

Packer, Z.Z. "Brownies." *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*. New York: Riverbend, 2004. Print. (Some EU students appreciated the use of asterisks in this slightly edited version.)

By our second day at **Camp Crescendo**, the girls in my Brownie troop had decided to kick the butts of each and every girl in Brownie Troop 909. Troop 909 was doomed from the first day of camp; they were white girls, **their complexions a blend of ice cream: Strawberry, vanilla. They turtled out from their bus in pairs, their rolled-up sleeping bags chromatized with Disney characters: Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Mickey Mouse; or the generic ones cheap parents bought: Washed-out rainbows, unicorns, curly-eyelashed frogs.**

Our troop was wending its way past their bus, past the ranger station, past the colorful trail guide drawn like a treasure map, locked behind glass.

"Man, did you smell them?" Arnetta said, giving the girls a slow once-over. "They smell like Chihuahuas. Wet Chihuahuas." Their troop was still at the entrance, and though we had passed them by yards, Arnetta raised her nose in the air and grimaced.

Arnetta said this from the very rear of the line, far away from Mrs. Margolin, who always strung our troop behind her like a brood of obedient ducklings. Ms. Margolin even looked like a mother duck -- she had her hair cropped close to a small ball of a head, almost no neck, and huge, miraculous breasts. She wore enormous belts that looked like the kind that weightlifters wear, except her would be cheap metallic gold or rabbit fur or covered with gigantic fake sunflowers, and often these belts would become nature lessons in and of themselves. "See," Mrs. Margolin once said to us, pointing to her belt, "this one's made entirely from the feathers of baby pigeons."

The belt layered with feathers was uncanny enough, but I was more disturbed by the realization that I had never actually seen a baby pigeon. I searched weeks for one in vain -- scampering after pigeons wherever I was downtown with my father.

But nature lessons were not Mrs. Margolin's top priority. She saw the position of troop leader as an evangelical post. Back at the A.M.E. church where our Brownie meetings were held, Mrs. Margolin was especially fond of imparting religious aphorisms by means of acrostics -- "Satan" was the "Serpent Always Tempting and Noisome"; she'd refer to the "Bible" as "Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth." Whenever she quizzed us on these, expecting to hear the acrostics parroted back to her, only Arnetta's correct replies soared over our vague mumbblings. "Jesus?" Mrs. Margolin might ask expectantly, and Arnetta alone would dutifully answer, "Jehovah's Example Saving Us Sinners."

"Serious Chihuahuas," Octavia added, and though neither Arnetta nor Octavia could spell "Chihuahua," had never seen a Chihuahua, trisyllabic words had gained a sort of exoticism within our fourth-grade set at Woodrow Wilson Elementary. Arnetta and Octavia would flip through the dictionary, determined to find the vulgar-sounding ones like "Djibouti" and "asinine," and mix them into conversation.

"Caucasian Chihuahuas," Arnetta said. That did it. The girls in my troop turned elastic; Drema and Elise doubled over on each other like inextricably entwined kites; Octavia slapped her belly; Janice jumped straight up in the air, then did it again, as if to slam-dunk her own head. They couldn't stop laughing. No one had laughed that hard -- well, not since this boy named Martez had stuck a pencil in an electric socket and spent the whole day with a strange grin on his face.

"Girls, girls," said our parent helper Mrs. Hedy. Mrs. Hedy was Octavia's mother, and she wagged her index finger perfunctorily like a windshield wiper. "Stop it, now. Be good." She said

this loud enough to be heard, but lazily, bereft of any feeling or indication that she meant it to be obeyed, as though she could say these words again in the same pitch if a button were pressed somewhere on her body.

But the rest of the girls didn't stop. They only laughed louder. The word "Caucasian" had got them all going. One day at school about a month before the Brownie camping trip, Arnetta turned to a boy wearing impossibly high-ankled floodwater jeans and said, "What are you? Caucasian?" The word took off from there, and soon everything was Caucasian. If you ate too fast you ate like a Caucasian, if you ate too slow you ate like a Caucasian. The biggest feat anyone could do, could pull off, at Woodrow Wilson was to jump off the swing in midair, right at the highest point of its arc, and if you fell, (as I had done more than once), instead of landing on your feet, knees bent Olympic gymnast-style, Arnetta and Octavia were prepared to comment. They'd look at each other with the silence of passengers who'd narrowly escaped a serious accident, and they would nod their heads in solemn horror. "Caucasian."

