

The cool kids

The child's perspective:

I'm 12 and it's my first year of high school. I don't like my school very much. The teachers are okay, but most of the kids there don't want to learn. They just want to swear and fight and get into trouble. I'm trying to fit in but it's hard because I like studying but that's not cool. Spitting and smoking and swearing are cool.

I only moved to Tasmania last year, so I don't know many of the other kids. I have a few friends though. My best friends are Kylie and Melissa. They don't like each other but they both like me.

Today someone told me that Tina Williams is after me. Tina is the toughest girl in the school. The second toughest girl is Katie Williams, Tina's younger sister. I don't know why Tina's after me. She's in grade ten and I'm only in grade seven, so I'm not important.

It's recess and I need to find somewhere safe to go before Tina finds me. I run upstairs to my home-room. Samantha and Jodie are there cleaning the blackboard. They're the class monitors, so they are in charge of keeping the room tidy. They're a bit geeky so most of the cool kids ignore them. I don't ignore them but I haven't talked to them either.

They probably think I'm weird when I walk into the classroom, shut the door and lock it. "Tina Williams is after me," I explain. I can't breathe properly I'm so scared. I think I can hear footsteps outside. "Why?" Jodie asks. "I don't know," I reply, "...but I don't know how to fight."

"Hide over here," Jodie says pointing to the bookcase. I feel sick and it's worse when

someone bangs on the door. Samantha runs over and peeks through the glass centre-pane. "It's her," she says. There's a lot of shouting. I'm trying not to cry.

"Where is she?" Tina yells. "She's not here," Samantha yells back and everything goes quiet. "She's gone," she tells me. "Just stay here and we won't let anyone in." I don't know why she's helping me, but I know I should be nicer to her.

After a few minutes there is a softer knock on the door. It's my friend Kylie. I know this is her fault somehow, but I have to listen to her. "It's okay," she promises. "Tina's not here."

"Don't believe her," Samantha whispers, but I'm already releasing the lock. Kylie opens the door and Tina charges past her, along with her gang. My feet are superglued to the floor. I want to run but all I can do is shake. She gets into my face and spits, "I heard you called me a slut." "I didn't," I mumble. "I heard you did," she roars. I don't have a different answer. "Well I didn't," I say. She looks straight into my eyes.

Whack. She slaps my cheek hard, spins on her heel and storms out. The others follow her except Jodie and Samantha. They come and stand by me. I take a deep, shaky breath and say, "Well at least she didn't punch me."

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The adult perspective:

My first few years at high school were not a happy time. I moved to Tasmania for my final year of primary school and tried to carve a niche as the only city slicker in a small rural institution where the kids had known each other since birth. Moving on to high school, I was desperate to make my mark. I wanted to be one of the popular kids but I chose the wrong

school. The 'in' gang at Latrobe High School were rough and tough. They smoked, they skipped school and they didn't do well academically.

In year seven I was still figuring this out. The two girls I called my best friends, Melissa and Kylie, would later turn on me and make most of my high school days a misery. Kylie made an early start on this project, telling Tina Williams, holder of the unofficial title of 'toughest girl in the school', that I had called her a slut. No-one with any sense to spare would slander a girl three years older, twice their height and under threat of expulsion due to prior bad behaviour, but logic wasn't in the teen lexicon.

One recess, I was on the run having being told that Tina was after me. I thought the safest course of action would be to hide, given my lack of fighting prowess. I rushed into my home-room, shutting and locking the door behind me, effectively imprisoning myself with Jodie and Samantha, the class monitors. They were nice girls, slightly quirky, missing the gene that made me try so hard to fit in to this school.

I'm not entirely sure that they were happy to be dragged into the limelight, particularly under Tina Williams' glare, but they took it in their stride. I explained that I was being hunted and I didn't know why and the duo offered to cover for me if I wanted to stay in hiding in the classroom. When Tina came a-knocking Samantha boldly lied and told her I wasn't there.

It was Kylie who brought this plan tumbling to the ground. Appearing at the door she convinced me that she was alone and I foolishly believed her. In stormed Tina and her entourage. She was raging, her gang out for blood – mine. I was quaking, but unable to run.

"I heard you called me a slut," Tina bellowed into my face. "I didn't," I mumbled, terrified. "I heard you did," she roared. I didn't have a different answer and I think Tina knew this, but she couldn't back down in front an audience.

She looked me in the eye and took a swing, giving me an open-handed slap that shuffled my brain. This was enough to feed the pack and they chased after her retreating form, leaving me with my new friends, Jodie and Samantha. They approached me with care and concern. "Well at least she didn't punch me," I said.

