and, instead of asking, has the argument with the teacher in her head. This girl who was so open now talks about hiding her thoughts and feelings. And the teacher, like her mother and her interviewer, rewards Lauren's silence, calls it good behavior—"promise"—and seems not to notice what Lauren gives up by playing according to these rules.

A full year later Lauren, now nine and in the third grade, continues to be aware of how her actions interplay with the reactions of others; and though still very creative and lively, she seems increasingly concerned about how others, especially adults, will respond to her. Telling her interviewer what seems, on the surface, like a simple story of procrastination, when "I didn't have something done on time," Lauren points to a deeper struggle to find a way to

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say what she thinks and feels when she anticipates how others will respond to her.

I had this project and I didn't turn it in on time. And I was in trouble because it was on a Sunday and it was due the next day and it was time for my bedtime and . . . I told my sister and she told my mom and that got me in trouble that my mom wanted to yell and scream at me. So I started to work on it but . . . I couldn't really, I just didn't want to do it right at that moment, because I was really tired and it was really hard for me to tell her why I didn't do it over the weekend.

Lauren, who finds it "really hard" to explain to her mother why she put off her homework, makes a lot of excuses to her interviewer as well: Her mother, she says, "made me read all weekend . . . because she likes me to read biographies." Also, Lauren quickly adds, "I forgot all about it." Moreover, she complains, "when I start it . . . it always turns out bad, whatever I think of." Yet following this string of excuses, Lauren suddenly shifts and explains her procrastination in a direct voice that sounds more genuine, more simple, and, perhaps for these reasons, more persuasive: "It's like, I really didn't want to do it right at that minute . . . I just really didn't want to do it at that point and it was like really dumb to me to do it and I really didn't like to."

In this moment, Lauren's resistance to what she sees as a "really dumb" assignment is clear, and she contemplates speaking her feelings straightforwardly to her mother and even telling her teacher what she wants to tell her: "I have so many lessons a week that I want to tell my teacher that I might turn in something late. But," Lauren adds, anticipating her teacher's response as she did her mother's, "I know she would come to me and say, 'You will just have to turn it in on time,' so I don't say it and I try to get things in on time." From past experience Lauren concludes that it is useless to say what she feels and thinks and does not speak. And she also knows that doing the assignment on time, in spite of her feelings and thoughts, means she won't "get a bad grade" and "my parents

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will be proud of me," and "I can go somewhere of my own choice . . . like to Burger King or Wendy's." In the plethora of good grades and burgers, no one seems to notice that Lauren doesn't say what she wants; no one seems to know what she has not said—eventually, we might assume, not even Lauren. Burying her feelings about the "dumb" assignment and also her growing "rage" at her sister for telling her mother, Lauren describes a reality in which, once again, like with the computer, selflessness pays—at least as far as she can tell from adults' responses to her selfless behavior.

But Lauren's capitulation or self-silencing seems only surface deep. Unable to speak directly and openly, since holding her own becomes truly difficult right now and costly, Lauren stays with her feelings and thoughts and finds other, less direct ways to speak, such as procrastinating. Initially "really shook up" about her sister's indiscretion and unable to speak her feelings directly, Lauren irritates her father and mother by doing what's she's asked very slowly, and later, in private, "shakes" and "pinches" her sister. Though she covers her actions and voice to give the appearance and sound of happy cooperation, Lauren's real feelings show through.

As the interview progresses, it is perhaps not surprising that Lauren characterizes herself in the way she might imagine others characterize her when she insists on speaking her thoughts and feelings: as a troublemaker. Talking about the porcupine and moles fable now, at age nine, she decides that the porcupine "was causing so much trouble with the moles." When Lauren personalizes the story, saying, "I would listen to the moles and help them move [out] if they wanted to," her interviewer becomes curious. "Who are you?" she asks. "The porcupine," Lauren responds. "And the moles would be uncomfortable and they would want to move, just to get away because they already know that I have sharp quills and I would scratch them and they would do anything [not] to lay near or to sit or be next to him."