Even the only white kid in our school, Dennis, got in on the Caucasian act. That time when Martez stuck the pencil in the socket, Dennis pointed and yelled, "That is so Caucasian."

When you lived in the south suburbs of Atlanta, it was easy to forget about whites. Whites were like those baby pigeons: Real and existing, but rarely seen or thought about. Everyone had been to Rich's to go clothes shopping, everyone had seen white girls and their mothers coo-cooing over dresses; everyone had been to the downtown library and seen white businessmen swish by importantly, wrist flexed in front of them to check the time as if they would change from Clark Kent into Superman. But those images were as fleeting as cards shuffled in a deck, whereas the ten white girls behind us -- invaders, as Arnetta would later call them -- were instantly real and memorable, with their long shampoo-commercial hair, straight as spaghetti from the box. This alone was reason for envy and hatred. The only black girl most of us knew that ever had hair that long was Octavia, whose hair hung past her butt like a Hawaiian hula dancer's. The sight of Octavia's mane prompted other girls to listen to her reverentially, as though whatever she had to say would somehow activate their own follicles. For example, when, on the first day of camp, Octavia made as if to speak, and everyone fell silent. "Nobody," Octavia said, "calls us n*g**rs."

At the end of that first day, when half of our troop made their way back to the cabin after tag-team restroom visits, Arnetta said she'd heard one of the Troop 909 girls call Daphne a n*g**r. "Man, I completely heard the girl," Arnetta said. "Right, Daphne?"

Daphne hardly ever spoke, but when she did, her voice was petite and tinkly, the voice one might expect from a shiny new earring. She had written a poem once for Langston Hughes Day, a poem brimming with all the teacher-winning ingredients -- trees and oceans, sunsets and moon -- but what cinched the poem for the grownups, snatching the win away from Octavia's musical ode to Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, was Daphne's last lines:

You are my father, the veteran.
When you cry in the dark
It rains and rains and rains in my heart.

She always wore clean, though faded, jumpers and dresses when Chic jeans were the fashion, but when she went up to the dais to receive her prize journal, pages trimmed in gold, she wore a new dress with a velveteen bodice and a taffeta skirt as wide as an umbrella. All the kids clapped, though none of them understood the poem. But I had read encyclopedias the way others read comics. I still didn't get it. Those last lines pricked me, though. I'd whisper over my Fruit Loops like a mantra, "You are my father, the veteran. You are my father, the veteran. The

veteran," until my father, who acted in plays as Caliban and Othello and was not a veteran, marched me up to my teacher one morning and said, "Can you tell me what's wrong with this kid?"

I thought Daphne and I might become friends, but I think she grew spooked by my whispering those lines to her all the time, begging her to tell me what they meant, and I soon understood that two quiet people like us were better off quiet alone.

"Daphne, did you hear them call you a n*g**r?" Arnetta asked, giving Daphne a nudge.

The sun was setting behind the trees, and their leafy tops formed a canopy of black lace for the flame of the sun to pass through. Daphne shrugged her shoulders at first, and then slowly nodded her head when Arnetta gave her a hard look.

Twenty minutes later, when my restroom group returned to the cabin, Arnetta was still talking about Troop 909. My restroom group had passed by some of the 909 girls, and for the most part they deferred to us, waving us into the bathroom, letting us go even though they had gotten there first.

We had seen them, but from afar, never within their orbit enough to see whether their faces were all the way all white girls appeared on TV -- ponytailed and full of energy, bubbling over with love and money. All I could see that was that some of them rapidly fanned their faces with their hands, though the heat of the day had long passed. A few seemed to be lolling their heads in slow circles, half purposefully.

"We cannot let them get away with that," Arnetta said dropping her voice to a laryngitic whisper. "We can't let them get away with calling us n*g**rs. I say we teach them a lesson." She sat down cross-legged on a sleeping bag, an embittered Buddha, eyes glimmering acrylic-black. "We can't go telling Mrs. Margolin, either. Mrs. Margolin will say something about doing undo others and the path of righteousness and all. Forget that s**t." She let her eyes flutter irreverently til they were half-closed, as if she was ignoring an insult not worth returning. We could all hear Mrs. Margolin outside, gathering the last of the metal campware.

Nobody said anything for a while. Usually people were quiet after Arnetta spoke. Her tone had an upholstered confidence that somehow was both regal and vulgar at once. It demanded a few moments of silence in its wake, like the ringing of a church bell or the playing of taps.

