

Chapter 4: Freedom Fighter
(or, my adventures as a mean girl)

In 1968, my parents took me out of P.S. 8 and sent me to a unique and absurd little school in what was then Fort Greene and is now called Clinton Hill, in Brooklyn. The school was nearly perfectly integrated—Black and Jewish. There were no Hispanics, Asians of any kind, or Catholics that I can recall. My brother and I were two of maybe a half-dozen goyim. The school song was “We Shall Overcome.” I spent fourth grade adjusting but in fifth grade I found that I still needed to hate someone. I hated Louise, the earnest and beloved daughter of well-meaning liberal Jews. Oh, how I hated Louise.

In fourth grade, I had actually attended Louise’s birthday party at Ratner’s delicatessen on the Lower East Side. It was my first experience with the division of milk and meat and I took personally the fact that there was cake but no milk. I felt I’d been tricked. Not that such a trick could excuse the campaign of meanness I mounted the following year—maybe it was the fact that Louise’s parents thought her worthy of a party at a restaurant (whereas my parents were no longer parents at all, but two single people who lived in different buildings in different parts of New York City).

I began by drawing caricatures of Louise as the Ur-nerd. I emphasized her childish short dresses, her owlsh glasses, and her little white socks. I added, for emphasis, a glimpse of flowered underwear, a pronounced knocking of knees, and a near-sighted expression evocative of clueless stupidity. But I hadn’t had to invent the little white socks.

In the underground economy of our classroom, demand increased for my “Little Louise” drawings. After a while I was no longer creating them on spec but filling orders. You would have thought it was pornography. In our little bubble of liberal peacenikdom, I guess it sort of was. Let’s face it, anger is magnetic. When I look at people like Mick Jagger and Judy Garland, performers who were never beautiful but nevertheless hold me rapt, it is their deeply sublimated rage that is so compelling—it’s the good, old venomous rage of the unloved child.

The next salvo in my private war was certainly unpleasant but I’ve never entirely understood why it escalated matters as much as it did. I put half a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on Louise’s chair in the lunchroom and she sat on it. Mrs. Lewis grabbed me by the arm and pulled me into the corner to deliver her reprimand. She gave me an opportunity to confess and apologize and I refused—our conversation went something like this:

“I want you to apologize right now, and I want you to offer to take Louise’s dress to the cleaners.”

“Why should I?”

“Because you are in the wrong, and you know it.”

“I can’t help it if she’s too stupid to look at her chair before she sits.”

“You are this close to being suspended.”

“So?”

Meanwhile, Louise was crying. My allies had scattered but later congratulated me on the way had I stuck to my guns.

That Christmas, my unwitting father gave me a button-making machine. He knew nothing of my recent forays into the creation of anti-social propaganda, it was just an apt gift for a child who liked words at a moment in time when the manufacture of clever slogans was a near-religion in New York City. I guess his idea had been that I would make anti-war buttons, or pro-ecology buttons, or maybe even just laminate photographs of JohnPaulGeorgeRingo and call it a day. Instead, I created “I Hate Louise” buttons in a variety of colors and sizes. Upon returning from vacation, I distributed these items to my classmates. That same afternoon, my mother joined me in the principal’s office where I was read my rights: suspension for one week. To this meeting, Mom wore a black leather motorcycle jacket and electric blue stretch pants, which outfit was observed and discussed with something between awe and outrage by students and teachers alike. No sign of Dad.

When I was allowed to return, I left Louise alone and moved on to persecute the other weak members of the herd—Stephanie, who had a slight speech impediment; and Arlene, who lived with her grandparents and came to school in a parochial school uniform and long underwear, presumably because those were the only clothes they could afford.

Regardless of how I learned to hate, my sins against Louise, Stephanie, and Arlene are all evidence of mean-girl-syndrome plain and simple. Catch me on a bad day and I am that mean girl, still. However, if I know that you have caught me, I will pretend I don't know what the hell you're talking about.