



Everything SUCKS

**Losing My Mind
and Finding Myself
in a High School Quest for Cool**

Hannah Friedman

SAMPLER

Everything
SUCKS

chapter one

FAMILY SUCKS

I am the firstborn human.

A smear of phosphorescent firefly guts illuminates my left cheek like cosmic war paint.

“Amelia!” I scold. “You’re supposed to put them in the jar, not squish out their insides!” Seven-year-old me is furious. I hate her.

My mother laughs as Amelia snatches up another bug, squeezes, then sucks out a juicy droplet of glowing goo with gusto. A neon trail dribbles down her chin.

“Eeeiw! Ma, I *told* you she doesn’t know how to play.”

“She’s just trying to be helpful, Hannah,” my mother assures me.

“Well, she’s not!” I shout, grabbing the jar and stomping over to the other side of the yard to avoid anymore unwanted monkey interferences.

You see, I am the firstborn human, but Amelia is the firstborn.

If Amelia would just stick to the rules of firefly-catching,

she'd make an excellent teammate. Her reflexes are undeniably swift, and she can see so well in the dark that she doesn't even need to wait for a bug to glow to spot it. But she never, ever listens—not to me or to my mother or even to the huge Great Dane down the street. As far as I can tell, monkeys in suburbia can do whatever they damn well please.

No matter how many cute shenanigans I pull, I am forever outshined by a family member who garners wild applause simply by serving herself spaghetti with her own foot. And that's not even the half of it. My parents have to call my kindergarten teacher to explain that a monkey really *did* tear up my homework collage. Nobody wants to have play dates with *me*, but even the most popular older girl in my elementary school clamors for an invitation to visit when she discovers that I am "That Monkey Girl." Living in the shadow of a one-foot-tall simian sensation totally sucks. On the bright side, I've become extremely adept at picking things up with my toes.

You're probably wondering where she came from. We all are, actually. The truth is that nobody expected her to live this long. She was born somewhere in South America, kidnapped by poachers, then sold to merchants in Egypt who ripped out her teeth. We think they taught her to pickpocket distracted tourists in town squares because she is a remarkably good thief. She's a sly magpie with an opposable thumb. She was in opium withdrawal when she was confiscated in a California customs office. She was also about to die.

My mother was working at the time for a program that trained monkeys to assist quadriplegics. My father was on a music tour and happily agreed to let my mother house the ailing primate for a few weeks before her eventual demise.

That was twenty-nine years ago.

It would be difficult to find two people more opposite than my parents in absolutely every way. My mother is perfectly proportioned and olive-skinned and is always telling me to turn off the lights and wear a jacket and remember that wearing a scarf in the car with the window open is an “invitation for decapitation.” Dad takes a rounder approach to most everything, explaining that sometimes the very best ideas come from whistling, that there’s never just one solution to a problem, and that everything is better with lemon meringue pie.

Long ago, death and divorce solidified Mom’s foundational fear that always, at any given moment, something absolutely freaking awful is about to happen. Seriously, watch out. There’s a ninety percent chance that whatever you’re doing right now could result in a horrific, crippling accident. Paper cuts can lead to gangrene, cancer will find you no matter what you eat, and you have certainly been kidnapped by psychotic terrorist cannibals before she ever assumes you might be stuck in traffic.

Dad, on the other hand, thinks “Psychotic Terrorist Cannibals” sounds like a great title for a musical. And maybe he’ll write, direct, and star in a full-scale production of said musical, and build six-foot-tall, dancing puppets to be his co-stars. From the time that I am old enough to support the Giant Tap Dancing Teeth Costume, I spend each holiday season performing in Dad’s annual Kids’ Silly Song Sing-Along Tour, kick-ball-changing my way through the humiliation-stravaganza that is running into your current elementary school crush while dressed as a set of giant, gleaming white

teeth. Not even a *cool* person looks cool rubbing against a toothbrush the size of a car. So. Clearly, I don't stand a chance.

Another child of divorce, Dad moved out at fifteen. He had a hit record by twenty-two. Over that sunny New York City summer, his mutt, Barker, befriended a neurotic Doberman Pinscher named Jesse, who happened to belong to the prettiest, saddest girl in the whole wide world, aka my mother. They fell in love. First the dogs, then the owners. Just like in the movies.

My mother is quick to remind me that just because she met my father in the park doesn't mean that the park is not "a major recipe for rape," and that I shouldn't trust guys just because they have nice dogs or handsome smiles or broken arms, because that's how Ted Bundy lured women into his van of death.

"What?!"

"It's true, Hannah."

"Ma, what does that have to do with dropping me off at the library?"

"Dogs, broken arms, candy . . . predators lurk at the library. I don't want you to—"

"Boy, I sure do love dogs," Dad exclaims, apparently not listening at all, which is about as surprising as the fact that Friday follows Thursday. "Barker's the reason that you're around, you know," Dad tells me for the thousandth time. "If he hadn't been so persistent, I don't think your mother would have ever given me the time of day."

"He was a very handsome dog," she adds.