"Well?" Arnetta said. She looked as if she had discerned the hidden severity of the situation and was waiting for the rest of us to catch up. Everybody looked from Arnetta to Daphne. It was, after all, Daphne who had supposedly been called the name, but Daphne sat on the bare cabin floor flipping through the pages of the Girl Scout handbook, eyebrows arched in mock wonder, as if the handbook were a catalog full of bright and startling foreign costumes. Janice broke the silence.

"They gone be sleeping," she whispered conspiratorially, "then we gone sneak into they cabin, we gone put daddy longlegs in they sleeping bags. And then they'll wake up. And then we will beat 'em until they're as flat as frying pans." She jammed her first into the palm of her hand and then made a sizzling sound.

Janice's country accent was laughable, her looks homely, her jumpy acrobatics embarrassing to behold. Arnetta and Octavia volleyed amused, arrogant smiles whenever Janice opened her mouth, but Janice never caught the hint, spoke whenever she wanted to, fluttered around Arnetta and Octavia, futilely offering her opinions to their departing backs. Whenever Arnetta and Octavia shooed her away, Janice loitered until the two would finally sigh and ask, "What is it, Ms. Caucasoid? What do you want?"

"Shut up, Janice," Octavia said, letting a fingered loop of hair fall to her waist as though the sound of Janice's voice had ruined her fun of hair twisting.

Janice obeyed, her mouth hung open in a loose grin, unflappable, unhurt.

"All right," Arnetta said, standing up. "We are going to have a secret meeting and talk about what we're going to do."

Everyone gravely nodded her head. The word "secret" had a built-in importance, the modifier form of the word carried more clout than the noun. A secret meant nothing; it was like gossip: Just a bit of unpleasant knowledge about someone who happened to be someone other than yourself. A secret meeting, or a secret club, was entirely different.

That was when Arnetta turned to me as though she knew that doing so was both a compliment and a charity.

"Snot, you're not going to be a bitch and tell Mrs. Margolin, are you?"

I had been called "Snot" ever since first grade, when I sneezed in class and two long ropes of mucus had splattered a nearby girl.

"Hey. Maybe you didn't hear them right. I mean" --

"Are you gonna tell on us or not?" was all Arnetta wanted to know, and by the time the question was asked, the rest of our Brownie troop looked at me as though they'd already decided their course of action, me being the only impediment.

Camp Crescendo used to double as a high-school-band and field hockey camp. There were balls stacked there on the field like a shrine of ostrich eggs embedded in the ground.

On the second day of camp, Troop 909 was dancing around the mound of hockey balls, their limbs jangling awkwardly, their cries like the constant summer squeal of an amusement park. There was a stream that bordered the field hockey lawn, and girls from my troop settled next to it, scarfing down the last of lunch: Sandwiches made from salami and slices of tomatoes that had gotten waterlogged from the melting ice in the cooler. From the stream bank, Arnetta eyed the Troop 909 girls, scrutinizing their every movement to glean inspiration for battle.

"Man," Arnetta said, "we could bumrush them right now if that damn lady would leave."

The 909 troop leader was a white woman with a severe pageboy hairdo of an ancient Egyptian. She lay on a picnic blanket, sphinx-like, eating a banana, sometimes holding it out in front of her like a microphone. Beside her sat a girl slowly flapping one hand like a bird with a broken wing. Occasionally, the leader would call out the names of girls who'd attempted leapfrogs and flips, or of girls who yelled too loudly, or strayed far from the circle.

"I'm just glad Big Fat Mama's not following us here," Octavia said. "At least we don't have to worry about her." Mrs. Margolin, Octavia assured us, was having her Afternoon Devotional. Mrs. Hedy was cleaning mud from her espadrilles in the cabin.

"I handled them." Arnetta sucked on her teeth and proudly grinned. "I told her we were going to gather leaves."

"Gather leaves," Octavia said, nodding respectfully. "That's a good one. Especially since they're so mad crazy about this camping thing." Her hair hung down her back in two braids like a squaw's. "I mean, really, I don't even know why they call it camping -- all we ever do with Nature is find some twigs and say something like, 'Wow, this came out of that tree.'"

Elise began humming the tune to "Karma Chameleon," all the girls joining in, their hums light and facile. Janice also began to hum, against everyone else, the high-octane opening chords of, "Beat It."

"I love me some Michael Jackson," Janice said when she finished humming, smacking her lips as though Michael Jackson were her favorite meal. "I will marry me Michael Jackson."

