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By Maya Van Wagenen

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I run for all I'm worth. The bus home could leave any second, and I'm not on it. It's well over 90 degrees out, and already unsightly sweat stains are blossoming under my arms. Lovely.

One of the security personnel outside the school yells at me, but I ignore him. Since we live on the Texas/Mexico border, they're just here to make sure that no one is smuggling drugs. Which I'm not. I see Kenzie raise her eyebrows at me through one of the bus's dirty windows. The bus driver seems reluctant to open the door and mumbles something in Spanish when I get on, panting uncontrollably. Some of the sixth graders snicker.

"Wow, you look like an idiot."

"Hi, Kenzie," I manage. I sink into the seat behind her and attempt to smooth back my frazzled ponytail. Kenzie is half-Korean, with a wild personality, curly hair, a passion for heavy metal, and a hearty disdain for most exercise.

I first met Kenzie two years ago on the first day of school. She was sitting alone, wearing a studded belt, and her frizzy hair was pulled back into a menacing ponytail. All I could think was, "Gosh, I hope she doesn't kill me." Little by little our classes forced us together and we soon became close, although it's clear that she could still take me out in a fight. She's really cool despite her dark aura. She's my opposite in every way, but she's one of the few people who doesn't make me feel like an outsider.

Seeing my Hispanic facial features but light skin, kids here ask if I'm Mexican. I answer that my mom is half, so that makes me a quarter. Actually my mother is a mix of English, French, Spanish, Jewish, Mexican Indian, and African. I'm not sure how you classify that, but on her it's beautiful. For me, in a school district that is 98 percent Hispanic, I'm told that I don't have enough of the right DNA to be part of team-Latino. Ironically, off the border, I consider myself Mexican.

Maybe with Kenzie being Korean, me not being Mexican enough, and neither of us with sufficient knowledge of Spanish to ask directions to a bathroom, we connected by not fitting in anywhere else.

Although Kenzie isn't the pillow-fight-at-sleepovers type, I've always appreciated her honesty. If I have a booger in my nose, she tells

me. If my fly is down, she's quick to let me know.

"Maya," she says now, "you're a mess. Like, really."

Friends like that are hard to find.

The sixth graders are staring at us over the tops of the seats with large eyes.

"They look so innocent," I say. They giggle in their prepubescent voices.

"Not for long," Kenzie grins. She turns to them and shamelessly belts out a chorus of filth that includes the anatomically correct names of body parts and their biological functions.

I hide my face in my hands. I try to chastise her, but Kenzie is laughing so hard, she can't hear anything.

Just before we get to my stop, one of the sixth graders turns around and spits on me.

First week of school down, countless more to go.

And yet, this year will be different. This year I have a plan.