

## Advice

For starters, don't be pale. Don't have frizzy, unruly hair that gets so matted while you sleep that it makes snarly noises when your mother brushes it in the morning before you go to school. Avoid having freckles at all costs, especially on your arms, shoulders, and along the bridge of your nose. Have a complexion that can tan and doesn't just go from snow white to lobster red in the summer. Don't be a skinny girl with knobby knees and perpetually bruised, mosquito-bitten shins. Do not grow up in the Midwest where it's always cold in the morning, and the months of February, March, and April blend together into one long, muddy-grey blur year after year. Do not have a mother who keeps her hair short and doesn't wear makeup. Instead, be sure that your mother doesn't think that high fashion is stupid, but in cases where this cannot be avoided, do not believe her.

Do not have an intelligent father who dotes on you, his only daughter. Do not love the way your father loves you, calling you "Gorgeous" with a capital "G" and reading to you from his big book of Greek mythology every night before bed. Try to avoid asking him which goddess he thinks you are, but if you do, don't act so surprised when he picks Athena. Do not ask him why Zeus loved so many women when he already had a wife (well, dear, no God is without his faults), and follow up by asking if he's ever loved anyone besides your mother (Of course not, sweetheart. She's the only woman for me).

Be sure to promptly forget this response and how he always called your mother "Beautiful" with a capital "B" so that you don't feel so sick to your stomach when he later moves out to go live with Linda in the fall after your 4<sup>th</sup> birthday. Don't spend your weekends in their new house looking for clues as to why he left; thinking that the empty bottles of hair dye, countless tubes of mascara, and fitness magazines mean that if your mother had just colored her hair, wore make-up during the day, and did yoga four times a week like Linda does, he might have stuck around. But even when you realize that things aren't that simple, just know that it's definitely not, as your mother says, "just how things worked out."

Do not have four older brothers who convince you that Barbies are stupid, Pokémon cards are awesome, and that everyone, little girls included, should know how to hold their own in a fight. Do not attend a K-8 Catholic school, but if you have to, don't miss your mother and brothers when you do. And no matter what: do not go on the trampoline with your brother Mitch the summer after first grade. But if you have to, get off before he does a front-flip and accidentally lands on your face, breaking your nose. Do not let the bones heal so that a bump forms, and definitely don't listen to your brother John when he tells you that all great heroes have broken bones, or David when he says your bump is there to let your foes know how brave you are, or Michael when he says he thinks it looks better than it did before, or Mitch when he apologizes for the hundredth time.

Don't cry on the first day of second grade when kids make fun of you for wearing light-up sneakers, but if you have to, do it in private. Whatever you do, don't cry in the middle of art class so that Ms. DeVamp hugs you as if you're her own child, giving all of the snickering kids surrounding the two of you the evil eye. Don't become attached to Ms. DeVamp, or think of how she reminds you of your mother: a strong, straight-forward woman who doesn't take crap from you or anyone else. Don't like art class; listen to what you hear the other mothers saying when they come to pick their kids up from school, and understand that Ms. DeVamp is an ugly, fat old lady. After all, if she wasn't, she would be married by now.

Be athletic and don't dread gym class. Don't let years of living with four nerf-gun-loving brothers teach you quick reflexes so that every single game of dodgeball ends with everyone on your team out except for you, nimbly avoiding each and every ball thrown your way. But if this can't be avoided, don't be terrible at throwing the ball. Don't let your stomach knot up when Mrs. White yells at you to just throw it already. Don't wuss out, for Christ's sake. Don't wonder why the other kids like Mrs. White more than Ms. DeVamp even though she's definitely a fat, ugly old lady. Don't pay attention to the way Mrs. White dyes her hair pumpkin orange and how her leathery skin sags off her bones like it's trying to escape. Do not wonder why Mrs. White found a husband and Ms. DeVamp didn't, and definitely don't notice the way your mother refers to Mrs. White as "that woman," when she hears that she had Mitch suspended for telling Mikey C., the boy who told you your freckles made it look like you had poop on your face, to fuck off. And don't notice the way that your father and Linda shrug and say it's okay when they hear that Mrs. White gave you a bad grade in gym, or hear them talking about how "it's true what they say about gym teachers."

