

**FIRST PLACE
HIGH SCHOOL
9TH & 10TH GRADES**

**THE BIRD SYNDROME
◀by A. Bishel▶**

They say teenage girls are "catty".

Clarissa thinks they are like birds, with sharp, delicate looking little beaks and beady eyes hard and black as obsidian. She calls it the Bird Syndrome in her head. Cats are dignified, feline, smooth, liquid. Cats were worshiped. They exude a vibe of soft confidence-- an aura of "I just don't care about what you think."

Birds chatter and tremble and chirp and gossip and whisper and flutter. They flock together, never straying away from others like them. They are stealthy and furtive and sneaky little beasts.

Clarissa never liked birds much.

RISSA

Clarie Fletcher was a tall, serious little girl with pleated skirts down to her knees and French-braided dark hair.

Rissa Fletcher appeared in sixth grade when Clarie's friends decided that they were in middle school and Clarie was a little girl's name. They wanted to be teenagers. They wanted to be new.

Clarissa pictured Rissa Fletcher: bright-eyed, outspoken and pretty. Rissa Fletcher would be tall, with a glossy curtain of auburn hair tumbling down to the small of her back. Rissa would not be afraid to wear booty shorts and tank tops, because she would have long, toned and tanned legs and arms.

The real Rissa's dark brown hair grew out but did not become glossy nor auburn. Finally she got fed up with the tangles and chopped almost ten inches off and donated it to children with cancer. She did not want to wear booty-shorts because she did not count on her leg and armpit hair darkening and waited five months before she got up the courage to use a razor. She got braces and mild acne.

Rissa in Clarie's mind was very different than the Rissa Clarie had become, so Clarie gave up on her Rissa. Instead, she is just Clarissa.

GRACE ACADEMY

Grace is Clarissa's school. It is very small, and in middle school the girls and boys are in different halls, go to different classes, and don't see each other except for breaks, field trips, and lunch.

Grace is *technically* a Christian school, and a pretty cheap one (the uniforms are a stiff polyester that feels like cardboard), but the education was good, and it was more welcoming than the intimidating public school system. Not everyone at Grace was Christian.

The thing about small schools is that they become a family.

Not the type of charming, all-American-yet-diverse-enough-to-be-politically-correct family with 2.5 children and a dog.

No, the type that has certain crazy cousins locked in the attic that no one talks about.

The type where back-stabbing and gossip is an acceptable form of communication.

Like various royal families that eventually kill themselves off.

That type.

THEM

Clarissa thinks of Them in capital Ts. They are a cult. An exclusive flock of flamboyantly colored birds. The most elegant are peacocks with bright tails fanning out behind them. The least of them are turkeys, earth colored and clever enough to stay in Their group.

There are requirements... unisex names like Taylor...Glenn...Frankie... athletic abilities... long, styled hair... height... perfectly tanned stick legs...

They never really bother anyone else, always staying in their group, preening and chattering.

They just pretend that Clarissa and her friends never existed. This doesn't bother them. Clarissa's group just pretends that They don't exist either. But They are the majority, so Clarissa's flock became invisible.

US

Them... and Us.

Clarissa thinks of her group as Us. With a capital U.

If they are birds, they are a motley flock. They are not all peacocks and turkeys. They are blackbirds and starlings and sparrows and cranes and finches and robins. All sorts.

It is not what they have in common that draws them together. It is what they lack in common that permits them to be friends.

NEW GIRL PART I

There is always excitement surrounding a new girl, especially at small schools.

There is a cycle:

The anticipation, where everyone displays an unusual amount of curiosity.

The "you're new and shiny and exciting", where the girl comes and everyone hovers flutters around her like she is a sweet and exotic flower and they are hummingbirds.

The breathing space, where the girl is left alone enough to decide what group she belongs in.

The acceptance, where the girl joins the group and everything is as it was before.

NEW GIRL PART II

Mrs. Findlay talks fast. Clarissa usually catches one out of every three words, and she knows she is not alone.

"I'd... welcome... newest...student... Melanie Raye... you'll ...feel... at home...arriving...later...." Mrs. Findlay looks at the room of blank-faced girls expectantly.

"We can't understand you," drawls Glenn, one of Them. "Talk slower."

None of Us would talk that disrespectfully to a teacher, thinks Clarissa.

But Mrs. Findlay is young and resilient. "We have a new student," she says slowly and deliberately. "Melanie. She is arriving later. Please make her feel at home."

And then she is off again, talking about something called Tequila Mockingbird. After about fifteen minutes, all Clarissa gathers is that it is probably a book and not a drink.

