

realities they face—their dissociation and feelings of disconnection—we wonder what choices these girls have, growing up in this time and this place, this society and this culture: what relational paths are open to them, what can they feel and know and say and still be in connection with others, what are the economic and political as well as the psychological and educational realities of their situation? Beginning with girls at early adolescence—at twelve and thirteen—may give us a clearer understanding of the gains and losses some girls experience and what becomes of girls' struggles and resistance.

## 5

### *Rivers into the Sea: Three Guides through Adolescence*

We began with twelve-year-old Anna, to stand with her at the crossroads of adolescence. Returning now to Anna—tall, slender, with short brown hair and green eyes, quiet and wary—we place her amidst her twelve- and thirteen-year-old classmates. What we see are the signs of change all around. What we feel and sense is movement, like rivers flowing toward the open waters of the sea.

This is a time of visual change. Two thirds of the girls at this age will have begun menstruating.<sup>1</sup> There is no physical prototype: some girls appear childlike, tall and gangly; others look like young women, their bodies less angular, more rounded and full—bodies stirring, desiring, knowing, yet caught in the reality of the immediate, uncomfortable and shy in the gaze of others. Elizabeth Debold, a member of our research team, wishing to see a seventh-grade dance class, was told by the instructor that the girls were too embarrassed, too uncomfortable in their leotards to be seen by a stranger. This led Elizabeth to recall her junior high dances, herself and other girls standing in nervous, furtive groups, whispering among themselves in low voices. "Twelve-year-olds," she says, "cluster together like gangly trees in a dense patch of woods. Often when they speak, they put their hands over their mouths." She remembers the stance: "pinched posture, shoulders pushed awkwardly forward, head slightly bent. Between the lithe, jazz movement of the ten-year-old girls and the cultured grace of the seventeen-year-olds is the discomfort of twelve and thirteen."<sup>2</sup>

These changes in girls' bodies visually disconnect them from the world of childhood and identify them in the eyes of others with women, and thus with images of women and standards of beauty and goodness—physical and moral perfection. Girls become looked at, objects of beauty, talked about and judged against standards of perfection and ideals of relationship. And girls learn to look at their "looks" and to listen to what people say about them. Seeing themselves seen through of the gaze of others, hearing themselves talked about in ways that imply that they can be perfect, and that relationships can be free of conflict and bad feeling, they struggle between knowing what they know through experience and knowing what others want them to know and to feel and think.

At times they hold true to themselves. Kara worries out loud about "endanger[ing] the way I feel about myself or what I feel should be happening to me or the way I think," and her classmates echo these fears. Holding in their thoughts and feelings, holding fast to what they know through experience of themselves and their relationships, these girls attempt to stay with "how I feel, what my feelings are." The sense of threat is evident. Linda, reflecting with her interviewer on what makes her struggle so in her relationships, says, "You know, I have to pick the thing I will be happier in . . . there is a bad way of choosing, I could do something I don't like." Anna, explaining to her interviewer that it would be better for people, including herself, to "think more about what they really wanted to do, and not what other people wanted them to do," conveys this sense of foreboding: girls at this age feel in danger of losing themselves and losing touch with what they want. Voices which readily sound selfish or self-centered, when listened to more carefully, speak about losing relationship.

Girls' preoccupation with deciding what "would be better for you," "what I think about myself in the long run," or "what I feel should be happening to me" is a move into abstraction and differs from speaking their thoughts and feelings. Speaking up, as we heard from Victoria and other twelve-year-olds, can be dangerous and disruptive, and these girls, recognizing all too well the potential loss of relationship if they do say what they feel and think too forcefully

or too directly, are up against a relational impasse which they describe: if they speak their strong feelings and thoughts—that is, if they bring themselves fully into relationships—they risk losing their relationships because no one will want to be with them; yet if they do not speak—if they take themselves out of relationship for the sake of "relationships"—they lose relationships that are genuine or authentic. Heard against this impending relational loss, girls' voices sound different and take on new meanings, because they are resisting losses which have been socially sanctioned and culturally inscribed—losses sustained by many women.

When these girls stay with the evidence of their senses in the face of this impasse, their relational capacities are striking. They clearly name the differences between what they know through experience and what others know or what is decreed as "reality." Neeti, whom we heard in Chapter 2, explains her decision to speak to the camp director on behalf of her cousin by saying at first that it is obvious why she did what she did, and then realizing that it may not be obvious to other people. However, she stays with what she knows in the face of others' rules and slogans:

It's obvious because—No, it isn't, but it is for me. It might not be obvious for you or for anybody else, but it's helping out my cousin. And that camp director, you know, it was a rule, but people are more important than rules, you know. So, he was just a little kid, you know, and they were trying out things, and the camp directors, they were saying, "We're just here to help our kids, to make them have fun," but my cousin wasn't having any fun, he was just contradicting the whole slogan, you know.

Neeti's repeated phrase "you know" suggests that she may have a question as to whether the woman sitting with her also knows what she knows: that it was helping her cousin, that people are more important than rules, that her cousin was not having fun at camp, or whether this woman will align herself with the camp directors and their rules.

Neeti explores the question of why what is obvious to her may not be obvious to anybody else in the situation. She knows that her

cousin was "crying at night and stuff," "screaming," and having "nightmares," and knowing her cousin, she knows how he feels. Her viewpoint is not the same as the camp director's or that of her friends. Relationship is Neeit's access to knowing how her cousin feels, and she realizes that in the absence of that relationship, others cannot know what she knows. "It's like either you feel it all the way or you just recognize it, you know," she says. And given what she knows and feels, it seemed obvious although risky to act.

Yet we hear other girls struggle to fit what they know and feel into versions of reality which are inconsistent with what they have experienced, with the result that they—and also we in listening to them—readily become confused. Faith shifts from a first- to a second-person voice in trying to stay with her thoughts and her feelings in deciding what's "really right for you and you think it's right." In her struggle, we hear the power of the normative enter with the force of moral language, threatening to cover over what Faith feels and thinks by dictating to her how she should feel and think. For Faith to accept "what should be right to other people," she will have to disconnect from her sense of what is "really right" for her.

As these twelve- and thirteen-year-old girls stand at the threshold of early adolescence, they experience some of the implications of the prevailing social order of relationships as it complicates their efforts to stay in connection with themselves and with other people. As with Judy, Noura, and Victoria, culturally inscribed and socially institutionalized notions of womanhood which specify the normal, the typical, the desirable, the good, and the bad woman, enter girls' conversations and a struggle breaks out—a struggle to know what they know, to rely on their feelings, to hold onto their experiences and their relationships as a way of grounding themselves. Asked if she has ever been in a situation where what she knows to be true from experience is different from what others are saying and doing, Anna replies, "All the time . . . that's my life."

Standing at the edge of womanhood, girls begin to speak about themselves, about their thoughts and feelings, as something that might be "endangered" or "jeopardized." Twelve-year-old Becka, for

example, struggles openly when she feels herself slipping away in relationships. Wondering whether to stay with a group of friends who make her life "miserable" or find "a new set of friends," Becka speaks with poignant clarity about what she lost in this miserable relationship: "I wasn't sure what to do, but then I realized that the good things weren't happening . . . I wasn't being happy, and I wasn't sure of myself . . . I wasn't being . . . with myself and I wasn't thinking about myself. I just wanted to have this group of friends," she continues. "I was losing confidence in myself, I was losing track of myself, really, and losing the kind of person I was."

Becka's choice not to give up relationship for the sake of having "this group of friends" is a sign of a healthy resistance—an active struggle against losing her voice and her sense of herself. Choosing to stay with herself and to take her unhappiness seriously, Becka will not call this false relationship real, but instead will look for new and, she hopes, better friends.

The generosity and openness that we saw in ten- and eleven-year-old girls when they created spaces for their own and others' voices tend to give way in these twelve- and thirteen-year-olds to self-protection. As girls feel pressure both from within and without to deny their feelings and thoughts for the sake of relationships, they can no longer afford to be so generous or open—or at least not in public. It is important to be "with myself," Becka says, as she faces an increasing number of alternative truths and interpretations, some with a legitimacy and authority that may feel overwhelming.

Like the younger girls, these twelve- and thirteen-year-olds are naturalists, bent on close and careful observation of the human world. But here at the borderland, where their "I" meets and for a short time self-consciously holds the "eye" of the culture<sup>3</sup>—where they see and hear clearly how they are being seen and spoken about—girls know to stand vigil over their thoughts and feelings. Visual metaphors characterize their conversation as they position themselves on this landscape. At once knowing themselves from their experiences in the relational world and seeing themselves as others see them, they find it increasingly difficult, as Judy says, to "feel with their minds" or even to believe in such a concept—to

take what Judy experienced as "a deeper sort of knowing" as knowing or as trustworthy or as real, no matter how deep their feelings. And when such feelings threaten to place them outside of the realm of the acceptable or understandable—when they feel themselves too sad or too angry or too sexual or too loud, they may decide that it is better to bury their feelings and to go with what others say and know. In this brief time-out-of-time of liminal existence, this edge between childhood and full-blown adolescence, girls' minds may grasp the meaning others make of their changing bodies and they may feel themselves moving from flesh to image in an eroticized and frightening, tantalizing and ultimately terrifying fall.<sup>4</sup>

Trying to stay with their thoughts and feelings in the face of pressure to fit an image—for images, unlike bodies, do not know or speak<sup>5</sup>—these girls voice what they are doing and in doing so name the division they are feeling between what they know from experience and what has been socially constructed as "reality." Thoughts and feelings which expose that reality as unreal often seem too dangerous to speak out loud, and are retracted, taken inside, moved out of sight and hearing: hidden from all but the most trusted relationships or perhaps not spoken at all. Feelings are felt; thoughts are thought, but when no longer spoken, they are no longer heard—no longer endangered but also no longer exposed to the air and the light of relationship. As we heard Neei say, when asked what was at stake for her in deciding to speak to the camp director, "Kind of like the ego, you know, and nothing physically and nothing that anybody else would see; it's just my feelings being hurt, and I hate being yelled at."

Even when girls choose not to risk their ego and bring their feelings and thoughts into relationships, they remain on the lookout for others by whom they can be safely seen and with whom they can safely speak. Moving themselves in and out of relationship, they listen for the ways in which others cover their voices and mask their true feelings. But in the absence of experience and in the presence of intense desires to be with people who are loving and genuine, they can rush too quickly into relationships and vulnerability. Becka, looking back at what now seems to her a rash decision to

be friends with girls who made her miserable, says, "[I learned] not to rush into anything right away . . . I saw them, and it's like, 'Oh, wow!' you know. So, I rushed in right away without observing them, you know, and seeing what they were like."

The slipperiness of words and the treachery of relationships which ten- and eleven-year-old girls are acutely aware of have become solidified and normalized by twelve and thirteen. Knowing the threat of fraudulent relationships, Becka cannot act on the immediacy of her feelings; she must keep herself in check, remain on guard. Adolescent girls who do not learn this lesson well are in particular danger. For young women to be physically and emotionally safe, they must be aware of the treacherous undercurrents in relationships and also societal and cultural strictures. But this awareness, although protective, takes them outside of themselves; and, looking at themselves and listening to themselves, they begin to change their looks, modulate their voices, and monitor their behavior in relation to the looks and the voices of others in the world in which they are living. Thus at adolescence, girls can become more readily disconnected from what they are feeling, distanced from their own desires and pleasures, and therefore, ironically, more reliant on others who tell them what they want and feel and think and know. And their responses to these disconnections, their shock and their resistance, reveal the strengths of their connections in childhood.