Don't look forward to square-dancing day because it's the only day when you, girl who has been taking ballet since she was four years old, have some sort of advantage during P.E. Make sure to not take delight in watching the same kids who screamed that it was your fault that your team lost in soccer trip over their own feet while you sashay with ease. Don't insist that dancing is exercise because it's not, and for the love of God – don't correct the other kids when they mess up the steps. Do not get glasses in third grade, and don't make the mistake of thinking that the frames you like are in the least bit cool or cute; they're purple tortoise-shell for Christ's sake. Hate reading, library time, and all other book-related activities because they're dorky and weird. Play foursquare during recess even though the other kids never let you serve the ball and the pavement scrapes your knees, and definitely don't spend it reading *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Do not cry when Sharon B. throws the copy of *The Last Battle* your brother John gave you into a dark, murky puddle on the blacktop sometime in mid-March. After all, she'd yelled something nasty at you and you just kept reading – you shouldn't have ignored her. Don't hate Sharon and all of her friends. Don't ask yourself why Mikey C. said your freckles looked like poop but has never said a word about the gigantic mole Sharon has on the bottom left side of her chin. Don't wonder why Mrs. White talks to Sharon in a tone of voice that

you've never heard her use with you, or why the other moms whisper your mother's name every time Linda picks you and your brothers up from school on Friday evenings.

When Amy M., the girl who isn't allowed to wear pants because her parents are raising a lady, tells you that Jesus saved all of us so that we'll all have eternal life, do not ask her what this means. And when Amy M., the girl who thinks that the class guinea pig died because God was punishing everyone for talking during math, tells you that eternal life means you never die and you go on waking up forever and ever, do not tell her that you think that's scary and you aren't sure you want it. And don't tell Amy M., the girl who informed you that *The Lord of the Rings* was the Devil's work, that you think Jesus had some good ideas about loving thy neighbor, but you don't know if you really believe that he walked on water or brought Lazarus back from the dead. And when Amy's mother calls your mother to tell her that she needs to take you to Confession immediately, don't hear the word your mother mutters under her breath after she slams the phone back on to the receiver. Do not remember this word and then use it later when Amy tries to explain why divorce is a sin and that your mother and father committed a crime against God.

Do not have a crush on Jeff S., but if you can't help it, just don't tell Becky W. And when Becky finishes telling Jeff that you like him, don't feel so hurt when Jeff tells you that he doesn't like you back, and don't act so surprised when he decides to tell you that he likes Becky; the girl has blonde hair for Christ's sake. Do not make Jeff a Valentine's Day card and then never give it to him because you're too scared and embarrassed. Do not hate Becky. Avoid crying, but if you have to, try to plan ahead. Don't wonder if this is why your mother won't go out with that one doctor her friend set her up with; maybe she's just as scared as you are.

Do not laugh when David H. clowns around in class so that Mr. Hart yells at you and gives you bad conduct marks every quarter of the fourth grade. Do not wonder why Mr. Hart continues to make you sit by David even though he knows you can't help laughing when he does something funny, and do not wonder why he doesn't yell at David the same way he yells at you. Do not think Mr. Hart is a terrible, mean man; everyone likes Mr. Hart because he gives out candy whenever the basketball team wins. Realize David is a bad, disruptive boy who should be ignored, and when he passes you a note that says, "I'm sorry" after Mr. Hart screams at you for the millionth time, don't smile.

Don't make friends with the new girl from England in the fifth grade because you like how her voice sounds, round and smooth compared to your angular Midwestern twang. Don't bond with her over your shared love of *Harry Potter*, or tell her that you like Hermione because she has bushy hair and loves to read just like you do. But if you do, just don't feel so excited when the girl from England says she's always felt the same way herself. When the two of you have your first sleepover together, don't stay up all night talking about how you miss your brothers

while they're away at school, how you like the boy who sits next to you in math class even though he's never said anything besides "What'd you get for #3?" to you, or admit that you actually really like Linda and how she makes your father so happy. Don't listen to the girl from England while she talks about her own parents' divorce, and definitely don't tell her that what everyone says about evil stepmothers is a bunch of bullshit. Also, be sure not to giggle when you hear each other say "bullshit."

