



*For Kyla and Jace
And Grandchildren
Yet to Come*



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MY 
Love-Hate
 Relationship with Drama

So, how is middle school working out for you? Do you love it? If you do...if you just can't wait to jump out of bed ridiculously early in the morning in order to start your day at this wonderful, loving, carefree place we call school...if you think life can't possibly get any better than it is when you are 11 or 12 or 13 or 14, you are most likely in the minority. And congratulations! I am happy that you are happy.

That was not my experience. My middle school experience was a nightmare...a nightmare I am going to invite you to re-live with me in a page or two. My middle school experience involved awkwardness, painful shyness, insecurity, bullying and debilitating misery. I was in the minority as well.

Most kids fall into the middle of these two extremes, which, I guess is an okay place to be because it is, after all, middle school. Sorry, for the bad joke. For most kids, middle school is just a couple of pesky years everyone has to muddle through on our way to our grownup lives. Most kids do what they are told, find a group of friends they enjoy hanging out with, and manage to stay out of trouble.

Which category do you fit into? Do you know kids in each of these three groups? Is your school a safe, comfortable place for everyone? Do you think there are kids in your class who dread showing up at school each

day because school is an emotional danger zone? I can pretty much guarantee there are some kids in your school who feel that way. You may sit right next to some of them and have no idea about the unhappy feelings churning around inside of them.

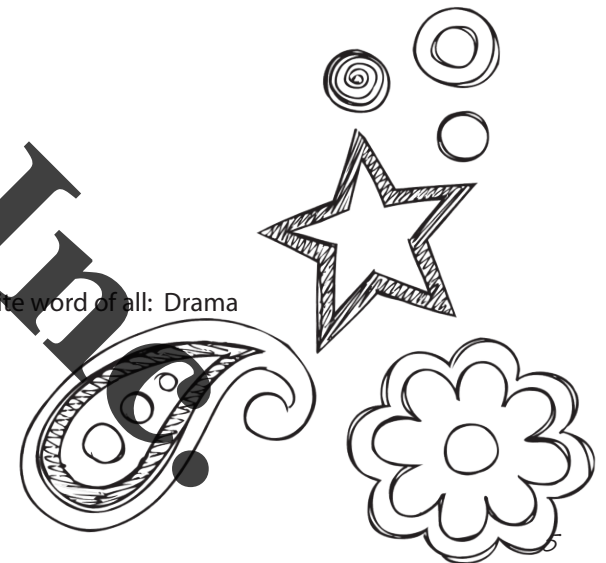
Let me say this: Most kids manage to emerge from middle school unharmed and relatively happy. But "most" isn't good enough. The number of kids who don't enjoy their "tween" years is HUGE! On any given day, more than 160,000 kids miss school because they don't think school is a safe place for them. That's a HUGE number of kids! I hope you're not one of them, but if you are, then at least now you know you are not alone. Not by a mile.

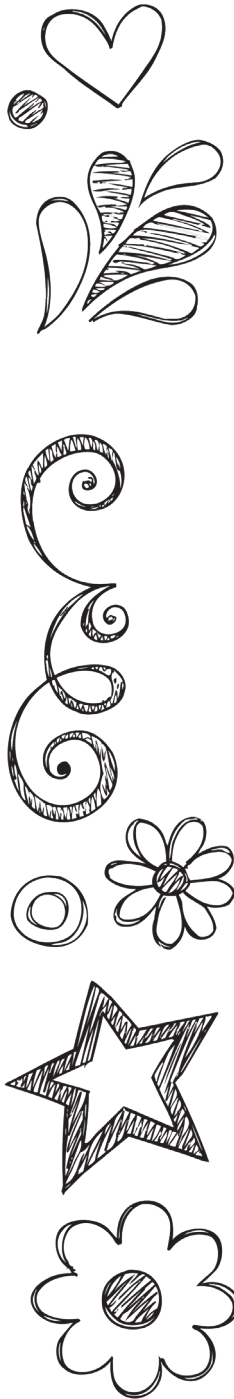
When I ask adult women to tell me about their middle school experiences, they have a lot to say. In fact, it's difficult to get them to stop talking. Some women have vivid memories of feeling excluded or left out. Others have lifelong regrets over things they said or did that made someone unhappy. Some talk about finding their passion in middle school for a sport, or for writing or dancing or just about anything else you can think of. Others love to rattle on and on about their first serious crush.

Here are some of the words that pop up most often in response to the question, "What do you remember about middle school?"

- Jungle
- Immaturity
- Anxiety
- Peer Pressure
- Weight
- Appearance
- Zits
- Shyness
- Gym
- Crush
- The Bus
- The Cafeteria
- Bullies

And my least favorite word of all: Drama





How do you feel about the word “drama?” How do you feel when you work up the courage (and it really does take courage) to go to a parent or teacher or guidance counselor with a serious problem and you are accused of stirring up drama, or even worse, being a drama queen? I happen to know it doesn't feel good.

