

## Excerpt 1

### In Real Life Chapter 1 Josephina, the Friendless Dunce

I wish I could remember if the lead paint chips that I ate as a child were satisfying to my curious, bored one-and-a-half-year-old self. Maybe they tasted so good that swallowing them was worth the torture they caused all the way through high school.

Somehow I doubt it. The way my mom tells it, we were living in an old apartment complex in my hometown of Marlborough, Massachusetts, a small city about forty-five minutes outside Boston best known for literally nothing. Well, that's not exactly true. A lot of shoes were manufactured there for soldiers during the Civil War. I also used to think that the cigarettes were named after the town, but I was wrong.

Anyway, my parents hadn't divorced yet (that fun news wouldn't come until one year later), so at the time, it was my mom, my dad, my older sister Nicole, and me living at home. We had an enclosed back porch that we used as our playroom, and I'd sit in front of the windows, doing my fat wobbly toddler thing, pushing around colored blocks and Fisher Price Little People. The paint on the sills was peeling and chipped, and since the windows were often open, the breeze would blow flakes of paint onto my toys. My mom isn't sure how many weeks I'd been ingesting the poison, but when she finally walked in and found me going to town on a bunch of little white flecks, she snatched me up and rushed me to the doctor to get tested for lead poisoning.

A normal nontoxic amount of lead in a child's system is under 10 micrograms. According to my blood test, I had 59 micrograms! Math

isn't my strong suit (thank you, paint chips), but I'm pretty sure that's almost SIX TIMES the recommended maximum. The doctors weren't really sure how it was going to affect me, but the big fear was that I would have brain damage. In truth, I'm lucky that I didn't end up with anything more severe than a learning disability, though that's not how it would feel while I was dealing with its repercussions for the next twenty years of my life.

From the start of preschool, I had a hard time acquiring basic skills like reading and simple math. My mother had me tested, and the results qualified me for special education classes. I didn't fully understand what that meant for the first couple of years of elementary school. At a certain point each day, I'd leave my regular class to go to another one, and I knew that it was a different sort of program, because the other students in it acted differently from the ones in my regular classes. This one—we called it SPED (special education) for short—was

mostly made up of a lot of really hyper kids with ADHD (that's attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), troublemakers, and a few kids with Down syndrome. Looking back, I find it highly strange that the school just lumped everyone with learning difficulties into one class, regardless of their specific educational needs. But the material was taught much more slowly than in the regular class, and it was easier for me to understand.

Though none of us were fully aware of the reason we were together, all of us special education kids were friends. I grew especially close to a girl named Taylor who had mild ADHD. One day while playing tag during recess, I told her that she reminded me of a mouse, and she got really offended. But I'd called her that because she was small, and her pretty yellow hair reminded me of Pipsy the Mouse from my favorite video

"You can walk Jackie there!" Jackie looked over at me, waiting to see if I would join her.

To this day, I'm ashamed of my response. "I don't even know that girl," I said and took off in the opposite direction. I ended up hiding in an alcove under a stairwell until well after the bell rang, just to make sure no one saw me going to the wing of the school where our classes were held.

In school, most kids want nothing more than to fit in. I hated the idea that my peers thought less of me because I was considered "stupid." It was embarrassing. But, really, I was my own toughest critic. I cared so much about what other people thought that it began to influence the way I thought about myself. I began to believe that I was less of a person because I had a disability. I knew that I had to change something because of the effect SPED had on my self-esteem, but it would be years before I was able to do anything about it. For the time being, I just made sure to go out of my way to take a really complicated route to get to class, trying my hardest to keep that part of my life secret.

But it was too late. Other kids knew, and I was ostracized more and more. In the cafeteria, I usually sat with a small group of girls, and whenever I'd make my way to their table, all the boys would taunt me, calling me a girl. In fact, the girls I hung around with could be just as brutal as the boys. Sometimes, out of nowhere, they would all gang up on me and tell me to go sit somewhere else. They'd sing along to the tune of "It's Raining Men," but use the words, "It's raining guts, hallelujah! It's raining Joey's guts, amen!" The lines between the chorus were all about how my different insides and body parts would splat and explode all over the ground.

