

FEELING LIKE AN OUTCAST



The yellow bus rumbled down the long dirt trail known as Middlemarch Roa, throwing up a thick cloud of red dust that swirled right into the air behind it. [...] Switching on the blinking red lights, the driver, Agnes Hooper, waited the trailing dust past before she opened the door to discharge her only remaining passenger.

Moving slowly, Lucinda Ridder dragged her heavy back down the center aisle. Even though she had been alone on the bus for several miles, Lucy Ridder never left her designated spot in the very back row. That was the place where some of the older kids had decreed she sit two years earlier, when she had first enrolled at Elfrida High School, and that was where she remained to this day - in the back of the bus. To Agnes Hooper's personal knowledge, none of the other kids ever spoke to the scrawny, homely girl with her bone-thin arms and her thick, eye-shrinking glasses.

Lucy had come to Elfrida High School after attending grade school in Pearce, a tiny community just up the road, but she had evidently been just as friendless there. None of the other girls ever offered to share that lonely backseat spot with her or whispered silly secrets in her ear. No one ever offered her a bite of the afternoon snacks that sometimes found their forbidden way onto Agnes Hooper's supposedly food-free bus. It seemed to Agnes that the girl's stubborn silence had rendered her so invisible that the other kids no longer even noticed her. In a way, that was a blessing, since it meant they no longer bothered to tease her, either.

The bus driver's kind heart went out to this strange and fiercely silent girl. After all, it wasn't Lucinda Ridder's fault that her fathergrandmother, was dead, that her mother was in prison, and that she herself had been forced to come live with her widowed grandmother, Catherine Yates, whose own great-grand father had been a noted Apache chief. Lucy's Indian blood had been diluted enough by her grandfather and her father, so she didn't look particularly Indian. Still, in that part of rural southeastern Arizona where what went on during the Apache wars still mattered, people knew who she was and where she came from. And as far as Apaches were concerned, what could you expect ? [...]

Agnes was stuck by the girl's obvious reluctance to exit the bus. Everything about going to school and riding the bus had to be pure torture for her. Still, on this blustery spring afternoon, it seemed to Agnes that whatever fate awaited her at home must be far worse.

As Lucy finally stepped off the bus onto the weed clogged shoulder, Agnes called after her. "You-all have a good weekend now", the driver said as cheerly as she could manage. "See you on Monday."

Lucinda Ridder nodded, but she didn't answer. Once clear of the bus, she stood watching while Mrs Hooper switched off the flashing lights and ground the bus into gear. It took several moves to manoeuvre the ungainly bus in the narrow turnaround that had been bulldozed into the shoulder of the road. She squinted her eyes to keep out the dust, but she didn't raise a hand to ward off the flying gravel and grit. Her fingers remained frozen stiffly at her side until the turn was complete and the bus had rumbled back past her, down the road, and out of sight. Only then she did she raise her hand in a halfhearted wave. Of all the people at Pearce Elementary and Elfrida High Schools, Mrs Hooper - the bus driver - was the only person who had ever shown Lucinda Ridder the slightest kindness.