These girls thus begin to look for the relational life which they know exists under the surface of what passes for relationships. They listen for and anticipate feelings and thoughts that are not spoken or shown but which they know will bubble up if not attended to. Erin, for example, plays out what would go on beneath the relational surface if she were to say something that hurt someone's feelings: "They wouldn't show it, but they would know," she says. "They would feel, like, kind of low, and they would not have as, they would not look at me as nice as they would have looked at me, they would just look at me as conceited and mean." Erin can "see if it would really bother them," not perhaps in the usual way, since "they wouldn't show it," but in the different way they would

look at her and potentially speak about her to others. In the face of such delayed and indirect responses, girls begin to watch their footing and become more cautious in the relational world. Exclusively attuned to the nuances of feelings and subtle shifts in relational configurations, they quickly learn the various ways in which people show what they feel and think; they pick up changes in voices, watch eyes and faces closely, scan bodies and clothes, and learn to read subtle cues, including cues about what can and cannot be spoken, what should and should not be known.

In this way, girls develop a sharp eye and ear for the disparity between what people say and what is really going on. But underneath there is a deeper and more confusing split: not between appearance and reality but between their experience and reality as it is generally constructed by other people. Then girls speak of feeling crazy or insane. Anna, who wonders if she is crazy, speaks into this confusion and asks how you can tell if what people are saying is true, "if what they are saying about you, if they really mean it . . . and it's hard to tell . . . with a lot of people, you can't tell how they are." Yet she feels that people can tell how she is, and this disparity conveys her sense of not quite knowing what she and others can and cannot tell. Anna, like many girls at her age, repeatedly says "I don't know." And this phrase enters our conversations with girls with rapidly increasing frequency at this juncture, marking girls' uncertainty about what they know and what they don't know, what can be known and what cannot be known.

Listening closely for what is not spoken, observing what is not shown or immediately known, many girls collude in covering over what happens in relationships in order to protect themselves and others from hurt or embarrassment. Melissa, for example, in a highly baroque passage, tells how she and her classmates would respond to someone who lied or cheated on a test:

I mean, we don't like to say, "Oh, we hate you, you lied." We don't like to say that. So if we see somebody cheating on a test, which we haven't, we'd say, we'd pull the teacher out and say quietly, "Oh, so and so has two papers." And so that way we're not shouting it all over school, and that way they don't suffer any

blame. So it doesn't spread around because you don't say anything. It is just between the teacher and them to deal with it or something.

*And why is that the best way, do you think, to handle it?*

I think that's the best way because you're not hurting that person in any real way. You're doing some good for them because if they cheat on one test, then it's most likely going to lead to another one if they get away with it, and so you're just telling them that it's not right, and how are you going to get any place cheating on the test? And so that way you're not hurting them with their friends, and so it stays like confidential and nothing gets out. They're not losing anything; they're not being hurt.

For Melissa and her friends it is bad to say directly, "We hate you, you lied," but it is good to turn the girl in confidentially, behind her back, in what is said to be an effort to protect her from herself and save her from embarrassment with her friends. The disconnections in this move to act in a way that is said to be good and not hurtful are seemingly unobserved by Melissa, and yet her repeated insistence that "they don't suffer any blame . . . you're not hurting that person in any real way . . . you're not hurting them with their friends . . . they're not losing anything; they're not being hurt" suggests that at some level she is troubled and knows that what she and her friends are doing is in fact hurtful. Although Melissa says that it is better to speak about someone quietly than to speak with them in what undoubtedly would be a noisy conversation, she may suspect that under the guise of confidentiality and doing good for others, she and her friends are in fact protecting themselves against a cheater in the class and at the same time avoiding the possibility of being called rattletales for turning her in. What is most striking to us is that Melissa seems not even to consider the possibility of speaking directly with the girl, saying what she thinks, "It's not right," and asking her the question: "How are you going to get any place cheating on a test?"

Melissa's story marks the relational impasse many girls at this age feel: that it has become impossible for them to say directly what they are thinking and feeling, or at least to say it outside of the



context of highly confidential or best-friend relationships. Knowledge of the power others have to look at them, to judge them, to spread rumors about them, to cause them harm, leads girls to protect themselves by removing their deepest feelings and thoughts from public scrutiny, and thus from public discussion, and taking them into an underground world. Girls thus become cautious or, in Anna's terms, "discreet." And yet Anna sees problems in discretion: "If you're afraid to stand up and say something," Anna explains, "I mean, if you just go along, if nobody else is discreet, you can't just go along with what everybody else says, because it happens all the time with young people, all being with one thing, and I really want to say something else."

Liza, also concerned about standing up, speaking out, and being silenced, tells how she would decide what's best if her friends disagreed: "I don't know, by doing probably what you wanted to do in a way that would be discreet enough so that you wouldn't . . . I don't know, make it too obvious." Liza brings her discretion to class where she takes herself out of public dialogue, choosing to keep her disagreements to herself. "Everyone I know takes the teacher's point of view," she says, "cause it's—they're the ones holding the grade book and they're the ones that are going to be giving you the test on it, stuff like that. I mean, you can't just take whichever one you want." "Can you privately?" her interviewer wonders. "Yeah," she replies. "And how do you decide what to do privately?" "I don't know . . . you just examine what's there and stuff, and you try to decide which is more right to you and not like—without anyone else's opinion."

Liza's discretion, designed to bury her knowledge and protect her from exposure, is at least for the time being a conscious and calculated decision to take herself out of relationship. For Liza, discretion is another name for disconnection. For safety's sake she represents herself partially, uses her sophisticated understanding of authority and power to shield herself from the dangers of being seen: "You have to like keep your eyes open at all times," she says. "When you learn things about people," she continues, "you have to be more

omniscient, you have to be able to see everything, not just like the physical appearance of a person or, you know, how well they can do something; you have to be able to see inside of them in a way."

Relationships for Liza, as for Becka, Melissa, and others, have become highly compromised as a way of knowing. No longer can they just ask people what they feel and think directly and listen to what they say; they have to see beyond "the physical appearance," they have to "see inside," they become experts at translation. Voice which has the capacity to reveal the inside world of thoughts and feelings seems increasingly untrustworthy to girls who no longer can imagine saying "go home" when they mean go home. Instead, they talk about seeing, seeing through, seeing into, as if one must step outside of relationships to know what is going on. And with this move, they align themselves with a long tradition that separates knowing from feeling, self from relationship, mind from body, voice from desire. By-passing relationship as a way of knowing, they attempt to become all-seeing, omniscient.

Knowing different perspectives, Liza confides, allows people to communicate, but only "if they're that way too." Otherwise, she adds, people are "like dictators," imposing their point of view on others and "punishing] people for what they haven't done." In the presence of dictators, an underground is essential. And Liza, clearly feeling such a presence, chooses to silence her astute and disruptive commentary. What she does in school is simply to voice "the teacher's point of view."

Disagreement makes Anna and Liza stand out, obvious, exposed to people's attention. Disagreement makes them vulnerable—open to the power of genuine relationship and also to the capriciousness of dictators. In the face of such vulnerability, Anna wonders whether it is better to be open or to be closed: "It's just better to stay out of things," she thinks, "cause people can get mad if you say something." Aware of the realities of physical violence and also of psychological violation, girls have reason to fear-arousing other people's anger. And their own anger, held in their bodies, unvoiced and out of relationship, loses its relational proportions and becomes

in itself frightening and unclear. Girls who fear speaking their anger readily become confused about whether anger really exists, whether they are really feeling angry.

"You sort of have anger inside but not really," Jennifer explains. "You shouldn't let it out around everyone else. You should just like do it yourself." Jennifer's confusion about what is happening inside—"you sort of have anger inside but not really"—becomes understandable in the face of the relational threats that girls feel. Moral language comes into girls' voices to enforce cultural norms against women's anger ("You shouldn't let it out . . . You should . . . do it yourself"), and the dangers for women in expressing their anger may in fact override the psychological dangers of not saying or knowing how they feel. The power of moral language to cover strong feelings is apparent and also the ways in which morality can provide the rationalization for girls' and women's disconnection from their experiences and feelings—their taking themselves out of relationship.

The twelve- and thirteen-year-old girls in this study, desiring relationship, thus struggle with authority. On the one hand, they speak their strong feelings and thoughts and describe their relational conflicts in ways that suggest that they know what they want and what they will feel good about. On the other hand, they interrupt themselves constantly to say "I don't know"—sometimes because they genuinely do not know but often before going on to reveal remarkable knowing. Their stories about their lives—their selves, their relationships, their conflicts—are at once psychologically accurate and filled with questions about the value and legitimacy of their experiences, their thoughts, and their feelings. How are they to stay with what they know empirically—knowledge of the human world which they have gained from close observation and through relationships with others—in the face of prevailing authorities who voice alternative truths that call such knowledge radically into question? In the face of this relational crisis, this seeming need to choose between staying with themselves and being with others, some girls stay with their thoughts and feelings—sometimes speak

ing what they know despite pressure to not know, sometimes choosing not to speak or speaking only to their friends, and in the process discovering where real relationships are and are not possible, sometimes at the expense of being deeply hurt. Other girls find the attraction to the normal and the typical irresistible. We heard Judy at twelve yearn for "the typical life of the child," and we hear Liza's preoccupation with being seen as the normal girl—"I don't want to sound really queer," she says, listening to the way she sounds as she tries to describe herself. "I fit in pretty well," she explains, "just an average, everyday person . . . just normal." And others, in the absence of experience, reiterate the promise of the romance story: that someday a prince will come and their life will be changed utterly. We heard Victoria's anger and sadness about her parents' relationship and her mother's betrayal turn to bitterness and denigration, and then to the idealization of relationships as she falls in love with the idea of love.

When these twelve- and thirteen-year-old girls engage in open resistance or disagree with those in power, relational conflicts—often a sign of healthy resistance to false relationships—take on political meaning, disrupting and interrupting the prevailing order of living. Poised at this edge in their own development, this place between girl and woman, girls yearn for authentic or resonant relationship at the same time as they begin to suspect that such relationships may be truly disturbing, may even be politically dangerous. And it is at this age that girls most commonly begin to be called "disturbed." Moving into a culture populated by images and models of young women, girls incorporate these images from reading magazines and books, from watching TV, and from listening in on the ways that other people, especially parents and teachers, look at and speak about them, their classmates, their acquaintances, their friends. And girls need to hold themselves away from the power of images and voices which encourage them to label their feelings and desires and needs as "selfish" and to see selflessness or self-silencing as the condition for being loved or approved of.

As girls become engaged in this struggle to hold onto the com-

plexity of their relational experiences, they sound like the women whose voices resound in the literature on women's psychology. Their internal struggles with wanting authentic relationship and fearing that if they voice their feelings and thoughts they will jeopardize relationships and endanger themselves, and their external struggles against cultural images and voices that encourage them to make a series of divisions which undermine what they know through experience, announce their entrance into womanhood, or more specifically, a womanhood where staying with themselves feels selfish and actively being with others feels selfless—where it seems impossible or untenable for them to bring their voices into their relationships.<sup>6</sup>

Girls literally cannot bring their experience of living in relationship with others into this selfish-selfless construction. "It was me saving myself or saving him," Neeti says, in an effort to summarize a difficult and complicated relational conflict in one neat sentence when her interviewer asks her, "What was the conflict for you in that situation?" But the question itself leads her astray. The conflict for her was that she was in relationship with her cousin, that she felt miserable knowing that he was miserable, even though she knew that his feelings were not her feelings, and that she could not stay in relationship with her cousin and with herself without taking action. In doing so, she risked being yelled at and having her ego hurt.

