

PROLOGUE

For as long as anyone can remember, the students of Mount Washington High have arrived at school on the last Monday in September to find a list naming the prettiest and the ugliest girl in each grade.

This year will be no different.

Roughly four hundred copies of the list currently hang in locations of varying conspicuousness. One is taped above the urinal in the first-floor boys' bathroom, one covers the just-announced cast for the fall drama production of *Pennies from Heaven*, one is tucked between pamphlets for dating violence and depression in the nurse's office. The list is affixed to locker doors, slipped inside classroom desks, stapled to bulletin boards.

The bottom right corner of each copy has been dimpled by an embossing stamp, leaving behind the scar of Mount Washington High rendered as a line drawing — before the indoor pool, the new gymnasium, and a wing of high-tech science labs were added. This stamp had certified every graduation diploma before it was stolen from the principal's desk drawer decades ago. It is now a piece of mythic contraband used to discourage copycats or competitors.

No one knows for sure who authors the list each year, or how the responsibility is passed along, but secrecy has not impeded tradition. If anything, the guaranteed anonymity makes the judgments of the list appear more absolute, impartial, unbiased.

And so, with every new list, the labels that normally slice and dice the girls of Mount Washington High into a billion different distinctions — poseurs, populars, users, losers, social climbers, athletes, airheads, good girls, bad girls, girly girls, guy's girls, sluts, closet sluts, born-again virgins, prudes, over-achievers, slackers, stoners, outcasts, originals, geeks, and freaks, to name just a few — will melt away. The list is refreshing in that sense. It can reduce an entire female population down to three clear-cut groups.

Prettiest.

Ugliest.

And everyone else.

This morning, before the first homeroom bell, every girl at Mount Washington High will learn if her name is on the list or not.

The ones who aren't will wonder what the experience, good or bad, might have been like.

The eight girls who are won't have a choice.