Identifying herself with the porcupine—"because," as she says, "usually sometimes I am really obnoxious, like a porcupine is"—Lauren seems to see herself as an irritant, a troublemaker, literally,

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as the one doing the poking. She also refers to the porcupine, surprisingly, as "him." She does not think of having the porcupine remove his quills or move out—now the troublemaker stays rather than leaves. Yet Lauren still struggles with what it means to stay with her thoughts and feelings in the midst of relational conflict. "If the moles were unhappy, I would be 'Fine,'" she begins. But as she has learned to do, Lauren then stops herself, perhaps in anticipation of the interviewer's response, and recites what sounds like a sentence from the book her mother helped her write: "I would just think of it for a minute and say to myself, 'Why don't I just stop being obnoxious and treat that person like they would treat me?'"

By being herself and staying in genuine relationship, by not leaving in the face of conflict but saying what she feels and thinks, Lauren has reason to believe others will find her abrasive, obnoxious, insensitive to their needs. And people do seem happier when Lauren does not say what she feels—the girl who took her place at the computer, her teacher, her parents, even her interviewer. But Lauren finds it difficult to give over her thoughts and feelings. In the face of such pressure, switching back and forth between being herself and being the porcupine, Lauren pleads the "obnoxious" porcupine's case: "I could have moved out but I would be in cold weather, like sitting there in the snow and I'd be cold and I would die because I think that porcupines are cold-blooded . . . I'd freeze and maybe I would die." Staying in the cave, in the midst of this relational conflict, is now, it seems, a matter of life and death for the porcupine and for Lauren. And yet to stay Lauren risks being called, and calling herself, "obnoxious" and a "troublemaker" and "him."

Still the pressure to be less trouble seems so great. "I was just thinking," Lauren adds, bringing in moral language like a protective shield to cover over the conflict she had just so vividly described—"I was just thinking of a way for both of us to be happy and to live like we should during the winter." In the wake of this sudden shift to nice and kind, we wonder if the porcupine has learned what

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Lauren knows, and what Jessie and Sonia also suspect by age nine: that it is better not to speak, to pretend things are fine when they are not, to act as if nothing has happened—especially maybe if you are a girl.

Two years later, eleven-year-old Lauren, her thick red hair pulled back in a pony-tail, her socks bunched around her ankles, sits with a different woman interviewer. Playing with a plastic flower—taking it apart and putting it back together—she begins her interview talking straightforwardly about the porcupine and moles. The moles "need their space" to "eat and walk," she now explains to her interviewer, so they "could either throw [the porcupine] out" to "live by itself," or "they could say 'get out of my house.'" Sure, Lauren says, it would be "bad" if the moles "just kicked him out . . . in the open to freeze half to death," but, she adds—creating space in the conversation for her own voice—"I wouldn't care." "You wouldn't care?" the interviewer asks. "Well, see," Lauren explains, "I'm not an animal . . . and I don't even see porcupines because they're not even near where I live . . . I don't even know what one looks like."

Lauren who, at eight, compared the porcupine with her pencil-holder and, a year later, identified herself with this troublesome animal, who, just a moment before, described these animals as "very prickly" and "fat" with "spikes sticking out," now claims not to "know what one looks like." Lauren's answer signals a break in the interview, a moment of resistance, a firm step outside this structured performance. But rather than respond to Lauren, her interviewer asks the next question—"Can you think of another way to solve the problem?"—and again Lauren interrupts the flow of the interview. "Not now," she responds, setting limits on what she is willing to offer and when—"Maybe in an hour or so."

As her interviewer dutifully stays within the rules of this pseudo-conversation, Lauren continues to resist. Asked if she can "think of a rule that would solve this problem for everybody," Lauren questions whether a relationship is ever possible between these different animals—"I don't even know how the porcupine can live with the moles, because they are enemies. I read [that] in a book"—and then

challenges the very idea that animals can think and talk and remember—"No [a rule wouldn't work], because they can't remember it; they have brains the size of an acorn."

But Lauren knows all about rules and their justification, as she explains to the woman: "Like here we have rules, like no running in the halls. They're to prevent us from falling." "Rules"—like the book Lauren used to keep—"help you control your life, you know. They might bore you," she adds—perhaps as this interview, so far played strictly by the rules, is beginning to bore her—"I don't know. If they had a rule that everything would go smoothly, they wouldn't have any fights or stuff like that." Staying within the rules of this structured interview, Lauren implies, nobody would "fall," there wouldn't be "any fights," things would remain "controlled," run "smoothly," but things would also be "boring," there would be no lively exchanges, no movement, no space for genuine relationship. So what if someone wanted to break the rules, the interviewer suddenly asks—perhaps sensing she is about to lose the lively, straightforward girl who spoke in the first few minutes of the interview—"Would that be okay?" "Well if they didn't tell anybody," Lauren responds, hinting at the underground and the possibility of a real conversation. "But," she adds—perhaps uncertain about this woman and what she is willing to know—"but . . . there's always a way that somebody is going to find out."