Before anyone had a chance to impress upon Janice the impossibility of this, Arnetta suddenly rose, made a sun visor of her hand, and watched Troop 909 leave the field hockey lawn.

"Dammit," she said. "We've got to get them alone."

"They won't ever be alone," I said. All the rest of the girls looked at me, for I usually kept quiet. If I spoke even a word, I could count on someone calling me Snot. Everyone seemed to think that we could beat up these girls; no one ever entertained the thought that they might fight back. "The only time they'll be unsupervised is in the bathroom."

"Oh, shut up, Snot," Octavia said.

But Arnetta slowly nodded her head. "The bathroom," she said. "The bathroom. The bathroom. The bathroom."

According to Octavia's watch, it took us five minutes to hike to the restrooms, which were midway between our cabin and the cabins of Troop 909. Inside, the mirrors above the sinks returned only the vaguest of reflections, as though someone had take a scouring pad to their surface to obscure the shine. Pine needles, leaves, and dirty, flattened wads of chewing gum covered the floor like a mosaic. Wads of matted hair webbed the drains in the middle of the floor. Above the sinks and below the mirrors, stacks of folded white towels lay on a long metal counter.

"Wow, what a mess," Elise said.

"Oh, you can say that again."

Arnetta leaned against the doorjamb of a restroom stall. "This is where they'll be again," she said. Just seeing the place, just having a plan, seemed to satisfy her. "We'll go in and talk to them. You know, 'How ya doing? How long you all going to be here?' That sort of thing. And then Octavia and I are going to tell them what happens when they call any one of us a n*g**r."

"I'm going to say something, too," Janice said.

Arnetta considered this. "Sure, whatever. Whatever you want."

Janice pointed her finger like a gun at Octavia and rehearsed the line she thought up. "'We gonna teach you a lesson.' That's what I'm going to say." She narrowed her eyes like a mobster from TV, and she yelled, "We gonna teach you girls a lesson."

With the back of her hand, Octavia brushed Janice's finger away. "You couldn't teach me to shit in a toilet, girl."

"But," I said, "what if they say, 'We didn't say that'? What if they didn't call anyone a N-I-G-G-E-R?"

"Snot," Arnetta said, "don't think. Just fight. If you even know how."

Everyone laughed except Daphne. "Daphne, you don't have to fight. We are doing this for you."

Daphne walked to the counter, took a clean paper towel, and carefully folded it like a map. With it, she began to pick up the trash all around. Everyone watched.

"Come on," Arnetta said to everyone, "let's beat it." We all ambled toward the doorway, where the sunshine made one large white rectangle of light. We were immediately blinded, and we shielded our eyes with our hands and our forearms.

"Daphne, are you coming?" Arnetta asked.

We all looked back at the bending girl, the thin of her back hunched like the back of a custodian sweeping a stage, caught in limelight. Stray strands of her hair were lit near-transparent, thin fiber-optic strands. She did not nod yes to the question, nor did she shake her head no. She abided, bent. Then she began again picking up leaves, wads of paper, the cotton

fluff innards from a torn, scuffed toy. She did it so methodically, so exquisitely, so humbly, she must have been trained. I thought of those dresses she wore, faded and old, yet so pressed and clean. I then saw the poverty in them; I then could imagine her mother, cleaning the houses of others, returning home, weary.

"I guess she's not coming."

We left her and headed back to our cabin, over pine needles and leaves, taking the path full of shade.

"What about our secret meeting?" Elise asked.

Arnetta enunciated her words in a way that denied contradiction. "We just had it."

It was nearing our bedtime but the sun had not yet set.

"Hey. Your mama's coming," Arnetta said to Octavia when she saw Mrs. Hedy walk toward the cabin, sniffing. When Octavia's mother wasn't giving bored, parochial orders, she sniffed continuously, mourning an imminent divorce from her husband. She might begin a sentence, "I don't know what Robert will do when Octavia and I are gone. Who's going to buy him cigarettes?" and Octavia would hotly whisper, "Mama," in a way that meant: "Please do not talk about our problems in front of everyone. Please shut up."

But when Mrs. Hedy began talking about her husband, thinking about her husband, seeing clouds shaped like the head of her husband, she couldn't be quiet, and no one could dislodge her from the comfort of her own world. Only one thing could pick her up -- Brownie songs. If the girls were quiet, and Mrs. Hedy was in her dopey, sorrowful mood, she would say, "Y'all know I like those songs, girls. Why don't you sing one?" Everyone would groan, except me and Daphne. I liked the songs.