She gives up on listening about Tequila and studies the room from her back corner seat. It is divided neatly right down the center, like a battlefield.

To the right and front: Us. Therese, Bridget, Greta, Elspeth, Faith, Kara, Morgan, me.

To the far left and slouching to the back: Them. Too many to name.

Between Us and Them lies a row of empty desks. It is a no-man's land, she decides.

Melanie, she wonders. Melanie sounds like Mallory. Mallory is one of Them, a turkey on the fringes of the flock. Mallory is not a unisex name. At least, she thinks so. And Mallory only plays tennis. Is that why Mallory is a turkey? Could she have been one of Us?

Melanie, she thinks. Melanie sounds nice, rounded. Maybe Melanie will be one of Us. Melanie. Mel. Uh-oh. Mel is unisex name. Mel Gibson. Maybe not.

And that is how she spends half an hour of Mrs. Findlay babbling about Tequila-the-book-not-the-drink and people with strange names like Bur Adley and Jemfinch and Attcos .

The door opens, and a girl steps in timidly, and Clarissa sees how rounded Melanie is.

MELANIE

The second thing Clarissa notices is her eyes. They are a lightning clear blue.

The first thing Clarissa notices is her weight. She is fat.

Not *morbidly obese*, Clarissa thinks. Not like that lady that took up two seats on the flight back from Miami last summer. Just fat...ter...than everyone else.

Her stomach pouches out, is curved. Her arms strain at her sleeves, because they are too tight and cling to her skin in hills and valleys. Her legs are meaty and they quiver as she walks to the seat in the no man's land that Mrs. Findlay points to, little waves of fat that crest and roll.

But she has pretty eyes.

REPLY

There is a titter, to Clarissa's shock. A cruel one.

She glances around. She heard which side of the no-man's land it came from.

She thinks she is wrong.

She wishes she was wrong.

It is the wrong side.

It is her side.

Bridget, Elspeth, Greta, Faith, Kara, Therese, Morgan.

HER SIDE

Bridget is Irish, with bobbed red hair and sparkling eyes. She is a robin, breasted and cheerful.

Elspeth is weird sometimes, wearing her uniform blouse with *four* buttons undone instead of the permitted three (how daring) and rolling her skirt's waistband until it just barely grazes her mid thigh. She dearly loves gossip.

Greta is short and fair. She has narrow gray eyes. She is quiet, but she is the best actress in the school, in Clarissa's opinion. Clarissa doesn't trust thespians, but Greta is truly talented.

Faith is black, but not really. She is actually Hershey's Milk Chocolate brown, and she is tall and has long legs and a sharp jaw line and high cheek bones. She is beautiful. Faith is mild. A middle-child. A peacemaker.

Kara came two years ago in sixth grade. She is bright and animated, but always compassionate, and always a vegetarian.

Therese is thin and Korean and smart. Of all of Clarissa's friends, she is most physically bird-like. She has eyes as black and glassy as drops of ink. She is small and lithe, and looks as light and wispy as if her bones were hallow. Clarissa loves her friend, she loves how Therese has a sarcastic sense of humor and how her lunch is packed in small boxes within small boxes, with rice and sushi and dumplings in their own little homes. She came in seventh grade with lightly accented English and ornamental butterflies in her hair. She is Clarissa's closest friend. Neither of them are sure how that happened.

Morgan is a unisex name, but like Faith, she'd been part of Clarissa's little flock since kindergarten. Morgan is very tall and blonde and quiet and almost never speaks. She is painfully shy, but plays volleyball like nobody's business.

LUNCH PART I

The morning has been peculiar, with the extra girl no one wants to look at tagging along. And They just ignore her, saying silently, *Oh, take her, we don't want this one.*

But Clarissa's flock of mismatched birds ignore her too.

They sit eight to a lunch table at Grace. It works out perfectly.

"Melanie is really FAT," Greta comments as she takes out her hummus. Everyone looks at her nervously.

"She IS," Elspeth agrees, breaking the silence. The dike is unplugged.

"How can someone let themselves GO so FAR?" Kara asks. "Self-control, anyone?"

"I KNOW," Greta chimes back in. "People like her are why other countries think Americans are FAT and STUPID."

"Stereotypes," Bridget shakes her head. "I hate being judged as someone else."

"Wow. I can't believe she's ACTUALLY EATING LUNCH," Greta adds.

"Now, now, girls," Faith says mildly, laughing uncomfortably. "Just because WE'RE all fit doesn't mean we should criticize."