As the conversation turns to friendship and disagreement, Lauren seems ready to push the boundaries of this exchange further, if given the chance. "Everybody has their own opinion on everybody," she says, explaining how people go back and forth between liking and hating. "What would two friends who disagree say to each other?" her interviewer wonders. "Well, it would probably go something like . . . I should say it?" Lauren asks, almost incredulous that this woman will now drop the questions and follow her lead. "Yah," her interviewer responds, "If I get lost in it, I'll just ask you." With this opening before them, Lauren eagerly breaks into a three-way conversation, acting the parts of two friends sorting out their feelings about another girl. Her face alive, Lauren changes expression and

switches position in her chair as she enacts the dialogue back and forth between the two friends:

Okay. Let's see. Um, first girl: "Well, I thought she was really nice and I thought maybe she could come over again." Second girl: "Well, I didn't like her that much, so don't invite her over again." First girl: "Let's talk about this for a while." Second girl: "Okay." First girl: "What did you see in her that you hated?" Second girl: "Well, she was bossing me around."

Suddenly the third girl appears on the scene. The second girl, the one who hates her, addresses her:

Girl two: "What's your family like?" Girl three: "Well, I'm an only child, my mom's 22, my dad's 58, and I'm 12. I have one pet. It's a bird and its name is Duster." Girl two: "Well, I have a pet and I have a bird too, and his name is . . . Sky." Girl three: "Bring yours over to my house sometime." Girl two: "Is yours a male or a female?" And then girl one interrupts: "Wait a minute, I have a bird too." Girl two: "How about we bring ours all over in twenty minutes, okay?" Girl one: "That's a great idea." So, narrator: They start talking about the birds and the girl who hated her before likes her now.

Lauren has succeeded in drawing her interviewer into this drama, and the woman, now genuinely curious, begins to ask real questions. If "girl one" and "girl two" can disagree with each other openly, what happens when girl three enters the scene? Why would the girls talk about the birds rather than the real issue, which was that "girl two" felt "girl three" was bossy? "Why didn't she just tell her that?" the woman wonders. "I don't know," Lauren responds, "maybe she'd feel sort of mean saying that . . . At the beginning you don't really know what that person is like. But after a while, and you get to know that person, you might change your feelings about her."

Lauren knows that "it hurts people's feelings" to make faces or laugh at them or even to say "mean" things, and, as we have seen, she tries not to make trouble—especially when she concludes that

she cannot or will not be heard. But in the presence of someone who listens, the eight-year-old Lauren—impish and playful, and also direct and open—seems to reappear in the body of this eleven-year-old. Invited to speak what she really feels and thinks, Lauren tells about a time in school when she tried to offer her ideas on a group project and no one would listen, “because they want to do their own thing.” Annoyed, Lauren says “I walk[ed] off . . . I was off just sitting reading a book . . . I just sat back and started reading my book. And I finished it.” Lauren who struggled at nine to speak her thoughts and feelings directly, who became silent in anticipation of what others might say or do, now tells her interviewer, perhaps because her interviewer will now listen and play, that she refuses to give over her ideas for the sake of false relationship, refuses to pretend it is okay that no one listens. “It’s like why would I help somebody if I didn’t have time to say my idea,” she asks. “I don’t want to help you if you don’t even listen to me.”

Perhaps wanting to tell her interviewer about what, for her, is a genuine relationship—a pleasurable, mutual relationship—Lauren then describes her “best friend,” Nina. Nina is expressive and kooky, “and if she heard something funny, she’d like make a weird face . . . when something smelled she’d [make faces].” The friendship between Lauren and Nina formed when they started riding the bus together and “every week we’d get in a fight.” Now fighting and making up daily, Nina and Lauren find it safe to say what they think and feel and need from each other, and Lauren trusts, ironically perhaps, that because she can say what she thinks and feels Nina will not abandon her. In turn, Lauren feels a deep loyalty to Nina. “I promised not to tell,” Lauren says of a secret Nina told her, “and I will never tell anybody.”