The erosion of girls' capacity to stay in relationship with themselves and with others becomes clear as Michelle announces with pride, "Like this year I've changed a lot. I think of, more of what to do to be nice than . . . what I want to do." Doing what she wants to do is, in this construction, not nice. Marie, seeing her mother come home from work "tired . . . with circles under her eyes" and knowing that the dishes need to be done, also thinks about herself and the homework "I really should do." Her conflict, she says, is between "wanting to help my Mom because I know she's tired and wanting to help myself get my work done . . . It's deciding whether you're going to do something for yourself or for someone else." Marie

calls this "a moral conflict," and once she has labeled it such, helping herself by doing her homework seems "selfish," at which point it seems clear what she *should* do. But her judgment is in fact more complex. "The person who needs the help," she explains, "is going to think you're being selfish if you don't." What Marie thinks remains unspoken.

Marie stays with what she sees—the circles under her mother's eyes, how tired she looks—and knows that she herself has work to do. But instead of representing the full complexity of this conflict, she superimposes a narrow moral framework in which her needs drop out—in which she voices only her mother's needs. In what seems at times an act of self-defense, these girls take on moral language like a protective shield, covering over the rich texture of their relational experiences and speaking as though there is an emotional or psychological scarcity of resources in the relational world.

Thus girls struggle with relational conflicts and exclusive choices—choices that destroy relationship whichever way they turn. The either-or framing (selfish or selfless, self or relationship) marks an inner psychological split or division. Taking on moral language, girls take in the dichotomies of a culture which splits good from bad women and divides the selfish from the selfless. People, in girls' descriptions, now sound less like people—the people in nine-year-old Margaret's life who have "a different mother and a different family, and a different skin, different color, different color eyes, color hair and intelligence"—and more like disembodied points of view, pre-formed and self-contained, juggled awkwardly to avoid making anyone hurt or upset. When differences were simply differences, relational conflicts were ordinary—to be expected. Now, as Marie says, "it's always a moral conflict."

While it is not unusual, in the midst of this juggling act, for these girls to exclude themselves to avoid being called "selfish," it would be simplistic to suggest that they gain nothing by such exclusive decisions. When girls act on behalf of others, seemingly at the expense of themselves, they gain in socially desirable ways. Jennifer



talks about how she responded when an unpopular girl asked her if she was her friend in front of her best friend and an entire cabin of girls at summer camp:

I wasn't sure that I should say that she was my friend because then I'd get my best friend upset and then I wasn't sure if I should say I wasn't her friend 'cause then I'd get her upset and then that would just get, like her against the whole cabin . . . I decided I'd say yes and explain [to my best friend] because that would be like the best thing to do. I'd make one person feel good and then I'd go back and make the other person feel good. So I figure that would be the perfect way to do it.

Attending to the needs of each person in turn, Jennifer avoids feelings of guilt and personal pain:

I don't want to make someone upset 'cause that would get me into the depression age again and if I got them upset it would be a load on my mind and I'd hate myself and I'd try to get them to like me again . . . 'cause I like being liked even though I don't like somebody. And so I just figured, well, I'll make them both happy. Everything will be fine . . . so everything was great and then I went to sleep with no guilt on my mind.

Taking in the full burden of responsibility for this situation—hat- ing herself if she made someone upset—Jennifer begins an exhaus- tive series of separate and private negotiations designed to cover over any appearance of conflict or disruption: "I'd make one person feel good and then I'd go back and make the other person feel good." Jennifer then describes what she gains in the process—other than a good night's sleep. She tells her interviewer of the sense of power she experienced—the power, or in her words "the domina- tion," to make things "peaceful," to restore relationship (at least on the surface), the power to prevent one person from feeling bad or losing her self-confidence and to allow another to save face, to retain her pride:

*How did you feel about it . . . about the whole situation?*  
Well, I wasn't too pleased with the fight or with someone asking

me if I liked them in front of everyone else who didn't, but I felt good that I said something 'cause that would have been, that was like, I was proud that I made the whole cabin suddenly get over a fight, and I was like, "Wow, do I have domination!" and I was proud.

*What was it about making them get over the fight that made you proud?*  
Well, fights are really not the best things to have. Now there's a winner and a loser, nothing lands on the top, except when I stopped it. No. The fight ended, everything was peaceful . . . it's just like that. You don't have lots of like screaming or anything. *When you think over the conflict you described, do you think you learned anything from it?*

Yeah. I think that I sort of learned how to get everybody happy at the same time. I learned how to get somebody happy by lying . . . I lied and got someone happy and then I told the truth to like all the rest of the people and got them happy, then I got myself happy because I'd made everyone else happy, and so ev- erything was fine. So I figured I learned how to do that . . . I solved the problem that I figured was really important to solve.

The problem Jennifer takes on is real, but we are struck by the difference between her solution and Noura's—that in Jennifer's mind it is better to lie than to take the time and the space to say her feelings, to speak as Noura and her friends did, in loud voices. "I got myself happy," Jennifer says, "because I'd made everyone else happy." Although she lied to one person, it was more important to her that she prevent a fight and solve the problem peacefully, without "lots of screaming."

As the rivers of girls' lives flow into the sea of womanhood, it seems less possible to take the time and space to say what they feel and think to each other. The younger girls we listened to, who fight openly, are, predictably, less tired, less drained emotionally. While covering over her dislike with lies and quelling disruption and disagreement left Jennifer with a feeling of domination and control, these efforts were also duplicitous, time-consuming, and emotionally exhausting.

While creating the appearance of a surface calm over strong

feelings is labeled by Jennifer as lying, it provides a way for her to distance herself emotionally from the girl she doesn't like and, in this way, to exercise some control over the relational world. Jennifer has taken in displeasure with fighting, the desire for peaceful resolutions, the distaste for conflict, the wish to make everyone happy. Her bad feelings have gone underground. Like Melissa, who does not say directly "what you are doing is not right," Jennifer does not voice her anger toward the girl who put her in this uncomfortable situation. And like Melissa, who thinks only of speaking in private to the teacher, Jennifer speaks confidentially to her interviewer about feelings she cannot speak aloud in her relationships.

Holding themselves at bay, out of relationship, these twelve- and thirteen-year-old girls take in the vernacular of relationships all around them. Jennifer's words, especially her self statements—"I made [them] get over a fight; I learned how to get everyone happy; I got myself happy; I made everyone else happy"—mark a static, controlled relational language startlingly different from the fluidity of younger girls' relational dialogues and disagreements. This shift in her relational language, we suggest, marks Jennifer's movement into the sea of Western culture and a profound psychological loss.<sup>7</sup>

Removing themselves from relationship, these girls struggle daily with the seduction of the unattainable: to be all things to all people, to be perfect girls and model women. As their new-found capacities for abstract thought emerge, girls find it easier to disengage themselves from relational conflicts altogether. Faith, for example, has difficulty negotiating the problem of whose sleep-over invitation to accept. Finally, she says:

I stayed home. It's happened a few times, though, and I think I've sort of done each thing just to see how it would work out . . . I just start to think up these little solutions that I could have done. I'd just sit around and think about it, and think, well, what if this happened or what if this happened, you know, just try and rearrange the information . . . like if you do one thing, what's going to happen? If you do the other thing—maybe there might be one way you save both friendships, maybe one way you could save

one, another way you could lose them all. So, it's really hard to tell what you should do if you want to keep your friends.

Approaching the problem at hand logically, Faith plays out various possible scenarios in her head. Since she has abstracted herself from the particulars of any one possibility—that is, taken herself out of relationship; quite literally, she has stayed home—she is free to "just try and rearrange the information." The viability of her solutions, then, depends on everything about the situation remaining the same—the invitation, her friends' reactions, their feelings, her own wishes, the relationships. Echoing Jennifer's language of "making" and "getting" relationships, Faith controls all the variables from afar—no muss, no fuss. Unsuccessful as she is in her plan to keep all her friends—she has done (or rather, thought) "each thing" and so far nothing has satisfied her—she is also seemingly unaffected. Her solutions depend on the rigid and unchanging nature of persons and situations; she keeps herself apart from the messiness and complexity of relational conflict. Choosing domination and separation over the heartbreak and difficulty of relationship, girls like Jennifer and Faith can use their ability to abstract knowledge to take themselves out of relational conflicts. Given their insights about difference, about dialogue, about the intimate relationship between thought and feeling and between feeling and action, as well as about the transforming power of relationships, girls are protecting themselves at the expense of what Judy calls "a deeper sort of knowing."

As girls learn to cover over their detailed knowledge of relationships, they learn to judge themselves differently and to reframe or revision the relational life they once lived. "My mom tells me that I'm rude sometimes," Erin explains, "and . . ." Her interviewer interrupts her. "Didn't she tell you that before?" she asks, wondering, perhaps suspecting, where Erin has been. "No . . . She just, I don't know," Erin responds. "Maybe she did, but I would, I would get really mad and I wouldn't listen to her. I still get really mad and I don't listen to her, but now maybe I'm listening to her more." Erin

describes herself as someone who has "changed a lot," from someone who was once rude—meaning someone who would say what she felt and "get really mad"—to someone who now thinks "more of what to do to be nice than what I want to do." She explains:

When I was in fifth grade I could do whatever I wanted and I could almost, and everyone would still like me. But now, I mean it was just rude, what I was doing. I can see now when I was little I was rude and it bugs me so much that I never wanted to be like that again, so I'm trying to make up for everything that I did when I was little and I was rude to people.

Erin's commitment to change has taken the form of a vow never to be rude—that is, "really mad"—again, to "make up for everything that I did when I was little and I was rude to people." This means Erin must forget what she knew as a ten-year-old—that relationships are complicated, that, as Allison said, people "process their thinking" differently, that people struggle to speak, and often do speak their feelings, in the face of pressure not to sound mean or bossy. There was a time when girls could say "I'm sad" or "I'm angry" and it did not seem rude and dangerously disruptive. Erin's memory both idealizes this time ("I could do whatever I wanted . . . and everyone would still like me") and rejects it ("I was rude . . . I never want to be like that again"). Her life becomes dedicated to undoing past indiscretions that, according to her ten- and eleven-year-old self, may not have happened in the first place. For Erin, a young woman entering this culture at this time, to retell or reconfigure her life in this way brings her into line with most prevailing accounts of psychological development, and also with accepted norms of female behavior.<sup>8</sup>

Once Erin takes in this foreign voice-over-her-voice—a voice she associates with her mother—and makes it a part of herself, she no longer needs her mother to "tell me I'm rude"; she can do so herself:

Like kids, when they invite me to their parties or something, sometimes I won't want to go and I will use an excuse or something and that's a decision which, like, will hurt their feelings . . .

[When thinking about what to do I consider] hurting their feelings, being rude . . . it's like it's rude and it's mean and it's unkind.