I know this because I've spent much of my life being told I'm dramatic. I've often accepted this statement as a compliment because the fact is, I ADORE DRAMA! But the drama I adore is the kind of drama the word was invented for. I love the kind of drama that takes place on a stage or on a screen.

I discovered the theater when I was five years old because my mother loved it and shared her passion with me. She wrote plays and directed them, and she always gave me a part. She never gave me the lead because she thought it would look bad if the director's daughter was the star of the show, but she always gave me a good, meaty part. And, if I may be honest with you, I was quite talented, so she wasn't totally out of line for favoring me.

I loved acting for many reasons, but probably the biggest one was that acting gave me a chance to be someone else for a short period of time. While I was onstage I was not the too-tall, too-shy, nearsighted, awkward, clumsy girl I believed I was in real life. I could escape into a dream world where I was funny and accepted and sometimes even admired. Plus, there was the applause.

Applause feels wonderful. It makes you feel like all those people clapping are sending you love. They're not. They're just saying, “Good job.” But it feels like love. The stage was my happy place for years and years, so the word “drama” was a happy word for me. Sometimes.

But other times, the word was used to belittle what I was feeling. When you are going through an emotional crisis the last thing you want to hear is that you are just causing drama. When someone accuses you of stirring up drama what she really means is, “You are being silly,” or “You're causing trouble for no reason” or “I am not taking you seriously” or “You are waaaay too sensitive.” I heard that last one a lot. A lot, lot, lot. And I still want to know what is so bad about being sensitive? Is it better to be insensitive?

And here's something I also wonder about. Why do people tell the person who has been insulted to not be so sensitive, but don't tell the person who does the insulting to not be so mean? I just don't get that.

I don't think I was dramatic anywhere but onstage. Offstage, I was just living my life and feeling my emotions and not wanting to make a scene. The truth is, in middle school I would have given anything to be totally invisible. When I cried (and I cried a lot), I did not cry to get attention. Believe me, the last thing I wanted was attention! I cried because kids gave me plenty of attention...the wrong kind. I cried a lot because kids, particularly boys, were cruel to me. Why didn't anyone tell them they were dramatic? Why? Because the word “drama” is usually reserved for girls, and that makes me mad.

This book is for girls who want to make it through middle school not only alive, but also aware. It's about getting through each day in one piece. It's about how to deal with all the (don't worry, I'm not going to say drama) conflicts and confusion and pressure that come with transitioning into another phase of your life. It's written by someone who still remembers the way her stomach hurt before getting on the bus each day. It's meant for girls of any race, religion or sexual orientation. It's written for girl athletes and actresses, readers and surfers, girls from large families or small, from big cities or wide open spaces. I want girls of all stripes to find their way to these pages so we can begin to bond together to make middle school a safe place for everyone. Isn't it worth a try?



WELCOME to my
Nightmare

I don't relish the thought of re-living my middle school years. I have pretty much pushed those memories to the far recesses of my mind. I moved on long ago, and have been leading a happy and productive life for many years. But I am so committed to making your tween years better than mine that I am willing to go back to those painful years so that I might share them with you, and possibly help you out. Here goes.

My family moved from one end of Rochester, New York to the other just before I entered seventh grade. I had gone to overnight camp the summer before we moved, and had made friends with a few of the girls who would be in my new school, so I wasn't in the position of knowing absolutely no one, but that didn't stop me from being scared to death.

Remember a few pages ago I mentioned that I desperately wanted to be invisible? This is why.

I was five feet nine inches tall when I was 12 years old. Back then, in the mid sixties, a girl that tall was a skyscraper. Today, for reasons scientists are beginning to explore, there are many tall girls around, but that was not the case when I was roaming the halls of Brookside Middle School all those years ago. I was about a foot taller than every other girl in my class. Most seventh grade boys haven't experienced their biggest growth spurt yet, so I was about a foot and a half taller than most of the

boys in my class. It's challenging to be invisible when you're gigantic.

In addition to my prodigious (look it up) height, I had bright red curly hair, freckles, a very large nose, and really dorky eyeglasses. I also had (and still have) a vision problem that caused me to tilt my head to the left all the time. Invisible? Hardly. The only invisible thing about me was the target on my back that people kept throwing emotional darts at.

The girls I met at summer camp were nice to me, but they were a very small part of the class. Thankfully, the super popular girls ignored me completely. But the boys? The boys made "Torturing Karin" their favorite sport, and almost all of them were good enough to make the varsity "Torturing Karin" team.