"Come on, everybody," Octavia said drearily. "She likes the Brownie song best."

We sang, loud enough to reach Mrs. Hedy.

I've got something in my pocket;
It belongs across my face.
And I keep it very close at hand
In a most convenient place.
I'm sure you couldn't guess it
If you guessed a long, long while.
So I'll take it out and put it on --
It's a great big Brownie smile.

The Brownie song was supposed to be sung cheerfully, as though we were elves in a workshop singing merrily as we cobbled shoes, but everyone but me hated the song, so they sang it like a maudlin record played on the most sluggish of rpms.

"That was good," Mrs. Hedy said, closing the cabin door behind her. "Wasn't that nice, Linda?"

"Praise God," Mrs. Margolin answered without raising her head from the chore of counting out Popsicle sticks for the next day's craft sessions.

"Sing another one," Mrs. Hedy said. She said it with a sort of joyful aggression, like a drunk I had once seen who refused to leave a Korean grocery.

"God, Mama, get over it," Octavia whispered in a voice meant only for Arnetta, but Mrs. Hedy heard it and started to leave the cabin.

"Don't go," Arnetta said. She ran after Mr. Hedy and held her by the arm. "We haven't finished singing yet." She nudged us with a single look. "Let's sing the 'Friends Song.' For Mrs. Hedy."

Although I liked most of the songs, I hated this one.
Make new friends
But keep the old.
One is silver
And the other gold.

If most of the girls in the troop could be any type of metal, they'd be bunched-up wads of tinfoil or maybe rusty iron nails you had to get tetanus shots for.

"No, no, no," Mrs. Margolin said before anybody could start in on the "Friends Song."
"An uplifting song. Something to lift her up and take her mind off of these earthly burdens."

Arnetta and Octavia rolled their eyes. Everyone knew what song Mrs. Margolin was talking about, and no one, no one, wanted to sing it.

"Oh, please, no," a voice said. "Not 'The Doughnut Song.'"

"Oh, please, not 'The Doughnut Song,'" Octavia pleaded.

"I'll brush my teeth two times if I don't have to sing 'The Doughnut'" --

"Sing," Mrs. Margolin demanded.

We sang.

Life without Jesus is like a doughnut.

A doughnut, a doughnut.

Life without Jesus is like a doughnut.

There's a hole in the middle of my soul.

There were other verses, involving other pastries, but we stopped after the first one and cast glances towards Mrs. Margolin to see if we could gain a reprieve. Mrs. Margolin's eyes fluttered blissfully. She was half asleep.

"Awww," Mrs. Hedy said, as though giant Mrs. Margolin were a cute baby, "Mrs. Margolin's had a long day."

"Yes, indeed," Ms. Margolin answered. "If you don't mind, I'm just going to go to the lodge where the beds are. I haven't been the same since the operation."

I had not heard of this operation, or when it occurred, since Mrs. Margolin had never missed the once-a-week Brownie meeting, but I could see from Daphne's face that she was concerned, and I could see that the other girls had decided that Mrs. Margolin's operation must have happened long ago in some time unconnected to our lives. But nevertheless they put on sad faces. We all had been taught that adulthood was full of sorrow and pain, taxes and bills, dreaded work and dealings with whites, sickness and death. So I tried to do what the others did. I just tried to look silent.

"Oh, go right ahead, Linda," Ms. Hedy said. "I'll watch the girls." Mrs. Hedy seemed to forget about divorce for a moment; she looked at us with dewy eyes, like we were some mysterious furry creatures.

"Come on, everybody," Arnetta said after Mrs. Margolin left. "Time for us to wash up."

Everyone watched Mrs. Hedy closely, wondering whether she would insist on coming with us since it was night, making a fight with Troop 909 nearly impossible. Troop 909 would soon be in the bathroom, washing their faces and brushing their teeth -- completely unsuspecting of our ambush.

"We won't be long," Arnetta said. "We're old enough to go to the bathrooms by ourselves."

Mrs. Hedy pursed her lips. "Well, I guess you Brownies are almost Girl Scouts, right?"

"Right!"

"Just one more badge," Drema said.

"And about," Octavia droned, "a million more cookies to sell."

Octavia looked at us all. Now's our chance, her face seemed to say, but our chance to do what, I didn't exactly know.