Erin wonders how best to respond, how to include her wishes when doing so will hurt someone's feelings. Saying what she wants directly is now "rude," "mean," "unkind." She decides, finally, that it's "the way you say yes or no, it all depends on how you say it, on how you say no," she says. "If you just say, 'No, I'm not going,' if you say, 'No, I'm just really not in the mood' or . . . you take a bit of your time to explain to that person what you're going to do." To take the time to explain, Erin adds, is "to be nice. I don't know. Just not to be rude or something." What was once pretty simple and straightforward now takes all of Erin's attention and effort because it has become so elaborate and complex. What was once so ordinary—speaking about feelings like sadness, anger, pleasure—now seems transgressive.<sup>9</sup>

These twelve- and thirteen-year-old girls, coming of age in a particular place in culture and in time, show a healthy resistance to losing their voices and losing relationship. Their capacity for resistance is evident in their insistence on knowing what they know and their willingness to be outspoken. But at this juncture in development, girls' "ordinary courage" becomes extraordinary, an act of relational heroism. Girls' healthy resistance to psychological illness then takes on the dimensions of a political struggle—becomes a political resistance or a challenge to the existing order of relationship, to the prevailing lines of power and authority. But this is a political struggle which is anchored relationally rather than ideologically, psychologically rooted in girls' desire to be in genuine connection with others.

Because the relational problem is real, most girls we listened to show signs of this struggle, and its legacy reaches far into women's lives. For some girls, a healthy resistance finds a creative voice or expression; for some the resistance remains open and turns political; for some it moves underground—into a political underground where feelings and thoughts are secretly shared, or into a psychological underground where feelings become "nothing that anyone can see"

## RIVERS INTO THE SEA

and thoughts become private and protected. But once girls remove themselves from relationships, they begin to have difficulty articulating their feelings. Finding themselves in relationships that are not psychologically real, that are not psychological or emotional connections, they can no longer say what they know. Then girls begin not to know what they once knew, to forget the feelings and thoughts they once spoke but then withdrew to protect. We hear their confusion: "I don't know," they say over and over, as they struggle against dissociating themselves from their thoughts and feelings in order to connect to the world around them. We then hear girls position themselves with visual metaphors—determined to be "omniscient," to see all, aware that they are being seen and commented on by all—as they take in images of women's bodies and women's psyches that do not have room for their experience. Feeling the power, what Jennifer calls the "domination" of this image, girls who take it in expect to feel safe and secure, protected in part by being disconnected from themselves and other people.

Here at this watershed in girls' development, we again join with Anna and Neeti, and also Liza. Each will struggle with a central relational quandary: how to stay with herself and be with others, how to keep her voice in connection with her inner psychic world of thoughts and feelings and also to bring her voice into her relationships with other people. And each will exemplify different ways of going—different streams of development, different pathways of growth. Anna becomes outspoken—a political resister; after flirting with containment, she "bursts out." European-American and working-class, she finds her way through the relational impasse that many girls experience. Instead of learning what not to know, what not to say, Anna becomes invested in learning as much as she can and in saying what she knows. Staying close to her own experience, Anna's eyes and ears open wide as she watches and listens and names the way the world works.

Neeti is Indian and upper-middle-class. Outspoken at twelve, Neeti feels the pressure to cover over her strong feelings and go underground to protect her image and avoid hurting others. But she describes this move in vivid detail and is aware of leading a double

## ANNA: A POLITICAL RESISTER

life—knowing and yet pretending not to know what she really feels and what is really happening in her relationships. Neeti is the underground woman.

Liza is European-American and upper-middle-class and physically can fit the model or image of perfection. Underground at twelve, Liza gradually transforms herself into the image she desires—blonde, beautiful, and thin—leaving a wake of questions and confusion. Becoming blonder and blonder, thinner and thinner, Liza becomes anorexic. And her anorexia marks her move from the conscious underground where, like Neeti, she is connected to her feelings but strategically protects them from view, into a psychological resistance where she struggles to remain in touch with herself and her feelings.

These three girls, three rivers into the sea, demonstrate how girls' struggle to hold onto their voices and visions in the face of pressures to not know and not speak can lead some girls to risk the open trouble and disruption of political resistance and others to move their strong feelings and thoughts underground. Once there, in the absence of safe-houses where girls can say what they feel and think, girls' healthy resistance may turn into a psychological resistance as girls become reluctant to know what they know and fear that their experience if spoken will endanger their relationships and threaten survival.

## Anna: A Political Resister

When Anna, at twelve, raises the question: How can you tell if what people are saying is true, "if what they are saying about you, if they really mean it, or if they are just doing it to be mean," she is trying to understand the difference between the surface banter of teasing, making fun, and putting people down that went on at the public school she once went to, and being "really mean" or cruel. Now, at her private girls' school, Anna notices that everyone is "nice" and she wants to be nice too—to not be mean or do something to hurt somebody. But sometimes, she says, "you just can't help it." "If you're feeling sad," Anna says, "you just can't make yourself happy." Thus she insistently rejects the otherwise tempting

## RIVERS INTO THE SEA

image of happiness or perfection, knowing perhaps that because of her working-class background she would never fit the conventional image of the perfect girl and her family.

But as a scholarship student, Anna is concerned about fitting in. "I don't think a lot of people like to be someplace where they're really different," she says. "You go somewhere and it's all a certain kind of people . . . So . . . you walk to the wrong door or something, and there's all these rich people inside, and you're just coming in off the street, and even if you look the same . . . you wouldn't be the same." And so Anna studies her surroundings. She is preoccupied with how people see her and how to interpret what others say and do, how to tell if relationships are true or false. Knowing that what people say and do can be different from what they feel and think, she searches for signs of authenticity in relationship, signs that friends are "really your friends."

Indeed, at twelve Anna wonders about the possibility of ever fully knowing another person. She thinks about how a person would feel if she could not make herself known to others. It "might be really hard on that person," she says, if you can't express "how you feel inside." And so Anna, who wishes to have "somebody to talk to or confide in . . . somebody [who] was there whom you could talk to," also knows the gaps in relationships that difference and disagreement can create—the places where people cannot express their feelings completely and the hurt they feel when they are misunderstood. Although Anna is clear about who she is inside—her "true self," she says, "is kind of however I feel; if I act that way, then I guess I'm being myself"—she wonders whether she can bring herself and her strong feelings into her relationships.

At home, Anna says it is unfair that her parents expect her to always remain in control of her feelings, to "ignore" her brothers' shouting and fighting, while they run rough-shod all over the house. When her "extremely violent" younger brother "attack[s] me" and "I try to defend myself sometimes . . . somebody gets mad at me," she complains. Anna concludes from this family drama that "you can't get mad . . . People think it's all your fault because you get mad at them." "I don't even try anymore," Anna tells her inter-

## ANNA: A POLITICAL RESISTER

viewer. "It is not worth anything because there is nothing you can really do about it."

Like other twelve-year-olds we listened to, Anna has a sharp eye for the disparity between what people say and what is really going on, evident as she describes her experience in going shopping for clothes with her mother:

She will pull something out and she'll say, "Well, what do you think of it?" And then if I say I don't like it, then she'll get really mad, and she'll put it back . . . And then she'll forget about what happens when I really give her my opinion, and then she'll say, "Tell me what you really think about it." And then she gets mad when I tell her . . . And I'll say: "Well, you don't really want it because you already screamed at me when I gave it."

Though Anna says "sometimes I'm mad at the world," she concludes "it's better to stay out of things, because people can get mad if you say something." And yet, although Anna "tries to be better"—to contain her impatience and her anger—sometimes, she says, "I'll get really mad and I can outburst." Her ambivalence about these moments is patent as she explains, "I have to learn how to work with people, because sometimes I just get really mad at people who can't understand what I'm saying, and I get so exasperated. It's like 'Why can't you just . . . ? What's wrong with you? Why can't you see this my way?' And I have to really go for what I want, though. I can't let this stuff take over me . . . I have to, you kind of have to fight to get what you want."

Anna is passionate about knowing; learning is intensely personal and experiential to her: "I think one of the most powerful things," she tells her interviewer, "is experiencing something." School provides a space for Anna's passion and gives her a sense of personal power or efficacy. In school there is a place for Anna's opinion, and thus for Anna, since as she says, "You can be yourself when you think of your opinion."

But Anna is forever aware of the difference between herself and most of her classmates. "I can't take anything for granted," she tells her interviewer—not friendships, not answers in school, not what



## RIVERS INTO THE SEA

parents or teachers say. Particularly aware of the power adults have "to just . . . do what they want to do . . . [to not] pay any attention . . . [to] just ignore the whole thing," to dismiss her off-hand with comments like, "Well it wasn't your conversation," or "Nobody asked you," Anna carefully sizes up situations and, like Victoria, decides when to respond: "Sometimes I [say something] and sometimes I stop and think before I say anything, and then I realize that they are not going to listen anyway, so . . . I know it really wouldn't make a difference and might have just [made] things worse."

In essence, twelve-year-old Anna states the problem of resistance which enters girls' lives at the time of adolescence. On the one hand, she attempts to suppress her feelings, "not to be like that . . . not to get really mad" or, even worse, "outburst," and on the other hand, she realizes that "I can't let this stuff take over me." One resistance is psychological and will lead Anna to become "nice" or, as she views it, "successful" as she leaves the working-class environment of her family and boards the Noah's Ark of her private girls' school. The other resistance is political, and it will, as she realizes, make trouble in the world of her school and create conflicts in her relationships with others.

Anna struggles between these two forms of resistance a year later at the age of thirteen—when, it seems, she has gone underground. The phrase "I don't know" runs through the transcript of her eighth grade interview more than three times as often as the year before, pointing to her struggle to stay in relationship with herself and her knowledge. This year Anna speaks of keeping things to herself, of bringing herself out "just a little bit," of "playing a part," and of fitting into her new school, where she loves learning and where she is one of the top students in her class.

Well aware of "the way people make judgments," Anna no longer has to be told not to speak, no longer has to hear "Nobody asked you" or "It was not your conversation"; she has become adept at reading the signs. "They don't say it but you just get the feeling," she tells her interviewer. People make decisions without listening, Anna says. "You try and say something and people just don't listen

## ANNA: A POLITICAL RESISTER

. . . They don't need to, like they don't have to listen, because they already know what they're going to do, so it doesn't matter."

Struggling to bring herself and her knowledge into relationship with others, revealing herself "bit by bit," Anna "tortures" herself about speaking and not speaking—about not speaking out in class when she knows the answer, and about "messing up" in school. "Oh, don't do that again!" she says to herself when she has not spoken, or "Now, why did I do that? That was a really dumb thing to say," when she finally speaks, but in a way that "messes things up." Anna listens closely to herself as well as to others and monitors the changing rhythms and patterns, the sudden shifts in tempo or tonality that mark the human worlds she lives in, the disparate worlds of school and family which she traverses every day.

Anna at thirteen remains acutely aware of differences—of being different from the girls around her who live mostly in affluent families, whereas, she says, the centerpiece on her family's table is a pile of unpaid bills. "You don't know," she says, revealing her constant sense of double vision or seeing double, "how you should interpret [what people say] . . . whether you should interpret what they're saying the way that they're saying it and the way that they're meaning it, or get something different out of what they're saying."