Definitely don't enter the sixth grade thinking things will be different. And when Sharon B., who makes sure that everyone knows that she now wears a training bra and keeps tampons in her locker, tells you you're being "condensending," do not tell her that you think she meant to say "condescending," and that she's using it incorrectly. Do not write poems about your feelings, and definitely don't use words like "embodies" or "forego" during class discussions if you don't want to hear Sharon and the rest of her bitches (which is what you and the girl from England call them behind their backs) laugh at you. Don't get braces, but if you have to, do not ask the orthodontist to give you purple ones because you know Sharon B. and her friends think that purple is gay, and you'd like nothing better than to piss them off. And for the love of God – do your best to not tell Sharon B. that she and her friends are ignorant homophobes, but if you do, see above for instructions on how to deal with "condensending."

Be sure to avoid raising your hand so many times that Mr. Short says, "Would anyone else like to try and answer? Someone I haven't heard from today?" And don't get embarrassed when Sharon and her friends mock you by holding their hands up so that they quiver like yours does when you know you have the right answer. Make sure that the embarrassment you feel doesn't turn eventually turn to anger, and don't make the mistake of thinking that Sharon's probably just jealous because she gets C's on tests you didn't even have to study for. Definitely don't drop your papers that have "A++!" written across the top in bright red marker in front of Sharon and her friends so that they know that you're smarter than them. And when Sharon gives you dirty looks, don't return them.

Do not feel surprised and disappointed when you hear the girl from England moves back home because her mother doesn't like it here; it's too cold. Don't set up an e-mail address ([Hermoine91@yahoo.com](mailto:Hermoine91@yahoo.com)) so that the two of you can stay in touch, growing even closer than you were when she lived here. Try and make friends at your own school by joining groups like cheer squad or the volleyball team, and stay away from groups like mock trial, the Mathletes, and chess club.

When you start seventh grade, do not dye your hair red because you want to look like Phoenix from The X-Men, and don't wear pink converse all-stars because you think they're punk. Do not inform Sharon and her friends that the stupid rapper they like sampled songs from Black Sabbath and that Black Sabbath is awesome. Do not wear your favorite Led Zeppelin t-shirt underneath your uniform, thinking you're like a rock star Clark Kent. Watch the reality shows on MTV and VH1 (e.g. "Next", "Pimp My Ride", and "Date My Mom") instead of listening to NPR and Jon Stewart,

and definitely don't quote either of these sources when Amy M. tries to convince you that Hillary Clinton wants to murder babies for the trillionth time. Grow your nails out instead of keeping them short so you can play guitar. Do not learn how to swear with your brothers when they come home during the holidays, and definitely don't listen to Michael when he says that the best thing you can do for yourself right now is not giving a fuck what anyone thinks about you.

Read the copy of Cosmo you find in Linda's bathroom and do not feel completely horrified by it. Do not have a body that can best described as "average;" have a flat stomach, skinny thighs, and try and get your boobs early if you can. Don't resent the boys who ignore you and make friends with the ones who don't. And when David H., who you see every Tuesday at mock trial meetings, gets in trouble for punching Mikey C. because he called you a "surfboard" until you cried, don't pass him a note that says "Thanks." And when David passes one back that says, "You're welcome," refer to previous instructions on passing notes.

Do not hold hands with the boy who you sat next to in math class during the end-of-the-year dance, and don't send the girl from England an e-mail the second you get home telling her all about how he kissed you on the cheek and that you think maybe, just maybe, next year will be different. And when the boy doesn't call you during the summer like he said he would, don't feel heartbroken and betrayed, especially when you run into him at the midnight show of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. Feel nothing when you realize the girl sitting next to him is Sharon B., and don't think back to all the times she made fun of you for reading the books. Don't suspect that the reason Sharon goes out with the boy through all of eighth grade is to get back at you for being *you*, even though you know Sharon could have any boy she wanted and you saw her smirk at you in the movie theater.

When your father tells you that Linda's pregnant with a baby girl and they're naming her Athena, respond as quickly as possible, and do your best to smile. Whatever you do, don't sit there silently until Michael nudges you in the ribs to make you say something. And when you do finally speak, make sure that what you say isn't just one, awful word, "Why?"