Finally, Mrs. Hedy walked to the doorway where Octavia stood dutifully waiting to say good-bye, but looking bored doing it. Mrs. Hedy held Octavia's chin. "You'll be good?"

"Yes, Mama."

"And remember to pray for me and your father? If I'm asleep when you come back?"

"Yes, Mama."

When the other girls had finished getting their toothbrushes and washcloths and flashlights for the group restroom trip, I was drawing pictures of tiny birds with too many feathers. Daphne was sitting on her sleeping bag, reading.

"You're not going to come?" Octavia said.

Daphne shook her head.

"I'm gonna stay, too," I said. "I'll go to the restroom when Daphne and Ms. Hedy go."

Arnetta leaned down toward me and whispered so that Mrs. Hedy, who had taken over Mrs. Margolin's task of counting Popsicle sticks, couldn't hear. "No, Snot. If we get in trouble, you're going to get in trouble with the rest of us."

We made our way through the darkness by flashlight. The tree branches that had shaded us just hours before, along the same path, looked now like arms sprouting menacing hands. The stars sprinkled the sky like spilt salt. They seemed fastened to the darkness, high up, their places fixed and definite as we stirred beneath them.

Some, like me, were quiet because we were afraid of the dark; others were talking like crazy for the same reason.

"Wow," said Drema, looking up. "Why are all these stars out here? I never see stars back on Oneida Street."

"It's a camping trip, that's why," Octavia said. "You're supposed to see stars on a camping trips."

Janice said, "This place smells like my mother's air freshener."

These are pine woods," Elise said. "Your mother probably uses pine air freshener."

Janice mouthed an exaggerated "Oh," nodding her head as though she just then understood one of the world's great secrets.

No one talked about fighting. Everyone was afraid enough just walking through the infinite deep of the woods. Even though I didn't fight to fight, I was afraid of fighting, I felt like I was a part of the rest of the troop; like I should be defending something. We trudged against the slight incline of the path, Arnetta leading the way.

"You know," I said, "their leader will be there. Or they won't even be there. It's dark already. Last night the sun was still in the sky. I'm sure they've already finished."

Arnetta acted as if she hadn't heard me. I followed her gaze with my flashlight, and that's when I saw the squares of light in the darkness. The bathroom was just ahead.

But the girls were there. We could hear them before we could see them.

"Octavia and I will go in first so they'll think that it's just two of us. And then wait until I say, 'We're gonna teach you a lesson,' and then bust in. That'll surprise them."

"That's what I was supposed to say," Janice said.

Arnetta went inside, Octavia next to her. Janice followed, and the rest of us waited outside.

They were in there for what seemed like whole minutes, but something was wrong. Arnetta hadn't given the signal yet. I was with the girls outside when I heard one of the Troop 909 girls say, "NO. That did NOT happen!"

That was to be expected, that they'd deny the whole thing. But the girl, though, sounded as though her tongue was caught in her mouth. "That's a BAD word!" the girl continued. "We don't say BAD words."

"Let's go in," Elise said.

"No," Drema said, "I don't want to. What if we get beat up?"

"Snot?" Elise turned to me, her flashlight blinding. It was the first time anyone had asked my opinion, though I knew they were just asking because they were afraid.

"I say we go inside just to see what's going on."

"But Arnetta didn't give us the signal," Drema said. "She's supposed to say, 'We're gonna teach you a lesson,' and I didn't hear her say it."

"C'mon on," I said. "Let's just go in."

We went inside. There we found the white girls -- about five girls huddled up next to one big girl, and I instantly knew she was the owner of voice we heard. Arnetta and Octavia inched towards us as we walked through the door.

"I think," Octavia said, whispering to Elise, "they're retarded."

"We ARE NOT retarded!" the big girl said. It was obvious that she was, that they all were. The girls around her began to whimper.

"They are just pretending," Arnetta said, trying to convince us. "I know they are."

Octavia turned to Arnetta. "Arnetta, let's just leave."

Janice came out of a stall, happy and relieved, then she suddenly remembered her line, pointed to the big girl and said, "We're gonna teach you a lesson."

"Shut up, Janice," Octavia said, but her heart was not in it. Arnetta's face was set in a lost, deep scowl. Octavia turned to the big girl and said, loudly, slowly, as if they were all deaf, "We're going to leave. It was nice meeting you. Okay? You don't have to tell anyone we were here. Okay?"