"And he taught me so much about enjoying life!" Dad muses. The napkin he is fiddling with begins to take the shape of a crum-

ply, four-legged creature. “When I really *listened* to what Barker wanted to do, I found myself exploring new places, exercising, socializing, and just appreciating the little things. Sunshine . . . blankets . . . hot dogs!” Dad smiles, enjoying the memory.

Mom says she doesn’t remember anything between the ages of nine and twelve, starting with the night her older sister Dianne stopped complaining about the headache that had been bothering her all day after she bonked her head on the side of the pool. Dianne stopped complaining because Dianne was dead.

I’m pretty sure Dad’s father isn’t dead, but I don’t know what he looks like. Dad remembers the day he left. Dad remembers everything between the ages of nine and twelve. He even has songs about it. He closes his eyes when he sings the line, “Daddy, I wish to God I knew, how come I try so hard to be not like you?”

My dad rents out the local baseball field for one evening every year and invites people from town—the accountant, the piano teacher, the guy from the deli whose cute twin boys are in my class—and he pitches slow and easy and doesn’t keep score. He keeps me at bat even after I swing and miss three times, then four times. He smiles and throws slower, easier. Underhand. “You can do it, sweetie!” Everyone is watching. Five times. Six times. “One more time!” Seven. I miss. Eight. He smiles. “Lucky number nine!” *Crack*. Finally!

But it’s a foul ball. Back to the plate. I think I hate him, and then I hate myself for thinking so.

My mother is beautiful. We look completely different. Some-

times when she comes to school for parent-teacher conferences, the teachers want to know if I am in touch with my birth mother.

“What the hell are you talking about? I am her birth mother.”

Mom says I’m not to curse on playdates or at school or in museums, but that she doesn’t care what the hell I say in the house because words aren’t dangerous, like matches or the radiation you’ll absorb if you watch chicken nuggets cooking in the microwave.

I’m doing my fifth-grade history project on the kitchen table and my mother is bandaging up Amelia’s foot.

“This is a lot of pus,” Mom says to herself. “Dean, wanna see?”

She squeezes the abscess and the monkey screams. My dad lifts his head slowly, processing the request as though he’s listening to soft banjo music echoing through clouds.

“What in the world makes you think that I would want to see that?” he replies, returning to his paper.

“It’s green. And it’s still draining. Last chance.”

“I think I can handle missing out on this one.”

“Suit yourself.” She gives it one last squeeze and wipes off the oozing pus with the tablecloth. *Eiw*. “The transmission stalled again today.”

“I’ll take a look at it.”

“Take it to the mechanic,” she tells him in a sharp tone. “I need a working car. I can’t take the kids to school via *shoe*.”

Dad’s eyes grow large. He gets up and begins to pace, rubbing his belly and puffing out his cheeks, deep in thought. He spears a bagel from the breadbox with his finger and spins it

carefully, studying. "It's brilliant," he declares secretively, then disappears downstairs. Twenty minutes later he emerges clutching a piece of paper with blue scribbles all over it. "We are building a Shoe Car," he announces matter-of-factly.

"A what?"

"A Shoe Car! Perfect in form and function." He points to the crude outline of a tennis shoe with giant circles sticking out from the sides. "Look at the slopes! It's so . . . aerodynamic! And with a lightweight canvas outer shell, it'll be swift enough to—"

"Trans-*mission*," Mom interrupts. "And look at the gutters!" She points to the window, through which a sloping piece of detached gutter dangles precariously.

"Are you even listening? Look at the steering mechanism! Isn't it *ingenious*?"

"We need new gutters before winter. Nobody needs a shoe car. Ever."

Dad is completely nonplussed. "Kids?"

My little brother Sam and I look at each other uncomfortably. There's really no good answer. If you take Dad's side, Mom becomes even more naggingly critical than usual, but if you don't support him, he's heartbroken. Then you remember the time he drove two hours through three feet of snow to pick you up from a sleepover when you had a tummyache, or the time he spent the entire weekend helping you craft a four-tiered Styrofoam cake hat that won the third-grade Hat Day competition, and you feel like an ungrateful brat. I know from experience that the gutters are never going to be fixed and that my mother will find some excuse to be miserable no matter what, so I side with Dad.

"Sounds great," Sam agrees.

Mom says nothing, only bites her lip, tugging on her right earlobe. She positions the monkey on her lap in prime booger-picking position. She's annoyed. "Mmm, got a big one . . ." she mutters to herself, extracting a pebble-sized ball of brown mucus. I think my mom likes animals because they can't disappoint her.

We build a Shoe Car. It is six feet long and painted blue and Dad even manages to convince Mom to hand-sew thirty-foot-long shoelaces. He has to get out and push it up the steep hills, but that doesn't stop him from showing it off, proud as can be, all over town. I'm proud of the sunny yellow bumpers and the big cartoon eyelets I helped craft out of plastic Fisher-Price rings, and proud of my dad for being so creative. I am sure that arriving at school in the amazing giant blue shoe that I helped build will finally erase my monkey moniker once and for all. Hannah the Amazing. Hannah the Magnificent!