So when the “cool” girls, the ones who “brag a lot,” dismiss Nina, Lauren gets angry and supports Nina publicly:

We were in a group with Ellen [a cool girl] and after all the ideas were given, Nina says, you haven’t heard [my] argument and Ellen goes, well, who cares, let’s do this anyway . . . I go, “Excuse me, you forgot somebody, and she has a good idea.”

When Ellen dismissed Nina, Lauren felt “sort of sad” for her friend and “worried that she might start crying.” “[I’d] comfort her if she were to start to cry,” Lauren explains. “I’d help her and I’d get her through her misery.” Lauren speaks up in Nina’s defense, believing she, Lauren, has a certain degree of power in her class: “Sometimes I can get people’s attention because I’m popular here,” Lauren explains. “Like I’m smart in math and I’m good in school and I guess they think of me as a smart person and they really, like, listen to me.” Though Lauren is aware that if she says what she thinks out loud “I might lose a friend,” her genuine, trustworthy relationship with Nina gives her the courage to speak directly to the other girls in her class—“I say, ‘Excuse me.’ I don’t say, ‘Shut up,’ but I say like excuse me, you forgot someone . . . to bring people’s attention, people that are careless, [that] just forget about other people.”

But Lauren, who says she stands up to the “cool girls,” still struggles to speak what she feels and thinks around adults, especially her mother. She still sometimes hides when she does things wrong, pretends “that I didn’t know that I did that.” Following what “they say,” Lauren plays by the rules, at least on the surface, since “parents have this instinct of finding out things.” “My mom always gets things out of me. The truth or not, she gets it out. She knows when I’m telling a lie.” Guarding herself against such omniscience and also tempted by the rewards of appearing good, Lauren moves her thoughts and feelings underground, at times publicly mouthing the right response to protect her private knowledge, but also waiting for someone who is interested in the lively, creative Lauren who lingers, waiting for someone to play with, someone who will really listen.

In the computer story, eight-year-old Lauren tells of taking herself, her thoughts and feelings, out of relationship to make others happy. But in the presence of a woman interviewer who listens, eleven-year-old Lauren, like eleven-year-old Sonia, directly and clearly refuses what she has, up to this point, accepted—to be in relationships that are not genuine relationships. “I don’t want to

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help you if you don't even listen to me," Lauren now says, and by voicing a refusal to stay in relationships in which she cannot speak, Lauren points to a touchstone of women's psychological health. In the presence of a woman who chooses Lauren over the rules, Lauren embodies what Annie Rogers calls the most natural, ordinary kind of courage.¹⁰

"We do not, cannot, know the meanings of all these words, for we are nine and ten years old. So we watch their faces, their hands, their feet, and listen for truth in timbre."¹¹ Like Claudia and Frieda in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Jessie, Sonia, and Lauren learn to anticipate what the adults in their lives—including the women who interview them—want to hear, want to see. Ready at eight years old to blow the whistle on relational violations, to dramatize their strong feelings, to disrupt the polite silences with their observations about what is happening in the relational world, these three young girls narrate the process by which, over time, they begin to replace their voices with the foreign voice-overs of adults, their feelings and desires with others' wants and expectations.

Eleven-year-old Jessie tells the woman interviewing her about being terrified as she experiences the relational world of her childhood disappear, the world where girls said go home and they meant go home and where it was possible to voice the full range of human feelings—anger, hurt, sadness, and jealousy as well as comfort, joy, pleasure, and love. Jessie fears that if she voices her thoughts and feelings—acts on her desire, thus bringing herself into relationship with others, she will disrupt, perhaps irreparably, the human world she lives in. And yet to pretend to agree when she disagrees and be nice when she does not feel like being nice is to abandon herself, to take herself out of relationship with others and to be "not really me."

Sonia begins her eight-year-old interview in quiet wariness, uncertain if it is safe to say aloud to her interviewer what she knows is happening and yet subtly voicing over and over again the difference between what she feels and thinks and what is said to be happening in relationships. Anticipating the power of the nice and

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kind in the world of her private girls' school, she is willing, at least for the sake of this interview, to "pretend" to be nice, to "ignore" mean behavior, to remain silent when she is blamed for things she did not do. Yet she arrives at age eleven in full voice, outspoken and straightforward, revealing, it seems, the power of a real conversation with a woman who is genuinely interested in what she feels and thinks, a woman whose own experiences resonate with the stories of unfairness and exclusion and, finally, of loyalty that Sonia tells.

