

DON'T
JUDGE
ME

LISA SCHROEDER



SCHOLASTIC PRESS | NEW YORK

Copyright © 2020 by Lisa Schroeder

All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Press, an imprint of Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920*. SCHOLASTIC, SCHOLASTIC PRESS, and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-62854-8

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 20 21 22 23 24

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, November 2020

Book design by Yaffa Jaskoll

CHAPTER ONE

Sometimes I like to imagine what it must be like to have a large family at dinnertime. Probably a little chaotic. Loud. Maybe messy. But I bet if there are school forms to sign, the parents hardly read them. Or if one of the kids doesn't feel like talking, no one even notices. That must be nice.

Since it's just the three of us in my family, my parents *always* notice if I don't feel like talking. Some days it feels like a giant sign with neon lights flashing at me: TALK TO US, HAZEL! TELL US ALL YOUR THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS!

The lights were about to start flashing at me across our Friday night dinner table at Ruby's Diner. It's a favorite place of ours, with booths covered in old-fashioned red vinyl and a counter with round stools, where people sit and drink thick, creamy milkshakes. I love strawberry the most because they use real berries. The waitresses wear pink dresses with aprons while the men wear black pants, white shirts, and pink bow ties. As my dad likes to say, "It's very retro."

I'd brought a book along with me to read, because I much prefer reading to talking. I was finishing up an old

favorite, *The Adventures of Pippi Longstocking*. It's always been my comfort book, and since starting middle school, I've *really* needed some comfort. I discovered Pippi when I was little thanks to a statue of her that stands in the park in front of our city's library. When Mom told me about Pippi, I'd wanted her to find the book and read it to me. So she had. And I fell madly in love with the girl named Pippi Longstocking.

Pippi doesn't care what anyone thinks. And she's so unique. She loves to sail the seven seas, she wears her two braids in such a way that they stick straight out from her head, and she can lift a horse with one hand.

For my birthday that year, Mom got me my own set of Pippi Longstocking books. It's hard to know how many times I've read the original book, but if I had to guess, I'd say around thirty.

While I read my book, my parents talked about some problems Dad was having with a coworker. But once our food came and I set the book down, the questions would start. They always did. And I needed to show them something that was probably going to infuriate them, especially my mom. I'd brought it with me because chances were good Mom wouldn't make a scene in a public place.

The waiter gave us our food and as soon as he left, I picked up my burger and took a bite. I was starving. But the texture was all wrong. I forced myself to swallow, set it

down, and took a long drink of water. My face must have given away my disgust.

“Hazel, are you okay?” Mom asked. She’d ordered her usual soup and salad. Meanwhile, Dad worked on his bacon cheeseburger like he hadn’t eaten in five days.

“It’s not well-done,” I said. “I don’t know if I can eat it.”

Dad wiped his mouth with his napkin. “Then let’s send it back.”

“No,” I whispered. “That’s so embarrassing.” I picked up one of the crinkle fries that came with it. “I’ll just eat the fries. It’s fine.”

“Sweetie,” Mom said with her warm smile. “He asked how you wanted it and you said well-done. If they didn’t give you what you want, it’s okay to ask them to make it right.”

Sometimes I wonder if becoming an adult gives you superpowers, one of them being the ability to do most anything and not get embarrassed by it. Well, unless you’re Pippi Longstocking. Something magical must have happened to her as a baby. That’s my guess. But take my dad, for example. He has no problem taking out the trash wearing his robe if he’s forgotten to do it the night before. Really, Dad? You’re okay with the entire neighborhood seeing that old, ratty green robe you’ve had for at least a hundred years?

And then there’s Mom. Nothing fazes her. Last weekend we drove down to Salem and went to Macy’s. As we browsed a rack of sale shoes, she burst out laughing.

“What?” I’d asked. “What is it?”

She’d pointed at the shoes she’d worn. “I was in such a hurry, I didn’t pay attention to what I was doing. Look, I’m wearing two different shoes.”

They were the same style, but one was black while the other was navy blue. She works at a coffee shop, which means she’s on her feet all day. When she finds a comfortable pair of shoes that she loves, she often gets multiple pairs in different colors. Seems boring to me, but whatever. Another superpower adults seem to have is that boring doesn’t bother them. At all.

“Well, hurry,” I’d whispered. “Buy some new ones and put them on, before anyone sees.”

“But I’m not really finding anything I like. Besides, hardly anyone will notice, and if they do, well, I bet every woman in here has been so exhausted or rushed at some point, they’ve done the same thing.”

I couldn’t believe it. She was okay walking around with two different shoes on her feet? In *public*?

“Can I go look in the teen section?” I’d asked. Yes, I admit, I didn’t want to be seen with her.

“All right. I need to stop at the cosmetics counter. I’ll be there in ten minutes or so. Stay alert. Be safe.” Her favorite four words make me sigh every time she says them.

Now, before I could stop her, Mom had waved down the waiter. I stared at my glass of water like it provided all the answers to the universe. If only!

“I’m so sorry,” the waiter said. “It must have gotten mixed up with someone else’s. I’ll have the cook make you another one right away.”

“Thank you,” my dad said while I muttered, “Sorry.”

“Oh, nothing to be sorry about,” the waiter said. “We want you to be happy!”

I wanted to say, “I’m in sixth grade. Do you remember what that was like? Happiness seems about as hard to find these days as the lost socks that magically disappear in the laundry.”

“So, how was school today?” Mom asked.

I’d been in middle school for about a month. At first, I told them how much I hated being in a big school and having passing time for classes. I longed for the familiar faces at my old school and the rooms I’d come to know and love. Mom kept telling me that getting used to something new can be hard at first, but things would get better. It didn’t take long to realize that telling them about my problems only made things worse. Because then they felt the need to ask about every little thing, and I just didn’t want to talk to them about it.

Instead, I write haiku. Strange, I know, but it helps. My fifth-grade teacher, Ms. Lennon, got me started. She shared one almost every day on the whiteboard last year. I kind of became obsessed and started coming up with my own. My brain loves counting syllables, apparently. And when something good comes to me, I try to write it down.

Since I'd been eating lunch in the library, I liked to write them on little pieces of paper and slip them into books for others to find. Like this one I'd written earlier today:

Three years of this, but
others have survived and so
will I. Hopefully.

For a moment, I thought about reciting it as my answer to her question. But instead, I turned to my mom, smiled, and replied, "Fine."

"Learn anything interesting?" Dad asked.

I knew they didn't like it when I answered with just one word. But did they understand I didn't like it when they asked about school every single day? Because honestly, they might have *thought* they'd love to know what it's like for me in middle school, but did they really?

I mean, did they *really* want to know there were a couple of boys who insisted on tripping my best friend, Tori, and me every day as we made our way to first period? Did they *really* want to know I'd asked for permission to eat in the library because kids in the cafeteria were so obnoxious, sometimes I could hardly stand it? Did they *really* want to know that in band class, I kept finding a note on my music stand with some horrible comment about my butt?

As much as I didn't want to show them, I knew I had to, and this was my chance. I pulled the piece of paper out of

the pocket of my jeans, unfolded it, and placed it in the middle of our table for them to read.

“Yeah, this happened today,” I whispered. “And, Mom, please, keep your voice down, okay?”

And then I held my breath, hoping she’d grant me my wish.