Try to keep a low profile while you get ready to graduate from middle school. When your teachers announce that your class theme is "integrity," and that they want you and your classmates to select a passage from scripture to be used as the class quote, do not submit one for consideration. Do not suggest one that you feel best "embodies" (which you now know is a word that you should never, ever use) the many different facets ("facets" is another word to avoid, as it turns out) of integrity, and do not give an eloquent, carefully crafted presentation explaining why you feel this way. Give your speech without faltering, even when you hear Sharon and her friends snickering, or see them making faces while they mimic your hand gestures. But above all else, do not feel surprised or taken aback when Sharon B. stands up in

the middle of your speech to say, “I just want to say that integrity is like, being smart, okay?” and then sits down, smug look of satisfaction firmly planted on her face. If this happens, you must do two things: First, do not notice anything ironic about Sharon’s statement. Second, do not think back on the nine years of torment this girl has put you through, or remember the ways that Mrs. White bullied you and your brothers. Don’t reflect on how painfully uncool you always have been and always will be to for the rest of your life. Do not hold back tears, thinking about the crazy injustice that this school has put you through, or how Amy M., the girl who claims to be best pals with Jesus, has never stood up for you once, even when she saw Sharon teasing you for wearing your brother’s hand-me-down sweatshirt. Don’t remember how Amy laughed with Sharon, and then went on to remind you that the meek shall inherit the earth just two days later. Do not think about how your best friend doesn’t even live on the same continent as you, and how you’ll never, ever be good at sports. Sit down, close your mouth, and listen to Sharon and her friends whisper, just loud enough so you can hear, about how “pretendous” you are, and do not think about how you know they mean “pretentious.”

Whatever you do, do not look Sharon B. in the eye and tell her to never fucking interrupt you again. Do not suggest that she look “integrity” up in the dictionary, and do not call her a classless piece of shit. Do not revel in the moment of silence that follows, or notice the way Sharon’s muddy brown eyes bulge while you glare into them. Do not let the rush of adrenaline keep you from hearing the other kids in the classroom murmur “Oooo...” while they turn to look at Mrs. Jensen, who you suddenly realize is screaming about “profane language,” “classroom etiquette,” and some shit about what Jesus would have done. Do not look at the demerit the principle wrote you, shaking her head and tut-tutting about what a shame it is that such a good girl had to ruin a perfect record with only a week or two left of school, and know that it was worth it.

Don’t grow into your once woefully average body during high school, or let your hair grow long so that it gets less bushy and its last few bits of Phoenix-red grow out. Don’t take up running because you like the way it makes you feel, strong and clear-headed, or trade in your hot-pink Chuck Taylors for navy blue ones because you like how they look against your new jeans, which you’re allowed to wear at your new school.

When baby Athena arrives and your father asks you to be her godmother, ask him why. Don’t nod silently with tears in your eyes, thinking that you’re starting to understand “Why,” before he hugs you and thanks you for being so very *you*. And when you hear that Amy M. passed away from heart failure in your freshman year of college, don’t attend her funeral. But if you decide that the decent thing to do is to go and to pay your respects, do not go with David H., who you’ve kept in touch with, and sit as far away from everyone you know as possible. Don’t look across the church to see everyone: Ms. DeVamp, Mrs. White, Mr. Hart, Jeff S., Becky, Sharon, and all of her bitches (which you and the girl from England still call them when

you're reminiscing about how much you hated middle school on your weekly Skype dates) sitting near one another. Do not notice the way Jeff puts his arm around Becky while she cries, or how Mr. Hart wipes his nose with a stained blue handkerchief he keeps in his coat pocket. Do not let yourself wonder who or what it is they've all come here to mourn today, because you have a sneaking suspicion that it's not Amy, it's something bigger, darker, and uglier.

Don't notice the way Mrs. White's voice trembles when she stands up to say a few words about what an angel Amy was or how Sharon's mascara trails down her cheeks, even though she and Amy were never friends. But even though you and Amy weren't friends either, don't sit there without crying. Don't try, thinking of every sad thing you can think of: your mother dying, your father dying, something horrible happening to your goddaughter, Athena, only to find that you can't, or maybe won't. Don't realize that all you have to say about this, Amy's funeral, the horde of characters from your past all huddled together across the aisle, and how it all feels now that it's staring you in the face, is nothing.

And when the service is over and you find yourself crossing paths with Sharon as you make your exit, make sure that you treat her kindly and respectfully, making it clear that you've decided to let bygones be bygones.

Whatever you do, don't glare at her when she smiles at you like an old friend and says, "Hi." And don't nod curtly before walking out without saying a word to her, so that she knows that you remember who she is. Because after all, that would be mean.