Given her different angle of vision, Anna is seeing or hearing in the voices of the people around her something different from what they are—as they see it—saying and meaning. And she knows—as is evident when she speaks about herself as a knower—that you can interpret things differently, that thoughts and feelings cascade differently from different beginnings, so that depending on where you start—what questions you ask or where you begin, for example, in reading a poem—you arrive at different endpoints.

Yet, conformity also has its hold on Anna at thirteen, and she tries to arrive at the same endpoint as her classmates, watching to see which way they go so that she can follow: "I usually wait for like ten other people and sense where they are going," she says. "If fifteen people are going there, they have got to have some idea of where they are going." This year, she says, she does not "massively

## RIVERS INTO THE SEA

disagree on anything." With friends, if she disagreed, she would be "kind of mad at myself, have kind of a messed up feeling"; with adults the risks are different: "They would overpower me most of the time." "It could mean," she adds, "totally not getting along with the teacher for the rest of the year."

At fourteen, in the ninth grade, Anna becomes outspoken. When asked whether she sees herself as having changed, she draws her interviewer's attention to the change she hears in her own voice: "I used to be really quiet and shy and everything, and now I am really loud." Anna's choice to speak in a loud voice is evident as she—encouraged to speak in her school and seeing herself as "having a lot of choices"—says something her teacher does not wish to hear, something that makes her teacher angry. "I had to write an English paper," she explains:

And the English teacher didn't want me to write the English paper because we had to write a legend. And I see things from a lot of points of view, like I am creative. But it was a legend and we had to do a hero thing, and I didn't want to write about a hero: "There was a ladeedah good hero, and went and saved all of humankind and everything." So I like . . . if you see the hero from a different viewpoint, from a different standpoint, everyone could be a hero. So I wanted to write it from a Nazi standpoint, like Hitler as a hero. And [my English teacher] really didn't go for that idea at all . . . And I started writing, and she like, I mean, she got really mad . . . it was just really weird . . . I ended up writing two papers, a ladeedah legend and the one I wanted to write.

The interviewer asks, "Did you give the one you wanted to write to her?" "Yeah," Anna says:

I turned them both in . . . and she gave me an A on the normal one. I just gave her the other one to read because I had to write it, it sort of made me mad . . . I just had to write it and get it out . . . and I ended up writing it. I wrote it from the point of view of a little boy who was just joining one of the youth groups they had and he was going around like, he was so proud to have a

## ANNA: A POLITICAL RESISTER

uniform, and it just, it didn't come out about Hitler as much but it came out all about the things like the jobs and everything. And I turned in the paper and I turned in a letter like saying just, I had to write the paper . . . you know.

To Anna, the teacher was "narrowminded," meaning that she could not, in Anna's opinion, encompass this shift in perspective on heroes and realize that Hitler was not, as the teacher would have it, an "anti-hero" in German eyes. "It wasn't," Anna insists, "if you wrote about it like someone remembering it and how great it was, it wouldn't be an anti-hero, it would be a hero . . . I don't know if she didn't understand that or because someone else was really against it." The teacher warned Anna she would sound like a little Nazi, but Anna, whose father was unemployed, whose household was the scene of violent outbursts on the part of her father and brothers, knows that the appearance of strength can cover a reality of weakness and vulnerability and that the need to appear strong and heroic can lead people to violence. "It was an urge," Anna says, capturing the physical insistency of her need to speak about the way she saw things. "I had to write the paper because I was so mad and it was, I had to write it to explain it to her, you know. I just had to . . . I just had to make her understand." The hero legend, from Anna's standpoint, is a dangerous legend. And at fourteen, Anna labels her ability to shift standpoint "creative" rather than "crazy."

In her outspoken effort to call things by their right names, Anna, at fourteen, observes and names and questions the inconsistencies in her school's position on economic differences—where money is available, for what reasons and for whom, and where it isn't—and the limits of the meritocracy which is espoused. Yet since getting the money to go to college is going to be a "big problem" and since "a lot depends on the people who do the college references," Anna also knows, wisely, that there are some things she does not want "to act out," some things she does not want to say to some people.

Anna's resistance to images of perfection becomes explicit this year as she rejects the premise of an ideal woman. Asked "What is

## RIVERS INTO THE SEA

society's image of the ideal woman," she begins by saying, "Someone who could be successful and happy with what they're doing," and then adds, "I don't know"—the phrase which frequently introduces girls' most astute observations, those they are tempted to take underground or keep undercover—"It depends on, you know," she says, wondering, believing, perhaps, that the interviewer knows and that she is, in essence, a member of the underground also—"It depends on, you know, what you think about society, because there's all kinds of people, they each can have different thoughts." Freeing thinking now from the constraints of what Hawthorne calls "the iron framework of reasoning" which upholds the established order, Anna concludes: "Everybody has a different idea . . . I think everybody would have their own, and so there wouldn't be one image that says, 'Oh, the perfect woman. That's her, right there.'"

In eleventh grade, at the age of sixteen, with "a whole bunch of friends" behind her, Anna begins to ask some pointed questions about what is taken for granted, assumed to be unquestionable, in the public world in which she lives: questions about God and about violence and about privilege. The provocative nature of Anna's questions is evident as she observes to her religious classmates that there must have been a lot of "animal stuff" on Noah's Ark after forty days and forty nights. More pointedly, she notices "how close-minded people can be . . . how fanatical people can be about something they can't prove." What Anna likes most about school this year are the debates and arguments she has in her classes, and she recalls in amazement and with annoyance how, one day in class, in the presence of intense controversy and strong feelings, "there were just a bunch of people who sat there like stones and listened."

This year Anna speaks frankly and openly to her interviewer about the different pressures she feels at home and at school, differences that sometimes make her feel, as she says, "schizophrenic." She takes great pleasure in a singing group she has been involved in over the years because, she explains, "I kind of think I need it because it's an in-between, because it's different from school and it's different from everything at home."

## ANNA: A POLITICAL RESISTER

Anna admits she has changed a great deal over the years, from someone who was "really, really, really shy and quiet" and at times "terrified" of speaking up, to someone who screams and yells—sometimes in fun and sometimes in anger. Along with her outspokenness, Anna has become, admittedly, somewhat cynical, particularly of those classmates she calls "annoying" and "superficial." Where once she wondered "how you can tell if what people are saying is true," now Anna is concerned about clarifying her own truths, critical of anyone who stands for nothing. Whether she is commenting on another student or on her own learning, shallowness or "superficiality" bothers Anna a lot: "You just can't stop from saying anything," she says. "I don't see how anyone cannot have a viewpoint and not want to say anything about it. And if you think someone else is wrong, how can you go on and not say anything?"

Anna speaks what she thinks and expresses what she feels, knowing she is disruptive and disturbing. Saying what she thinks, interrupting the flow of nice conversations, has in fact kept Anna out of school social clubs and popular cliques and has often made her classmates furious with her. But Anna has come to a conclusion: "I think I've hit a point where I don't care what all the popular people think," she says. "[Before] I really cared about fitting in, but now I have my own bunch of friends and I don't care what anyone else thinks of me. So, you know, a while ago I wouldn't have said anything, because I'd be afraid that people would say, 'What a strange person,' but I don't care anymore."

Anna distances herself from those people who seem "unreal" to her, or "irrational," or "superficial"—those people who don't look around themselves at the world, don't express their thoughts and feelings, but align themselves with popular opinions or nice appearances. She questions this "Pollyanna" view of reality where people don't want to know about people who are different, people like her, who are poor, who have unemployed fathers or violent brothers. "I've had to go through it," Anna says, speaking about being poor in what she terms a rich girls' school. Having been through it, Anna finds those people who will not listen or don't want to know "scary."

## RIVERS INTO THE SEA

And yet she continues to speak from her experience, risking their disparagement:

I get called a cynic all the time by everybody. They are, "you are such a cynic, and you are such a pessimist," but I'm not. You have to be, I think anybody who is living with somebody, you have to be cynical, you can't just . . . I mean Pollyanna would have problems . . . really, you have to be realistic about it. And thinking that life is peaches and cream is not realistic either, it's not real . . . And if you are not cynical about anything and think that every day is wonderful . . . it really grates on you when you have somebody around you like that, that is like Pollyanna. It's just like, 'Get away,' that's really scary, you know. You can't deal with someone like that.

Anna speaks about how she suspects others think of her—as a cynic, as a pessimist, as crazy—and by facing into these judgments, knowing them, repeating them, she lives with them, turns them from becoming somehow prophetic or overpowering to a self-conscious commentary on the distinction between her reality, her experience, and a Pollyanna existence. In this way Anna reveals the irony of polite masquerades, of hypocrisy and fraudulent relationships designed on the surface to protect people's feelings but which are, from her viewpoint, "crazy-making" conventions that separate people from one another, from themselves, and from reality.

Anna at fourteen, determined to get underneath this patina of niceness and piety, is not so sure she wants to join the elite or "normal" world to which she has entry. Instead, echoing Virginia Woolf's suggestion in *Three Guineas* that women gain a university education, enter the professions, and then form a "Society of Outsiders," Anna says that she "will be one of those people who go through college and get a Ph.D. and I'll live at the bottom of a mountain in Montana, just one of those weird people. Have a chicken farm. I don't know. Then I'll just write books or something." For the present, Anna imagines herself giving the senior speech she wants to give—"the best Senior Speech in the world in terms of shocking people," the speech where she tells what she knows through experience about reality.

## NEETI: THE PERFECT GIRL

Neeti: The Perfect Girl

Neeti, Anna's classmate—friendly, intense, her long dark hair elegantly braided, of Indian descent—is an outspoken resister at age twelve. But in contrast with Anna, who becomes increasingly outspoken over the five years of the study, Neeti becomes increasingly quiet, popular with other girls, striving to raise her grade-point average from the imperfection of 3.7 to a perfect 4.0, active in sports and other school activities, and involved in increasingly complicated and futile attempts to be always nice and kind, never mean or rude. To stay with herself—to attend to her complex thoughts and feelings—is to risk being called "bad" or "mad," in both senses of the word, or more simply "selfish." To stay with others, Neeti chooses in effect to bury herself.

Listening to Neeti at age twelve, we are drawn by her knowledge of human relationships and psychological processes into an awareness of how closely and carefully she observes the relational world. Neeti tells us that "watching" and "listening" are key to the way she learns about people and the world. "I watch people," she says, "I watch over and over again . . . It's like, listen and learn, you know. Like I like learning from people's mistakes . . . It's not nice having people make mistakes, but it helps me out." If you want to know people, Neeti advises the woman who is sitting with her, "stand back," wait and watch, because "if you want to have friends and you are going to plunge into things, you can do it all wrong and never have a chance at having them as friends." You have a chance only, she says, "if you take things gradually . . . look out and see how they act, and see . . . whether I can fit in."

It is difficult to know to what extent Neeti is also commenting here on the interview process itself, her concerns about fitting into this psychologist's categories or her cautions about this relationship. The careful distinctions Neeti draws between her feelings and the feelings of others allow her to hold the difference between what authorities, such as the camp director, are saying and what she knows to be true or real. But these distinctions become more difficult to hold in her relationships with her friends. With friends,

## RIVERS INTO THE SEA

as Neeti explains, she is more cautious and less likely to plunge in and risk doing things "all wrong," less likely to disrupt or interrupt. Instead, she uses her keen powers of observation—her watching and listening—to assure that she will do the right things in order to fit in. To this end, Neeti sharpens her observational skills and listens more closely. As she becomes more and more adept at reading others and sizing up the prevailing order of relationships, she finds herself, her feelings and her thoughts, slipping away.