"Why not?" said the big girl, like a taunt. When she spoke, her lips did not meet, her mouth did not close. Her tongue grazed the roof of her mouth like a little pink fish. "You'll get in trouble. I know. I know."

Arnetta got back her cunning. "If you said anything, then you'd be a tattletale."

The girl looked sad for a moment, and then perked up quickly. A flash of genius crossed her face. "I like tattletale."

"It's all right. It's all right, girls. It's gonna be all right," the 909 troop leader said. All of Troop 909 burst into tears. It was as though someone had instructed them all to cry at once. The troop leader had girls under her arms and all the rest of the girls were crowded around her. It reminded me of the time we saw this hog on a field trip. It was a mother hog at feeding time, and they were all latching onto her teats. The Troop 909 leader had come into the bathroom, shortly after the big girl had threatened to tell. Then the ranger came, and then, once the ranger had radioed the station, Mrs. Margolin arrived with Daphne in tow.

The ranger had left the restroom area, but everybody else was huddled just outside, swatting mosquitoes.

"Oh. They will apologize," Mrs. Margolin said to the 909 troop leader, but she said this so angrily, I knew that she was speaking more to us than she was to the other troop leader.

"When their parents find out, every one of them will be on punishment."

"It's all right. It's all right," the 909 troop leader assured Mrs. Margolin. Her voice lilted the same way it did when she was addressing the girls. She smiled the whole time she talked. She was like one of those TV-cooking-show women who talk and dice onions and smile all at the same time.

"See. It could have happened. I'm not calling your girls fibbers or anything." She shook her head ferociously from side to side, her Egyptian-style pageboy flapping against her cheeks like heavy drapes. "It could have happened. See. Our girls are not retarded. They are delayed learners." She said this in a syrupy, instructional voice, as though our troop might be delayed learners, as well. "We're from the Decatur Children's Academy. Many of them just have special needs."

"Now we won't be able to go to the bathroom by ourselves!" the big girl said.

"Oh, yes, you will. Yes, you will," she said, but we'll have to wait until we get back to Decatur."

"I don't want to wait!" the girl said. "I want my Independence badge."

The girls in my troop were entirely speechless. Arnetta looked stoic, as though she were soon to be tortured but was determined not to appear weak. Mrs. Margolin pursed her lips solemnly and said, "Bless them, Lord. Bless them, Lord."

In contrast, the Troop 909 leader was full of words and energy. "Some of our girls are echolalic." She smiled happily, and presented one of the girls hanging onto her, but the girl widened her eyes in horror and violently withdrew herself from the center of attention, sensing she was about to be sacrificed for the village sins. "Echolalic," the troop leader continued, "means that they will say whatever they hear, like an echo. That's where the word comes from, comes from 'echo.'" She ducked her head apologetically. "I mean, not all of them have the most progressive of parents, so if they heard a bad word, they might have repeated it. But I guarantee you, it was not intentional."

Arnetta spoke. "I saw her say the word. I saw her." She pointed to a small girl, smaller than any of us, wearing an oversized T-shirt that said, "Eat Bertha's Mussels."

The troop leader shook her head and smiled. "Oh, that's impossible. She doesn't speak. She can, but she doesn't."

Arnetta furrowed her brow. "No, no, it wasn't her. That's right. It was her."

The girl Arnetta pointed to grinned as though she had been paid a compliment. She was the only one from either troop actually wearing a full uniform: The mocha-colored A-line shift, the orange ascot, the sash covered with badges, though at the same time, she had this Try-It patch. She took a few steps toward Arnetta and made a grand sweeping gesture toward the sash. "See," she said, full of her self-importance, "I'm a Brownie." I had a hard time imagining this girl calling anyone a "n*g**r"; the girl looked perpetually delighted, as though she would cuddle up with a grizzly if someone had led her to that.

On the fourth morning, we boarded the bus to go home.

The previous day had been spent building miniature churches from Popsicle sticks. We had hardly left the cabin. Mrs. Margolin and Mrs. Hedy guarded us so closely, almost no one talked for the entire day.

Even on the day of departure from Camp Crescendo, all was serious and silent. The bus ride began quietly enough. Arnetta had to sit next to Mrs. Margolin; Octavia had to sit next to her mother. I sat beside Daphne, who gave me her prize journal without a word of explanation.

"Do you want it?"

She shook her head, no. It was empty.

Mrs. Hedy began to weep. "Octavia," she said, to her daughter without looking, "I need to sit with Mrs. Margolin. All right?"