Genevieve, the coolest, most popular girl in my elementary school, who even wears a real bra, takes one look at me pulling up in the Shoe Car and howls with laughter. Here is some excellent advice: if you don't want your new nickname to be the same as your old one except with a big fat "freak" added to the end of it, as in "That Monkey-Girl *Freak*," then the Shoe Car debut is not a winning strategy.

"You people are ruthless!" Mom shouts out my brother's window. "We don't have anything for you to take!" She storms down the stairs and throws open the front door to show the men in black suits the busted TV set, the doors that don't close, and the elaborate system of tiered trash bags tacked to the

basement ceiling in case the pipes burst. Again. The men take a few notes, look a little puzzled, and then leave. Dad says that they think he might be laundering money. I don't know exactly what that means, but I'm quite sure by looking around the house that nothing of any sort is being laundered here.

Other dads put on ties every morning to go to work, but my dad is rarely up before noon and rarely clad in anything more than Tightly-Whities. It's gross. Not as gross as the dead cat in the freezer, but still.

Sometimes people in the neighborhood bring their pets to Mom in an emergency. If the pet is in too much pain and doesn't have a chance, she'll euthanize it and store it in the freezer behind the peas and carrots until the owners can figure out what to do with it. We don't remember who owned that frozen cat. Every now and then when I'm rooting around for a frozen pizza, I'll accidentally grab a handful of tail through the plastic bag like I'm in some really bad horror movie.

Hollywood said Amelia was too ugly to be the close-up monkey in the horror movie that she starred in, but she still got to do all the stunts, like lighting people on fire and injecting them with poison. Amelia bought our house with her salary from the movie. Dad doesn't like to talk about that.

Once, when Sam was a baby, Amelia tried to toss a hair dryer into the bathtub, a stunt for which she had been rewarded with many mini marshmallows on the movie set. Even though the hair dryer wasn't plugged in, I still got in trouble. Amelia didn't.

Sometimes I feel like my mother is looking through a window at the alternate-dimension life she would have had if Dad had become the rock star everybody thought he would. He

was on the fast track until a combination of bad luck and worse management landed him on the music industry blacklist. In another life, my mother would fly first class and eat out at fancy restaurants and wouldn't have to remind Dad to put on a nice jacket. Or maybe he'd be such a rock star that he *could* wear dirty T-shirts to fancy restaurants, because he's freakin' DEAN FRIEDMAN, and he could *buy* this restaurant if he wanted to, so he can do whatever he wants. Actually, he *does* do whatever he wants, which kind of confuses me. But it seems like if you're wealthy, you don't have to explain yourself. You have an excuse. You're just that eccentric billionaire.

Dad sometimes designs interactive museum instruments like harps with lasers for strings or volcanic fiberglass sculptures covered in orange bicycle horns arranged in spiraling chromatic scales. But even the virtual reality video games, the time-travel TV show, and the talking guitar never managed to take off and shower my mother with all the money and security she imagined she was destined for at twenty-two. Perhaps because of this disappointment, she is rarely supportive of his ideas.

Which is why I am absolutely horrified to discover that Mom is now on board with Dad's latest plan to yank me out of sixth grade and move the entire family onto a tour bus all the way across the Atlantic Ocean in order to promote his new album. It's a big deal, his first partnership with the record industry in seventeen years. Even so, I am *not* missing the first year of middle school to rove around the English countryside, sharing a bed with my smelly little brother in a smelly little bus. I'm not going.

Amelia is draped over Mom's shoulder. They both stare me

down intensely.

“We have fed you and clothed you and paid for piano lessons and glitter rainbow shoes, and I spent sixteen hours in labor with you, and now we’ve finally found a competent monkey-sitter after *twenty-seven* interviews, so you. Are. *Going.*”

And I go.

When everything sucks, change everything . . .

And that's exactly what Hannah Friedman set out to do in an ambitious attempt to bust out of a life of obscurity and absurdity and into an alternate world of glamour, wealth, and popularity.

Being dubbed "That Monkey Girl" by middle school bullies and being pulled out of sixth grade to live on a tour bus with her agoraphobic mother, her smelly little brother, and her father's hippie band mates convinces Hannah that she is destined for a life of freakdom.

But when she enters one of the country's most prestigious boarding schools on scholarship, Hannah transforms herself into everything she is not: cool. By senior year, she has a perfect millionaire boyfriend, a perfect GPA, a perfect designer wardrobe, and is part of the most popular clique in school, but somehow everything begins to suck far worse than when she first started. Her newfound costly drug habit, eating disorder, identity crisis, and Queen-Bee attitude lead to the unraveling of Hannah's very unusual life.

Putting her life back together will take more than a few clicks of her heels, or the perfect fit of a glass slipper, in this not-so-fairy tale of going from rock bottom to head of the class and back again.



Hannah Friedman grew up in New York and graduated from Yale University. She is one of the youngest authors ever to be published in *Newsweek* magazine and has won both the Yale Playwrights Festival and the New York Television Festival. You can find more from Hannah at www.hannahfriedman.com and www.youtube.com/writinghannah.

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