Twelve-year-old Neeti thus struggles to stay connected with herself—with what she knows through experience, what she hears and sees—at the same time that she wants very much to be connected to her friends and to fit into the world of her school. Like Anna at twelve, Neeti struggles with whether to speak out, to say what she is feeling and thinking, as she carefully takes in the relational world. Like Anna, she feels that she has to be herself—that she cannot cover over her feelings and her thoughts. "I can't look at something and ignore it," she says; "I look at everything before I make my judgment . . . I have to figure it out." Looking at everything, however, Neeti also wants to respond to everything that she sees. Seeing that some people are alone, she tries "to be friends with most people." And Neeti feels good about her responsiveness to others. "I feel good when there is a person and she doesn't have anybody to be with that day, so I stay with her and I feel good." "It's really rude to be mean," she tells her interviewer, and so, "I just smile all the time."

Underneath her smile, Neeti feels irritated that people do not notice or appreciate her or see what she is doing. "It's like people do things and nobody appreciates it, and you feel like why should I be doing it?" Yet Neeti chastises herself for these feelings and thoughts. When she begins to question why she buries her feelings for ungrateful people, a small voice inside says that she is not being responsive to others enough. "When I see something happen," Neeti says, "I always think to myself, I could have stopped that . . . I always think about it . . . I could have done more."

Neeti tries to notice everything. Carefully she watches and listens in on the relational world. The temptation to be perfect, to be

## NEETI: THE PERFECT GIRL

always there for others, to always smile, to always do the right thing, is irresistible. But inside Neeti knows that she is not perfect, that "nothings ever really perfect," that she does not always feel like being nice, and these feelings eat away at her. Pushing these feelings underground, she moves out of relationship with herself and into relationship with an image of herself that other people respond to and seem to desire or value—one that she herself has come to see as nicer or safer.

We hear the doubling of Neeti's voice and vision as she tells her interviewer that the only time she can really say she is being herself is when she meets someone else's standards of perfection, but then moves to describe her struggle to speak what she feels and thinks in her relationships. Neeti wants to be recognized for who she is and not how popular she has become:

That used to be my whole past life, you know, people being like picked out and selected . . . not just myself, but other people felt like me. But now I don't care anymore because I realize I'm still there, and people, like if I walk down the hall, people will still see me . . . It's like as long as, like any friends I'm part of now, if they are really friends . . . if they're not going to be your friend unless you're famous or something, it's not worth it.

But while Neeti struggles to be "still there," to stay visible as herself and to have friends who are "really friends," she also knows the power of being chosen, and she wants to be popular. She herself acts differently around boys, because "I don't know if they'd like me for me, but I don't know if I act like myself, I can't tell." Playing the popular perfect game, Neeti risks not knowing what is an act and what is really her. "People think this is the only way," she observes; they think, "I can't have any other friends if I don't do it this way, so they'll just do it this way." Reflecting on herself, she tries to sort out what she is doing:

I think I often do it, but I can't tell, just like I said, other people can't tell. Like I'm sure, like now it's hard to know the real you, you know, there are so many different people around . . . that are different, and so I have learned the way to act from people's



## RIVERS INTO THE SEA

experiences, and my own experiences, and I guess that's the way I always act; so either that's me or something that I totally don't know.

Learning the way to act both from other people's experiences and her own experiences, Neeti cannot tell if she is being herself, if she is being real, or if she is "doing it"—acting different to be popular, to fit in, to make other people choose her, to make others feel good. And since other people can't tell either, the real Neeti who feels something different from what she is saying and what others are seeing seems in jeopardy. Her experience is now indistinguishable, at least on the outside, from others' experience of her. Neeti says uncertainly, "Either that's me or something I totally don't know."

A year later, thirteen-year-old Neeti continues to struggle with this relational impasse. Her desire to say what she feels and knows conflicts with her desire to have relationships, not to disrupt relationships, not to hurt anyone. As Neeti moves further out of relationship with herself, she also sounds emotionally uninvolved with her life. Although she appears self-assured in school and describes how she and her classmates disagree with one another and "get thrills out of seeing a teacher be wrong," she does not speak with passion or interest about learning. She is a hard worker, is considered smart, and strives for good grades. She says to her interviewer, "I just think that school is something, the only reason I'm learning all this is to get into college, and that's the only reason I'm here."

In fact, this year the public arena of school and the private world of personal relationships are split apart for Neeti, and we have no sense that she stands firmly in either. Saying that her relationships are "always there," Neeti monitors herself closely. Still struggling with the impossible task of living up to images of female perfection and never saying something that would lead another person to feel hurt, Neeti finds herself walking through a relational minefield. Asked to talk about an experience of conflict, she tells of "one friend I have and she is supposedly my best friend, you know, and I don't talk to her, because like everybody hates her in class . . . I mean I

## NEETI: THE PERFECT GIRL

don't ever like her." This unpopular "friend" follows Neeti around and as a result Neeti feels she has to explain this encumbrance to her other friends. She cannot talk to the girls because "she's so sensitive." And so, Neeti concludes, shifting momentarily to a second-person voice, "There's not much you can do" before returning to her first-person experience of paralysis or impasse: "And I can't say anything to her, because she'll be hurt, so I have no idea what to do." With this change of voice, Neeti recapitulates in the interview session her giving up of her first-person voice and then not being able to say anything and not knowing what to do.

Neeti, feeling trapped in a scene which is not of her making, which is not what she wants, then tells a story of relational treachery, explaining that she and a friend who was really her friend backed out of a plan they had made to go to camp with this unpopular "best friend":

[This girl] didn't sound offended; she said, "Okay." But we knew that she was hurt, you know, and so like we knew, we felt bad, but we didn't want to go there . . . So one day, this is me, not really, but there is another friend . . . she called up [this unpopular girl] . . . She and I were on the phone . . . and she pretended that I wasn't on the line, so I heard what they were saying. And so she mentioned my name and everything . . . [She said], "Do you know what they did? . . . [They] called me up one day out of the blue and said they weren't going to camp with me" . . . And she was upset, but there was nothing I could do about it . . . And she never said anything about it . . . She's nice to me . . . So her Mom called my Mom . . . and she was upset, but she didn't make it sound upset, you know . . . So now [my friend] and I and a few other girls had decided to go to another camp, and she goes, "Well, can I come?" And I go, "If you want to. It's up to you." Because I don't want her to come, but I can't say no.

Neeti, speaking now from the underground—protected by the confidentiality of the interview and perhaps by her sense of her interviewer as someone who knows her and someone who will stay with her—speaks her conflict clearly. Her dilemma is "that I don't like this girl at all, that I absolutely hate her, but I don't know how

## RIVERS INTO THE SEA

to act because I have to be nice." Neeti then describes with remarkable acuity the fraudulence woven into this relational drama—a drama involving both girls and women. The unpopular girl, after being abandoned and hurt by Neeti and her friend, does not "sound offended" but says "Okay" and continues to "be nice" to Neeti. Neeti finds out how she feels not by asking her but by secretly listening in on a set-up phone conversation. The girl's mother calls, upset, "but didn't make it sound upset." Neeti is clear that she does not want to be near this girl who follows her around, yet she responds to her desire to go with her to a different camp by saying, "If you want to. It's up to you." Neeti expresses her "hate" for this girl to the interviewer but does not know how to act because, as she says, "I have to be nice."

Neeti clearly knows the real and false of these relationships. She is a careful and deliberate observer: "I watch people and how they interact with each other . . . I look to see how people act differently when they are with some people and differently with others. And I think I can tell a lot about people." Yet Neeti feels intense pressure to be nice, to keep up false pretenses, and also does not want to upset this girl she dislikes so strongly. And there are other people to think about: "Her sisters and my sisters are friends," Neeti says. "Her mom and my mom are good friends, our parents have each other over for dinner." This unpopular girl, it seems, is omnipresent in her life—she lives close by, they carpool together. And Neeti knows this girl is easily hurt and depends on her friendship: "She called me one day and tells me, 'My world was shattered when you wouldn't talk to me.' So what am I supposed to say?"

Neeti wants to say "I hate you. Please leave me alone," but she also does not want to upset anyone—the girl, their sisters, their mothers—with these feelings. She has evidence that if she says what she feels this girl will be "shattered." And so Neeti describes a false and a "suffocating" closeness that feels like "being married" to someone she does not love. To protect the girl from being hurt, Neeti has to remove herself from the relationship. Unable to speak their feelings to each other, these feelings become amplified—the girl "follows her around," "suffocates her," and Neeti's dislike be-

## NEETI: THE PERFECT GIRL

comes an intense "hate." At the center of the dilemma, then, is an irony: By hiding her true feelings and reactions in order not to hurt this girl, to be seen as nice, and to avoid conflict in their relationship, Neeti participates in a relationship that is cruel and false. Her unspoken actions both betray her own feelings and leave this girl whom she wishes to protect confused and really alone, possibly more hurt than if Neeti were to say what she really felt. And so, ironically, to save a relationship Neeti participates in creating a false relationship in which there is no possibility for dialogue but only continued misunderstanding and bad feeling.

We watch Neeti's relational world darken as she becomes caught and seemingly hopelessly tangled in a web of fraudulent and ultimately cruel behavior. What she wishes for is an end to conflict. Unspoken, unvoiced, and thus taken out of relationships, her feelings and thoughts have come to seem out of proportion and out of perspective and thus impossible to bring into relationships with others. And yet, Neeti remains an astute observer of the human scene. In a trenchant and wonderfully ironic description of the relational world of her classroom, she notes that: "Nobody's mean from where I stand, but there are people who have hurt feelings." In this world of perfectly nice girls which she aspires to fit into, everyone—as she knows, including herself—"is talking behind people's backs."

At fourteen Neeti no longer speaks publicly—or even privately to her interviewer—about bad feelings, anger, or hatred. "I like to do the best I can," she says, when asked to describe herself. "I will do it to the best of my potential . . . I am conscientious about things that are going on around me, like I notice little things. I observe little things and I care for people around me." Asked how she has changed over the years, Neeti dutifully says that unlike when she was twelve, now she realizes "how important school is and how important friends are." Neeti appears to be the perfect girl this year—a straight A student with no bad thoughts or feelings, the girl everyone wishes she could be.

But when her interviewer asks Neeti to describe an experience of relational conflict, Neeti tells yet another version of the same

story of relational impasse she has struggled with for the past two years. "I have a friend," Neeti begins, who "is thinking about running for president." "She's asking me if she is going to win, and I know she is not going to win and I don't know whether to say, 'Yah, I know you are not going to win,' or just say, 'Try for it, you never know.'" Though Neeti knows the "competition is going to win," she chooses not to say this to her friend, "because it would hurt her if I was honest." "In [such] situations," Neeti explains, "I think it's better to be nice," since "she might have been a little angry with me if I was honest with her."

Neeti still holds the distinction between what she really feels and thinks inside and what she feels she can say to her friend. This year, however, she seems less confused and less ambivalent about how to act and what to say. In this situation where the conflict, she says, is "whether it's more important to tell what you think or whether to tell what that person wants you to think," her decision is now somehow clear and justifiable—she will do the "nice" thing, she will do "what [her friend] wanted" rather than hurt her or cause her to be a "little angry."