Lauren at eight portrays the lively, impish resister. Although she reveals in remarkable detail how she takes in the adult voices around her and learns well to anticipate what others want, she also reveals in her own creativity and loves to play. We listen as her voice comes up against the framework of her interviewer's questions and also the wall of conventional female behavior, where it is considered both good and the right thing for Lauren to give up her strong feelings and give over the things she wants. Like Sonia, Lauren at eleven reveals the power of a relationship with a woman in which she can say what she feels and thinks, an experience that recalls the pleasure and the danger of playing outside in a thunderstorm with her grandmother and her sister.

At eight and nine, Jessie, Sonia, and Lauren speak in a variety of voices, a polyphony of voices that complement and contradict one another. Lauren feels no pressure to integrate her solution to the fable—that the answer to whether the porcupine should leave would be "yes" and "no" makes perfect sense to her. Sonia is willing, with some frustration but without great difficulty, to double her voice and vision as she goes about her relationships half-listening and pretending to be nice. And Jessie simply appreciates the differences between the porcupine and moles, giving the animals two clear but opposing views of the relational conflict. But over time, as these three girls become more subtle in their thoughts and feelings, as they gain a capacity and a desire to integrate the different voices they are taking in with their own thoughts and feelings, they begin to feel their voices in tension with others, to comprehend the relational consequences of speaking out, to appre-

ciate how others will greet their relational truths. Sonia and Lauren, who begin to cover their thoughts and feelings, seem to emerge as resisters at eleven, in a responsive relationship with a woman who resonates with their liveliness and outspokenness and is willing to play with them within the interview session. But Jessie in speaking with her interviewer seems to move further out of relationship with herself, with what she sees and hears, feels and thinks. At eleven, Jessie no longer calls attention to the moles' discomfort or pain, no longer blows the whistle on the porcupine's intransigence and cruelty. We cannot help but connect this change over time—from Jessie's willingness to speak about the moles' feelings and the porcupine's abuse to her silence about both in the name of "cooperation" or nice relationship—with the tendency of some women to stay in emotionally or physically abusive situations. What Jessie is learning at ten and eleven, it seems to us, is a justification for staying in such relationships, a lesson she may carry with her into adulthood.

All three girls voice their psychologically astute understanding of relationships and point to the places where a world they know seems in danger of disappearing; all three learn to anticipate what others will say or think if they express their strong feelings; all three know the tyranny of nice and kind, the power of the perfect (white, middle-class) girl. Jessie, Sonia, and Lauren take in the relational world around them—messages about holding in their feelings and thoughts in order to be seen as good girls, as well as pleasurable experiences of being with women who really want to know them, who enjoy being with them, and who stay with them even when they are disruptive. The pressure to integrate their rich emotional lives with narrowing visions of nice and kind women leaves these girls struggling with the difference between true and false relationships. As we listen to these girls at eleven, and recall their eight-year-old voices and the voices of their classmates at that time, we begin to wonder what is happening at the edge of adolescence to call forth such resistance, and what will sustain it.

4

Approaching the Wall: Three Guides into Adolescence

Susan is eleven and in the fifth grade. I go to her classroom to tell her I am ready because my previous interview ran a bit over the scheduled time. As we move down the hall I notice she is walking on the backs of her top-siders, crunching them into something like slippers. I ask her how she's doing and how she likes school, and she responds softly in a word or two. Though she was interviewed last year, this is the first time we have met. I soon learn that much is different for her this year. As a fifth grader, she has entered the Middle School world of changing classes, tougher subjects, higher expectations. School has become more serious. But, she tells me, she and her classmates have weathered these changes; relationships have survived.

Guided to fifth grade by Jessie, Sonia, and Lauren, we now meet Susan and her classmates who, according to their teachers, are an unusually bright and sensitive, close-knit group. It is easy to understand this portrayal as we watch them engage in lively discussions, hover over science projects, read stories they have written aloud to each other, laugh heartily or glance knowingly at their best friends across the room.

In our interviews, it becomes clear to us how much these ten- and eleven-year-old girls know about people and relationships and how deeply they feel relational conflicts. Their curiosity about the human world they live in is palpable; they seem always to be listening in or keeping track of what is happening between people. Open to relationships, they talk unabashedly about vulnerability—