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The Truth about Truman School

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Everyone at Truman knows the truth about what it's like to be an eighth grader, but few are willing to shed light on the matter. That is, until Zebby and Amr decide that a Web site would provide the opportunity for Truman to spill its guts. Zebby tells her schoolmates to write two versions of what happens around the school: one for the language arts teachers and the actual story. Zebby explains, "I'll read through everyone's stories; then I'll cut and paste, change the names, and rearrange the whole thing into one big story…the REAL truth about Truman School." Unfortunately, they are unprepared to handle responses that illustrate what happens when the pain of feeling unaccepted becomes too much to bear. Neither do they consider that people might become vicious when hiding behind a computer screen.

The Webmasters also didn't know that the site would provide a larger forum for a schoolmate using the alias Milkandhoney to continue harassing Lilly Clarke, Zebby and Amr's former friend. First, Milkandhoney embarrasses Lilly by posting a picture of her when she was overweight. Next, the culprit tells everyone Lilly is a lesbian even though she isn't. As soon as Milkandhoney hurls false information about Lilly onto the Internet, her popular friends distance themselves from her and begin to treat her just as badly as Milkandhoney does. They encourage readers to visit a site where they can post mean things about Lilly: "How much do you hate Lilly Clarke? Tell us in 250 words or less."

Desperate, Lilly runs away instead of reaching out to her single mother or another adult. Zebby and Amr find her, and she returns home and confronts the person she believes has been cyberstalking.

Though eight characters narrate the story, their voices are distinct and help move the plot along. The author, who has written a number of anthologized short stories and middle grade novels such as *Sliding into Home*, *Trading Places with Tank Talbott*, and *Tank Talbott's Guide to Girls*, skillfully offers subtle hints that suggest the identity of Milkandhoney, without interfering with the suspense that remains throughout. Readers will recognize characters like Lilly and her friends, who are often called "mean girls" because they are cruel, even to members of their own "clique." In the end, the students at Truman learn that the real truth is that they all need to learn to treat people with respect.
KAAVONIA HINTON (April 14, 2008)

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