

Excerpts from the YA novel *Speak*, by Laurie Halse Anderson.

Melinda Sordino narrates the story. She is a normal high school student until she has a bad experience at a party, just before the start of the book.

It is easier not to say anything. Shut your trap, button your lip, can it. All that crap you hear on TV about communication and expressing feelings is a lie. Nobody really wants to hear what you have to say.

You don't understand, my headvoice answers. Too bad she can't hear it. My throat squeezes shut, as if two hands of black fingernails are clamped on my windpipe. I have worked so hard to forget every second of that stupid party, and here I am in the middle of a hostile crowd that hates me for what I had to do. I can't tell them what really happened. I can't even look at that part myself. An animal noise rustles in my stomach.

I am a good actor. I have a whole range of smiles. I use the shy, look-up-through-the-bangs smile for staff members, and the crinkly-eye smile with a quick shake of my head if a teacher asks me for an answer. If my parents want to know how school went, I flash my eyebrows upward and shrug my shoulders. When people point at me or whisper as I walk past, I wave to imaginary friends down the hall and hurry to meet them. If I drop out of high school, I could be a mime.

It is getting harder to talk. My throat is always sore, my lips raw. When I wake up in the morning, my jaws are clenched so tight I have a headache. Sometimes my mouth relaxes around Heather, if we're alone. Every time I try to talk to my parents or a teacher, I sputter or freeze. What is wrong with me? It's like I have some kind of spastic laryngitis.

I clear my throat. I can't get any words out, it is too dry. I try again, with a little cough.

They keep asking questions like "What is wrong with you?" and "Do you think this is cute?" How can I answer? I don't have to. They don't want to hear anything I have to say.

We have a meeting with Principal Principal. Someone has noticed that I've been absent. And that I don't talk. They figure I'm more a head case than a criminal, so they call in the guidance counselor, too.

Mother's mouth twitches with words she doesn't want to say in front of strangers. Dad keeps checking his beeper, hoping someone will call.

I sip water from a paper cup. If the cup were lead crystal, I would open my mouth and take a bite. Crunch, crunch, swallow.

They want me to speak.

"Why won't you say anything?" "For the love of God, open your mouth!" "This is childish, Melinda." "Say something." "You are only hurting yourself by refusing to cooperate." "I don't know why she's doing this to us."

Principal: "Melinda. Last year you were a straight-B student, no behavioral problem, few absences. But the reports I've been getting . . . well, what can we say?"

Mother: "That's the point, she won't say anything! I can't get a word out of her. She's mute."

Guidance Counselor: "I think we need to explore the family dynamics at play here."

Mother: "She's jerking us around to get attention."

Me: [inside my head] Would you listen? Would you believe me? Fat chance.

Do they choose to be so dense? Were they born that way? I have no friends. I have nothing. I say nothing. I am nothing. I wonder how long it takes to ride a bus to Arizona.

Lawyers on TV always tell their clients not to say anything. The cops say that thing: "Anything you say will be used against you." Self-incrimination. I looked it up. Three- point vocab word. So why does everyone make such a big hairy deal about me not talking? Maybe I don't want to incriminate myself. Maybe I don't like the sound of my voice. Maybe I don't have anything to say.

Sometimes I think high school is one long hazing activity: if you are tough enough to survive this, they'll let you become an adult. I hope it's worth it.