Although Neeti knows what she is doing—knows she is telling her friend what she thinks her friend wants to hear and not what she really thinks—she no longer agonizes about being dishonest, no longer struggles much with the gap between what she feels and what she says. Carefully scrutinizing her friends and relationships for any sign of conflict, Neeti holds herself at bay and becomes a reflection—a mirror or sounding board for what others "want [her] to think." Doubling her voice, Neeti feels good that she can know what she knows and yet protect her friend from her knowledge.

But though the relational surface looks smooth and calm and may even feel smooth and calm, Neeti is involved in relationships that are not psychological connections. In contrast with herself at twelve, when she brought her feelings into relationship—feelings of concern and anger and fear and sadness that led to open conflict and disruption and eventually to a greater understanding of herself and other people—Neeti has now taken her feelings out of rela-

tionship, and increasingly has difficulty voicing anything but the nice and kind self she shows the world.

For Neeti to buy into this world of perfection, to become the model student and the model friend, is not to speak about—and, we suggest, eventually not to know—her thoughts and feelings. Unlike Anna, whose disruption will continue to put her at political risk, Neeti's movement underground may eventually place her at risk psychologically.

#### Liza: Cover Girl

For Liza at twelve the struggle around what to know is audible in her voice, visible in her face.<sup>10</sup> "I don't know," she says over and over again when the interviewer asks her what stands out for her over the past year, "I don't know, probably grades."

#### *Why are grades important?*

I don't know, I don't know, it's for me and for my parents and so I try to do well so that, I don't know, for my future, for my parents, so that they're not disappointed, I don't know, for a lot of reasons.

At twelve Liza says she feels great loyalty and indebtedness to her parents—"I mean, they pay for me to go to this school," she says, "they pay for a good education, and it's not right to disappoint them." She has taken in her parents' voices, repeating their maxims for good living—"you can't, you just can't do whatever you want, you have to do what you should do . . . if you're perfectly capable and you have potential and stuff, there's no reason why you can't, you know, use that to get what you want out of life . . . you know, I just think that that's the way it should be, you should always try to do your best." Switching out of the personal "I" to a general "you," Liza's first person slips into a second person and she disappears. At twelve she rarely says what she thinks and feels in first-person voice, only the words that precede them: "I don't know, I've been brought up to do the right thing usually, if I know what it is . . . you just know . . . if you were brought up, you know, learning the proper way to do things and, you know."

To Liza, learning the "proper way" seems to mean finding a way out of conflict and disagreement, "taking an in-between side," she says, as she does when she and her parents disagree. In school, Liza says, she, like "everyone I know," takes the teacher's point of view, "because they're the ones holding the grade book." Privately she tries "to decide which is more right to you . . . without anyone else's opinion." Consciously taking what she knows safely underground, where she can examine what she is learning and decide for herself what she thinks and feels is right, twelve-year-old Liza leaves the world of her family and her classroom unaffected and unchanged by her voice, her feelings, ideas, and opinions.

Like Judy and Neeti, Liza at twelve comes up against a powerful wall of cultural norms and the conventions of female imagination, as she traverses the terrain between childhood and adolescence and travels from girl to woman. Liza wants desperately to be seen as "normal." Taking in the shoulds and shouldn'ts around her, she begins to find it difficult to describe herself in her own terms. "Everyone could just like say a lot of good things and bad things about themselves," she begins, "but I don't really know what to say, because I don't want to sound really queer or something . . . I don't know, I think I work pretty hard in school and I fit in pretty well." The threat of falling outside the boundaries of what is considered appropriate and acceptable threatens to silence her as she judges herself by others' standards, knows who she is because she fits in, and knows she fits in because her relational life appears typical, normal. "I'm just an average, everyday person who goes to school," she continues, "who has a best friend, I don't know . . . likes guys, goes places on the weekends, stays home all Sunday to do homework, I don't know . . . just normal."

Liza molds herself into her image of the average girl, the good girl, the proper girl as defined by the upper-middle-class white world she has grown up in: she does well in school (though not so well that she stands out), "gets along with" her family, has a lot of friends, "likes guys." So careful about how she looks and how well she fits in, Liza says little about how she feels and what she thinks. She does not want to say or do anything to disrupt her carefully con-

structed image—"You don't want to spread anything around," she says, "You don't want to cause anything to occur that doesn't have to."

But Liza is anything but average. Her looks and the degree of her involvement with boys have already placed her on the periphery of her seventh grade class, where she must be ever vigilant of how the other girls see her. Because she has left her girlfriends for "guys," Liza says, she has to keep her "eyes open all the time." As she is with adults in her life, Liza has to "be omniscient" around other girls. "You can't just ignore something," she explains to her interviewer, touching briefly on the problem of her reputation among the girls in her school, because if you did "it might cause you to, I don't know, regret something."

Her eyes open wide, Liza sounds a bit like Neeti as she makes inferences about what is "inside of" people by watching "the way they relate to each other and the way they relate to you." Paying close attention, Liza says, "I think you know what to say and what not to say"; you are "like sensitive about what you say so that you don't disturb or hurt [a friend] in any way." "But how would you deal with a disagreement between you and your friends?" her interviewer asks, wondering perhaps what she really thinks and feels about this tiptoeing around in her relationships. "I don't know," Liza adds, "by doing probably what you wanted to do in a way that would be discreet enough so that you wouldn't like—so that you wouldn't . . . I don't know, make it too obvious." Unlike younger children who, she says, "kick . . . or punch" people, Liza says she prefers "a pleasant fight, you know, where you kind of ignore the person or just try to step back."

Liza does not wish to be alienated, to feel alienated, from others. But living always in the gaze of others, waiting for the judgments of others, and yet never wanting to be "obvious," Liza feels pressure to act in ways that feel uncomfortably false. In a halting voice that alternates between first and second person she describes a time when she feels she's not being her true self: "I don't know . . . when you're probably just—I don't really know, I mean, when you're talking with someone who really, you know, is putting pressure on

## RIVERS INTO THE SEA

you . . . I don't know, you're constantly like smiling and laughing and talking about things that you don't know anything about." In touch with the pressure and discomfort she feels during such moments, Liza also has her finger on the pulse of what others need and want from her. At twelve, she seems balanced on a precipice, one minute hoping for genuine relationships—friends who are "really friends," she says, "will always stick by you"—the next minute stumbling on the dangers of fraudulence, feeling pressure to talk "about things that you don't know anything about."

Liza wants to be a "role model" of what she defines as the ideal woman—"someone who is not afraid to speak up . . . who's not really stupid"—yet her ambivalence is palpable. "[You want to be] a person who can speak out?" her interviewer asks, wondering how this view fits in with the Liza who is private and discreet and normal. "Yeah," Liza replies, "but who's not too . . . I don't really know . . ." Who's not too what, we wonder, as we listen to Liza's voice trail off. Too outspoken perhaps, too indiscreet, too improper, too disruptive? Liza, who says "I have a guilty conscience," polices herself against such extremes; she keeps her eyes and ears open "at all times" for signs of her own indiscretion.

Yet, this twelve-year-old girl, whose main problem, she says offhandedly, is "that I don't have blonde hair," clearly wishes to be more than a reflection of others' expectations, more than a receptacle for others' opinions, ideas, and values. Though she appears on the surface to take in her teacher's point of view uncritically, underneath she wants a teacher who speaks with "feeling . . . with an interesting tone in [her] voice . . . [who] brings some examples" from life experience. Liza wants to connect with what she is learning—to be, herself, a person who speaks out with feeling.

And so, twelve-year-old Liza struggles to stay with her feelings and thoughts as she tries to hold together the disparate voices she has taken in. Speaking sometimes in a voice laced with shoulds that promotes radical independence and autonomy, Liza tells of her desire to be mature, by which she means completely self-sufficient. Parents "are not always going to be there for the rest of your life,"

## LIZA: COVER GIRL

she explains to her interviewer. And you have to realize that "you either . . . take care of [things] by yourself or someone has to take care of [them] for you." Thus she abjures her relational desires and knowledge.

Mingled with this voice of emerging independence and separation is a voice of feminine silence and acceptance—a soft voice that knows when to be sensitive and when not to "disrupt," how to be "discreet" and compromising. Struggling with these competing voices, Liza sees the hint of an opening—"when people can see both ways, it's kind of like being bilingual, you know." The possibility of communicating with people in their own language is seductive to Liza because it removes the "reason for a lot of conflict." But as she dances back and forth between her "I don't know" and the all-knowing, all-seeing "you," which becomes the "eye" of the culture, the already internalized self-scrutiny that she carries from home to school and school to home again, we wonder how she will, without conflict, negotiate these disparate voices.

"I am basically the same person," thirteen-year-old Liza tells her interviewer a year later. "I think like my ideas have changed and everything like that," but "there's been no like radical change. I haven't changed that much. I think that I have grown psychologically, but . . . I haven't changed. I have kept like the same consistency." Yet, Liza soon implies that she stands in the midst of a cool wind of change that whips and swirls around her, moving her, almost imperceptibly, "to a different level of life . . . a different psychological level." Thirteen is a "pressured time," Liza explains, "because like, you know, your friends change and everything becomes really different and then suddenly you are not like a little kid anymore . . . You are a lot more complicated now. You have more things to worry about; more things to deal with, social pressures, everything."

Indeed, Liza and Liza's life sound more complicated. Her struggle to "fit in" and remain a safely discreet member of her class has given way to open tension with the other girls as she leaves them not only for the world of dating but for a different kind of friendship.



"I've had lots of boy friends," she tells her interviewer. "Girls are not always the best friends to have. I'd rather have a guy friend more than a girl friend." "Why is that?" her interviewer wonders.

"Because," Liza explains, "girl friends are really picky, you know, and like the slightest thing you do wrong, they're like, 'Oh,' and I don't know, guys are more accepting as friends I think . . . [girls] are more critical of you, you know, and they're always more, you have to be careful about what you do and say and all sorts of things like that . . . I think it is sort of generally true."

Liza connects her withdrawal from or disparagement of the world of her friends with their anger and criticism of her. Extricating herself from what she feels are the constraints of girls' jealousies, disconnecting from the girls who are in her mind so "picky" and critical, Liza maneuvers carefully in their presence, faking it for the sake of relationships which she sees as essential.

You're either more careful about what you say or you are sort of faking it, you know. You are faking . . . I don't know. Like if you are, I don't know, if you're sort of like thrown together with someone you try to like adapt to like them, so I don't know. You just sort of have to, I don't know, sometimes, if you know you are not going to get along by being yourself.

Even as Liza pulls further away from the girls in her class, she feels bad and "a little down" about the changes in her relationships. She expects there will be times like this in her life when friends "sort of go against you" and "you are doubting yourself" and "you are just bummed out," yet she sounds defensive and bitter about the "little fights and squabbles" she has with these girls. "If you don't care," about a person, she says, "if you don't get along with them anyway, then it doesn't matter." "If you don't care, it must be useless." After all, she decides, her classmates lack a kind of psychological maturity. Speaking in the general "you," Liza seems to underscore her alignment with adult views of maturity against the childishness of these girls: "If you act mature . . . [adults] will probably accept you as that . . . If you are given the opportunity to

act older and to get, you know, more privileges and to be more sophisticated . . . I think generally you will take it." Although she is "one of the youngest people in my whole class," she says, distancing herself further from her classmates, "I'm more mature than a lot of people that are older than I am." Moreover, it is "depressing," Liza says, that so many girls in her class act immature or "stupid." "That annoys me when someone is really stupid." "I don't have a lot of patience with stupidity, I really don't . . . I don't know, you can tell when they are faking it, you know, you can tell when they're acting dumb . . . I mean I don't understand why you would want to act dumb. That is not, I don't know, I would never try to do that."