They harassed me about everything; my height, my red hair, my freckles, and my glasses, but the bulk of the tormenting was about my nose. I had a very prominent nose with a large bump. I hated looking in the mirror, and the boys in my class became a mirror I couldn't escape. They called me animal names like elephant and rhino and aardvark and rabbit, but mostly rabbit, which I couldn't understand because rabbits have cute little pink noses and they are so fluffy and adorable. I guarantee those boys were not calling me fluffy and adorable.

It happened in the same places that kid-on-kid torture likely happens in your school...on the bus, in the cafeteria and outside the building. Kids aren't stupid enough to act like this in class, where a teacher can see the behavior and punish the perpetrator. I suppose that was a good thing, because I can just imagine how much worse the torture would have become if the kids had been caught and disciplined by an adult for their behavior.

The bus was ground zero. Our bus driver was oblivious to the events taking place inches behind his back. They threw spitballs at me. They called me the most disgusting names, and they imitated any move I made. There were a couple of girls on the bus who told me they were my friends, but they did not stand up for me even once. I guess they were afraid they would become the next victims if they came to my aid. I was alone and afraid on that bus every single day, twice a day.





The cafeteria was a danger zone as well. I sat with my few friends and kept my eyes on my lunch, but out of the corners of my eyes I could see those kids laughing at me. Once, I got up to go to the restroom and when I returned someone had written "rabbit" on my spiral notebook. Get the picture?

When Jewish kids turn thirteen, they traditionally partake in a ritual called the Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

Many years ago, a Bar Mitzvah took place solely at the synagogue, where the newly minted teenager would participate in the weekly Sabbath service, and then everyone invited would have a glass of wine and some cake. Over the years, however, the Bar Mitzvah has morphed into a full-blown extravaganza. Yes, the thirteen-year-old boy or girl is still required to study the Torah (The Jewish holy scroll), and recite some passages during the service, but today, instead of a little wine and cake many Jewish families throw huge extravagant dinner dances at country clubs or social halls. And this was happening when I reached my thirteenth year of life.

I didn't have a wide circle of friends, but my mother sure did, and all those moms forced their kids to invite me to their parties. If it hadn't been for my mother's friends, I wouldn't have been invited to a single boy's bar mitzvah party, and that would have been fine and dandy with me. I would have preferred to stay home. I would have preferred to have my eyeballs ripped out of my head with a grapefruit peeler than go to those parties, but my mom felt it was rude to refuse an invitation, so almost every week I found myself at some horrible dinner dance trying to make all five foot nine inches of me look petite. It never worked.

Let me tell you about dance cards. Thank goodness those are a thing of the past. A century or two ago, some lunatic thought up the idea of dance cards. When you arrived at a dance, you were handed a card that listed all the boys who would dance with you and in which order. You wore it around your wrist. So it would say, "Dance number one, Bobby Jones. Dance number two, Jimmy Friedlander," etc... I bet you know where this is going.

Somehow, by magic, whenever my name appeared on a boy's dance card, he would disappear...vanish into thin air. Poof! Gone! I was left standing there like an idiot without a partner for every single dance. I have never experienced worse humiliation. After this happened about fifty times, I decided I'd rather be the one to disappear, so I spent about

nine months worth of Saturday nights in ladies rooms. For awhile, I could tell you what every ladies room in Rochester, NY looked like because I spent so much time there. I could go home and draw the wallpaper. But enough! I am sweating just writing this.

I should have been angry with the people who did this to me. I should have been furious with them for treating me that way. But I wasn't. Instead, I hated myself. I despised myself for being tall and red-headed and big-nosed and generally not worthy of taking up precious space on earth. That's often how it works, isn't it? The kids who shame others get to just live their lives, while their innocent victims suffer in silence.

You'll be happy to know I survived middle school. It wasn't easy or pleasant, and it seemed to last forever, but eventually I graduated and moved on to high school where a miracle occurred.

I thrived! Yes, it's true. I was granted my very own miracle. All of a sudden and out of the blue, kids started being nicer to me. Some kids experienced rapid growth spurts, so I was no longer the only tall kid in the school. Many of the mean kids decided they had better things to do than pick on me. Perhaps they began to worry about getting into college, or making it onto the football or cheerleading teams. Maybe they found boyfriends or girlfriends. There's nothing like a love object to take you away from whatever else you were thinking about.

I don't know what the reasons were for my sudden release from the bondage of my classmates, and I didn't care. Once I could get through a day without hiding or crying or both, my days became a whole lot better. I finally had the time and the energy to notice I was good at many things, so I began to get involved in the life of the school.

For one thing, I was a talented actress. I LOVED performing onstage, and I was cast in nearly every play and musical our school presented. I was often given a starring role. I lived for the spotlight!



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About the Author



Karin Kasdin has worked with young people for more than four decades. She holds a BS degree from Northwestern University and a M.Ed. from Harvard University where she studied adolescent development and children’s television.

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