It sounds like a truly bizarre way to tease someone, I know. But it cut like a knife (much like the one from their song that freed my guts from my belly).

Although I was the girls' punching bag, sometimes they wouldn't want to deal with me at all and would just silently wave me away when I tried to sit with them. On one such humiliating day, I decided to lick my wounds by seeking out a frozen treat. The cafeteria had recently gotten an ice-cream vending machine, and it was considered a pretty big deal because most of the desserts you could order from the machine were pricey for the average elementary school student. After being rejected by the girls, I wanted to pretend that I was above them, so I haughtily marched up to the machine like I was the richest kid in school. I used the sixty cents I'd scrounged out of the bottom of my bag earlier that day to buy the cheapest item available—a cherry Popsicle. I turned to face the cafeteria as if I didn't have a care in the world, proudly unwrapped it, and took my first lick. My tongue immediately froze to it, just like that scene from *A Christmas Story* when the kid licks the flagpole.

I tried to remove my tongue discreetly at first while pretending to enjoy the Popsicle. I wiggled the bastard around in little circles, but it wouldn't budge and started to burn my tongue badly. I turned to face the wall and tugged on it hard, all the while keeping a side eye on the cafeteria to make sure no one saw what was happening. Too late. I heard someone start to laugh hysterically, and I slowly turned around to face the crowd, where everyone suddenly exploded with laughter and pointed at me. By the time a teacher finally came over to lead me away to the nurse's office so she could pour warm water over my tongue, I wanted to die.

The girls laughed the loudest at me that day, but while they could be terrible, I still tried to hang out with them because they seemed like a safer alternative than the boys. I was already becoming sensitive about people reacting to the way I behaved. I understood that I acted in a way that was considered feminine, but I didn't know how else to act. It was simply who I was. I'd been teased about it my whole life, especially by my cousins, who would call me Josephina every time they caught me trying on girls' dress-up clothes and playing with dolls when I'd visit their house. As much as I hated the nickname, I couldn't help it. I didn't want to play with those lame building blocks and plastic cars. Girl toys were much more fun.

My dad couldn't stand my disinterest in traditionally male activities, and would buy me things like basketballs or Wiffle Ball Bats for my birthday. He was always trying to forbid me from hanging out with girls and sometimes even sneered and said that I sounded gay when I talked. He pestered me to play sports my entire life, but they never interested me at all. I was terrified of getting hit in the face and breaking my nose.

But one day I watched a girls' soccer game after school with Taylor, and the players made it look like fun. It was just a lot of running around and kicking, which I felt that I could handle. I remember that I was riding in my dad's car when I told him that I wanted to join a soccer team, and I swear he almost drove off the road with excitement.

He signed me up for a team that wasn't officially affiliated with our school, so I was playing with a bunch of kids I didn't know. I was awful, but no one teased me about it to my face. The next season my dad ended up coaching, and even though I was still a terrible player, I felt

"Burn!" Michael said, cackling.

Alex and I never talked at practice after that, and my reputation as a friendless loser was officially cemented. I might as well have worn a name tag that said as much. But it was really hammered home one day in health class when we learned how to do CPR. Everyone was supposed to partner up with someone else to learn the technique. These forced divides were what I dreaded most in school because no one ever wanted to pair up with me. There were an odd number of kids in the class, and as usual I was left standing alone.

"Okay," the teacher said. "One of you will have to be a group of three. Who wants Joey in their group?"

Not a single kid raised a hand. Some of them coughed and looked away; others snickered right in my face. I remember looking out at all of them and thinking, Not a single person here wants to learn how to save me if I was dying. LITERALLY DYING—not even the girls who sometimes let me sit with them at lunch (although that was probably to be expected since they already took such pleasure in imagining my death). The teacher must have quickly realized how humiliating the situation was for me, and she forced two kids to let me join them. They were not happy about it, let me tell you.