To Liza, acting "stupid" or "dumb" means acting out, being silly or loud and speaking out. Perhaps for both reasons Liza distances herself emotionally and psychologically from the girls around her. She does not question how or why the girls in her class "that used to be the best class"—"We had teachers like you wouldn't believe saying how good we were"—now "frequently run laps in the gym" for breaking school rules and acting out. She does not question why a girl in her class who is "really bright" gradually, over the last few years, feels "worse and worse about herself, you know, getting really bad grades and everything." "She should have just worked," Liza says, rather than asking why such a smart girl would purposefully "write in the blanks [of a science test] like the Sesame Street people or something." "It just totally blows me over," Liza says in disbelief. "I don't understand." Yet Liza talks about these girls.

Distancing herself from her classmates and what they are doing and saying, Liza also describes moments of genuine relationship with herself and with these girls. "There is sort of like an instinct in every person," Liza tells her interviewer, "there is something in you that makes you want to do something . . . impulsive . . . spontaneous," like the time she and her girlfriends cut class: "Eight of us, you know, in a little line walking down the halls," Liza says, her eyes twinkling with the memory. "I mean, it was so natural, it was so successful . . . it felt good, I really did. It felt like we were heroes

## RIVERS INTO THE SEA

for a while . . . Sometimes it feels really nice to rebel, because I don't do it often." Speaking now in the first person, Liza places a moment of authenticity—a moment of genuine pleasure—in the context of a rare act of resistance with girls in her class. But neither she nor her interviewer comment on this scene that stands in such odd relationship to what she has said moments before about girls and girlfriends.

As Liza overrides this "I" with the "eye" of the culture, and her girlfriends for the "true friend relationships of boys," she exchanges those rare experiences of spontaneity, times when she feels "impulsive," "so natural" and like her "true self," for a maturity which sounds forced, artificial, and fake. The definition of maturity Liza espouses is at odds with her experience of the girls in her class. And yet she cannot resolve which is faked and which is real.

Against the story of cutting class, Liza describes her "mature" relationship with her boyfriend, four years her senior. This is a relationship of "limits" and control for Liza, since she has always been aware that her boyfriend "could want more than you could give, you know, in the sense that, the physical sense." Reflecting on her feelings about her boyfriend's desire, Liza says:

I mean, I will refuse to a certain point . . . I think that every person has to establish a limit and then you should stick with it, you know, because as I said before, it's like you can't change your priorities in the middle of things, because if you do, then you are really weak, you know, you know that you are like a weak person. And it's really important to think things like that through. You know, just sort of, as if, you know, you had to get in the car with a drunk driver, it's sort of, you know, a decision like that, I think.

Equating her relationship with her boyfriend to getting in a car with a drunk driver, Liza conveys what she cannot say directly—her fear that she is in a life-threatening situation. Knowing about the dangers of getting "pulled under, so to speak," about being seduced into feeling "wonderful" without "thinking things through," she sets and patrols her boundaries.

## LIZA: COVER GIRL

Liza, who says she finds guys more accepting and easier to talk with, struggles to say what she feels and thinks to her boyfriend who, she says, "is sort of a possessive person." She cannot, she says, tell him she dislikes this in him and wants to see other people, for fear of making him "really mad . . . He acts sort of like, 'You are going out with me and that's it,' she explains, "and I don't know." She decides to "let it"—meaning her feelings—"go" for a while, "put [my wishes] out of my mind," she says, "contradict" herself, by which she means override her voice, change her priorities, and, because "I wasn't sure of his reactions, so I didn't tell him . . . He could have gotten mad, he could have gotten upset. I mean, I didn't know what would come, you know, I didn't know what would come of it."

The social landscape has changed for Liza at thirteen but her struggle, so close to the linguistic surface,<sup>12</sup> has not. Now caught between relationships with her girlfriends, which are filled with ambivalence and conflict, and the world of "maturity" and romance, where under the shadow of a possessiveness which carries with it a threat of violence, she finds it difficult to know what she knows and speak her feelings, Liza does not know with whom she is safe, whom she can trust, "who's really worth it and who's not."

At fourteen and in the ninth grade, Liza has dyed her hair blonde, turning her wish for blonde hair at twelve into a reality. "I'm a busy person," Liza tells her interviewer this year, "Your social life seems to pick up when you get taller, get bigger, you know, older, and stuff." Observing herself from outside of herself, constantly aware of her "looks," Liza explains her changes in visual terms:

I think just getting older. I don't know, my appearance has changed a lot, like my physical appearance, like I am taller and thinner than I used to be. I don't know, I am all around better looking than I used to be, so I guess when you are being better looking than you used to be, you feel a little better than you used to feel . . . I don't know, like I used to be fat, be sort of fat . . . I just got sort of different looking than I used to be . . . I don't know, like if other people used to criticize me for the way I looked instead of look at me now, you know.

## RIVERS INTO THE SEA

Seeing herself through the eyes of others, Liza proudly describes the extent of her physical changes:

Like I walked into school this year and a teacher asked me who I was, and like I have been going here since first grade and I said, like, "No, you can't be that person." And I'm like, "Yeah. I just got sort of different looking than I used to be."

Liza's gaze has shifted to a point outside herself, the point in the social world where "everyone's always commenting," and as she aligns herself with this gaze, she is unrecognizable. "I still have my personality," she adds almost as an afterthought, as if to rescue herself from disappearing, as if she feels in danger of losing herself.

Liza's appearance (or disappearance) is striking. Becoming thinner and thinner has changed her "attitude" as well as her social life, especially her relationship with her boyfriend and her best friend. Through visual metaphors she positions her self and her relationships in space and in time: "I am all around better looking" she says, speaking again of how she has changed over the year. [Me and my boyfriend] "drive around in [a sports car] together," she says, explaining why her best friend calls their relationship "perfect." "You know, we look good together, have a good relationship."

Held in place by the gaze of others and now by her own self-serving ego, Liza nevertheless continues to feel an intense desire for relationships. "You can't survive like alone, you can't like sit on a mountain and be alone," she tells her interviewer. "You can't live alone, you need other people." Yet she feels "possessed" and "trapped" in her relationship with her boyfriend.

After returning from spring vacation with a girlfriend, feeling self-possessed and free, Liza finds it more and more difficult to talk with her boyfriend and to say what she feels: that she is angry with him and not sure she can stay with herself and remain in the relationship. When he overrides her attempts to speak with his arguments and protests, she finally breaks up with him:

I mean he is very possessive of me . . . and he called one night and I just said, "You know, I am really tired of your possessiveness and I do have my own life, although you don't think I do" . . . I

## LIZA: COVER GIRL

said, "I really can't handle this anymore" . . . I was, "I told you that I needed some space and I just need to breathe."

But her boyfriend is persistent and Liza, responding to his pursuit of her and also perhaps to his recklessness and daring, decides that she still likes him.

I said, "You are grounded and you just took the car and left." He said, "Well, that was important to me. I wanted to get you." I said, "Boy, he is going to get himself in trouble for me." I said, "Alright!" It really showed me that he cared, I guess . . . That action sort of taught me, he really cares, and I really still do like him.

Although "he was just really possessive," and she initially thought of "how I could be sort of free, how I could be unattached," Liza stays in the relationship. "He cared about me enough to like pursue," she says. Thinking about the "really good time" they had together and also the "security" of the relationship, Liza covers over her feelings of anger and frustration by naming them "impulsive" and "irrational": "It's good to be like your own person," she explains, "but there is a point where you've got to say, you know, I really did care about him and I was just being sort of irrational." After all, she adds, "You can't criticize someone for caring too much."

Liza does not wish to hurt her boyfriend since "it is not good to hurt someone," she tells her interviewer; "I didn't have anything to lose." Yet what Liza loses is voice, saying that a relationship that did not feel good to her is not good for her. Taken over by her boyfriend's romantic sacrifice, swept away by his care and hurt feelings, she justifies straying in a possessive and oppressive relationship by effectively retelling her story—renaming her anger and loss, her desire for freedom, to "have my own life" "irrational."

Relationships pose unsolvable dilemmas to fourteen-year-old Liza. Back and forth she slips on the thin ice of a paradox: To meet a standard of maturity she calls "independent," she moves herself out of relationship with others—with the girls in her class and with her best friend: if you become too "dependent," she says, "you can sometimes get mixed up as to who you are. You can sort of lose your

individual self." Out of relationship with others, however, she loses touch with herself and becomes really confused. Relationships then become truly dangerous and treacherous for Liza. With her boyfriend, for example, she no longer knows how she feels and what her point of view is and so she is persuaded in the name of love to remain in an emotionally abusive relationship.

Liza's insights about herself and her relationships seem to be gradually dissolving. Struggling to keep her thoughts and feelings above the pull of the currents swirling around her, she grabs first for the isolation or "maturity" of independence, then for the security of romance. She does not seem to remember the creative "private" strategies she used at twelve to stay with her voice, with the inner world of her thoughts and feelings when it was dangerous to speak aloud. Now fourteen and very blonde, Liza is also anorexic.

Girls at the edge of adolescence face a central relational crisis: to speak what they know through experience of themselves and of relationships creates political problems—disagreement with authorities, disrupting relationships—while not to speak leaves a residue of psychological problems: false relationships and confusion as to what they feel and think. Anna, Neeti, and Liza demonstrate three streams through this relational impasse, three responses to a crisis in women's development.

Anna, willing to be outspoken and disruptive, openly resisting becoming Pollyanna or taking on her view of the relational world, strays with what she feels and thinks and therefore knows. But she is not sure she wants to—or will ever be able to—bring herself fully into the world, to ever have a sense of place. Staying with her voice and also imagining herself living on a chicken farm in Montana writing books, Anna points to the dangers inherent in her resistance, the particular losses and the longings she feels.

Outspoken at twelve, Neeti moves her thoughts and feelings underground. She clearly names the discrepancy between what she feels and thinks and what she can say without hurting people or jeopardizing relationships. Neeti lives a double life. A perfect student, liked by everyone, she becomes, over time, emotionally dis-

connected from school and involved in relationships that are troubling to her. And Liza illustrates how the conscious underground can turn into a psychological resistance. A member of the underground at twelve, Liza disconnects from her childhood friends and aligns herself with standards of beauty and visions of maturity which for the most part have been defined by men. Out of relationship with others, Liza becomes more and more confused and out of touch with herself, until she no longer knows what she knows or can name what is happening in her relationships—her boyfriend's emotional abuse of her and her own abuse of her body.

For girls coming of age in this culture at this time, adolescence marks a potential point of departure from life experience. Because adolescence is a time when a variety of perspectives can be held and coordinated, a time when the hypothetical and the abstract can be entertained, girls risk losing touch with the specific—with their bodies, with their feelings, with their relationships, with their experience. And thus they are in danger of losing their ability to distinguish what is true from what is said to be true, what feels loving from what is said to be love, what feels real from what is said to be reality. Consequently, at a time of heightened physical and psychological risks in relationships, girls becoming young women are in danger of losing their ability to know the difference between true and false relationships.