"I'm Asian," Therese says. "I CAN'T get fat. Not THAT fat, anyways. Not like MELON-Y over there." The other girls laugh.

Who ARE these people?

In second grade, they used to play a game, a strange one that involved collecting prodigious amounts of dandelions. Clarie's cache of dandelions was filched one spring day (and shredded and scattered about the field) by James O'Malley. She screamed and cried at him but he laughed. Bridget flounced over and punched James's nose. Then he was screaming and crying and Clarie was screaming and crying with laughter. Where is that Bridget now?

When Grace Academy holds chapel time, El is the first to come and last to leave. Sometimes she cries as she kneels and prays...quiet, free tears. Where is that Elspeth?

Where is the Greta that cried when they watched genocide videos in History?

Where is Faith, who carried Clarissa's books when she sprained her ankle last year?

Clarissa remembers that she and Kara went to sleep away camp two summers ago. Clarissa remembers this vividly because she got her period during camp. Her first one. She remembers stumbled into the dimly lit, flowery-smelling bathroom in the lodge and stuffed her panties with toilet paper, face flaming red with embarrassment. Kara followed her to make sure she was okay. Where is she now?

Where is Therese?

Only Morgan seems to be the same, still solidly silent.

Clarissa is horrified. It feels like her friends' words are stabbing her.

Melanie sits alone, head bowed, slowly eating a sandwich. It's painful. It literally makes her sick, listening to her friends. She gets up, mumbles "cramps," and flees to the bathroom.

NAUSEOUS

Clarissa's sixth grade English teacher was a stickler for weird grammar rules. *I hope*, not hopefully. *More important*, not most importantly. *Between you and me*, not between you and I.

"Don't say 'I feel nauseous,'" she would say. "Nauseous means 'to cause nausea.' You don't feel like you're causing nausea. That would mean you are a hateful, nausea-inducing person. You *have* nausea. You are *nauseated*."

"Mrs. Samuels, if we feel like we're going to puke, we're not going to bother with the extra syllables," Bridget had said.

Clarissa feel does not feel nauseated. She feel nauseous.

THAT NIGHT

She strips before her shower and stares at her body. She has a little belly protruding.

Does this make me fat? she wonders. How am I so different than Melanie? She pinches herself hard, hoping to pinch away the flab like wet clay. It only stings and turns scarlet.

She doesn't call Therese. She calls Morgan, the only one who didn't participate in the lunchtime verbal massacre.

"I'm fat," she tells her. She feels the tears building

"No, you're not," Morgan says.

"See, I knew you were going to say that. You have to say that. But I know I'm fat. I have fat on my stomach. I don't have a flat stomach." She is crying now.

Morgan is silent. "They're not bad people, Rissa. They're human. I am. You are. I didn't have the guts to speak up either. That's okay. We don't have to. It's not our fault."

"But I--" *stood by and let them peck her apart with their sharp little words and didn't do a thing but run away.*

Clarissa hangs up.

LUNCH PART II

Last year, when Clarissa had ventured to do something mildly athletic (cross country) she had rolled her ankle. She didn't realize it was sprained and she thought she had to finish the race. She thought that was the hardest thing she'd ever done.

That was not. This is.

She had spent the morning wrestling with her conscience. What about her friends, her little flock? But what about Melanie? But...but...*but*...

She feels sick again. Nauseous. Her palms are perspiring and her armpits feel damp.

But it is lunchtime again, and Melanie sits at her table, painfully alone. And that kills Clarissa. You don't see birds alone, away from the flock. It is wrong.

Clarissa sits next to her.

She knows Melanie must have heard them yesterday. She wants to apologize for her friends, to tell Melanie they really aren't bad people. She wants to know where Melanie came from, why she had come to Grace. She wants her to be okay.

She says, "You have pretty eyes."

Melanie looks startled. "Thank you," she whispers softly, like she is afraid it is a joke.

It breaks Clarissa's heart.

Morgan sees Clarissa and Melanie.

Please come, Morgan, Clarissa thinks desperately.

Morgan hesitates, then slowly walks to their little table. "Hi...I'm Morgan," she says. "Welcome to Grace."

Faith walks in from the main hallway and notices the three of them. She looks undecided, then her brow clears and she slides into the seat next to Morgan and begins chattering amiably about the weather.

Clarissa sighs silently, heart still drumming, palms still sweaty. But she has done it.

Greta, Elspeth, Therese, Bridget and Kara stare at them, puzzled.

Therese cocks her head at Clarissa.

Maybe tomorrow she will understand.