Arnetta exchanged seats with Mrs. Hedy. With the two women up front, Elise felt free to speak. "Hey," she said, then she set her face into a placid, vacant stare, trying to imitate that of a Troop 909 girl. Emboldened, Arnetta made a gesture of mock pride toward an imaginary sash, the way the girl in full uniform had done. Then they all made a game of it, trying to do the most exaggerated imitations of the Troop 909 girls, all without speaking, all without laughing loud enough for the women to hear.

Daphne looked down at her shoes, white with sneaker polish. I opened the journal she had given me. I looked out the window, trying to decide what to write, searching for lines, but nothing would come to me. Nothing could compare to what Daphne had written. "My father, the veteran," my favorite line of all time. I replayed it in my head and I gave up trying to write.

By then it seemed that the rest of the troop had given up making fun of Troop 909. They were quietly gossiping and passing notes about who had done what at school. For a moment the gossiping fell off. All I heard was the hum of the bus.

"You know," Octavia whispered, "you know something's up. Why did we have to get stuck at a camp with retarded girls? You know?"

"Yeah. You know why," Arnetta said and she narrowed her eyes like a cat. "My mama and I were in the mall in Buckhead, and this white lady just kept looking at us. She was looking at us like we were foreign, like we were from China or somewhere."

"What did the woman say?" Elise asked.

"Nothing. She didn't say nothing."

A few girls nodded their heads gravely.

"There was a time," I said, "when my father and I were in the mall" --

"Oh, shut up, Snot," Octavia said.

I stared at Octavia, and then rolled my eyes from her to the window.

"Go on, Laurel," Daphne said to me. It seemed like the first time she'd spoken the whole trip, and that anyone had said my real name. I turned to her and smiled weakly, trying not to cry, hoping that she would remember that I had tried to be her friend. "What happened?" Daphne said.

The bus was silent. I gathered my voice. "Well," I said. "My father and I were in this mall, but I was the one doing the staring." I stopped and glanced from face to face. I continued. "There were these white people dressed like Puritans or something, but they weren't Puritans. They were Mennonites. They're these people, see, who, if you ask them to do you a favor, like paint your porch or something, they have to do it. It's their religion."

"Oh, that sucks," someone said.

"Oh, come on. You're lying."

"I am not lying."

"How do you know that that's just not some story somebody made up?" Elise asked, her head cocked, full of daring. "Who's going to do whatever you ask?"

"It is not made up. I know, because I was looking at them. My father said, 'See those people? If you ask them to do something, they'll do it. Anything you want.'"

No one would call anyone's father a liar -- then they'd have to fight the person. But Drema parsed her words carefully. "Well, how does your father know that that's just not some story? Huh?"

"Because," I said, "he went up to the man and asked him would he paint our porch. And the man said, yes, he would. It's their religion."

"Man, I'm glad I'm a Baptist," Elise said, shaking her head in sympathy for the Mennonites.

"So did the guy do it?" Drema asked, scooting closer to hear, as the story got juicier.

"Yeah," I said. "His whole family was with him. My dad drove them to our house. They all painted our porch. The woman and girl were in bonnets and long, long skirts with buttons up to their necks. The guy wore this weird hat and huge suspenders."

"Why," Arnetta asked archly, as though she didn't believe a word, "would anybody pick a porch? If they'll do anything, why not make them paint the whole house? Why not ask for a hundred bucks?"

I thought about it, and then remembered the words my father had said about them painting our porch, though I had never seemed to think about his words after he had said them.

"He said," I began, only then understanding the words as they uncoiled from my mouth, "it was the only time he'd have a white man on his knees doing something for a black man for free."

I now understand what he meant, and why he did it, though I didn't like it. When you've been made to feel bad for so long, you jump at the chance to do it to others. I remembered the Mennonites bending the way Daphne had bent when she was cleaning the restroom. I remembered the dark blue of their bonnets, the black of their shoes. They painted the porch as though they were scrubbing the floor. I already saw that Daphne was trembling when she quietly asked, "Did he thank them?"

I looked out the window. I could not tell which were the thoughts and which were the trees. Everything blurred by. "No," I said, and suddenly knew there was something mean in the world I could not stop.

Arnetta laughed. "If I asked them to take off their long skirts and bonnets and put on some jeans, would they do that?"

And Daphne's voice, quiet, steady, came, "Maybe they would. Just to be nice."