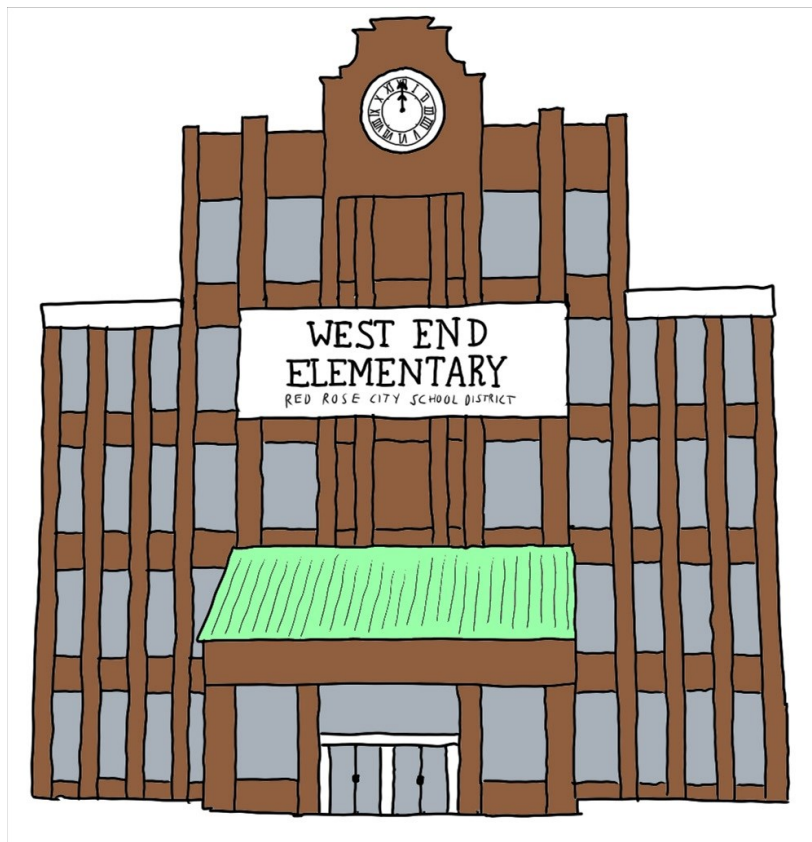
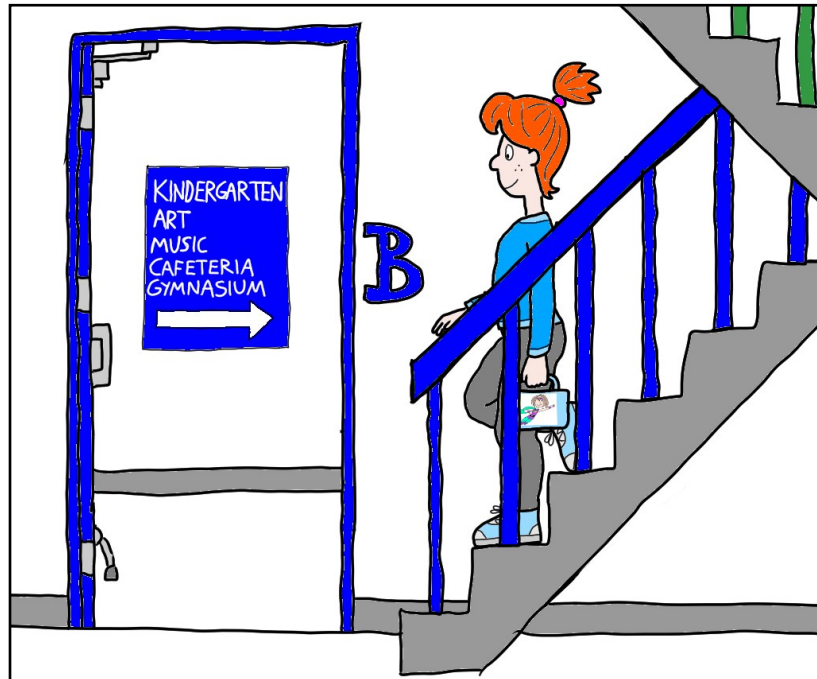


Chapter 1

Zoe, Victoria, and Felix

“Okay, class!” said Mrs. Smith. “We’ll talk more about our projects later. Let’s line up for lunch.”



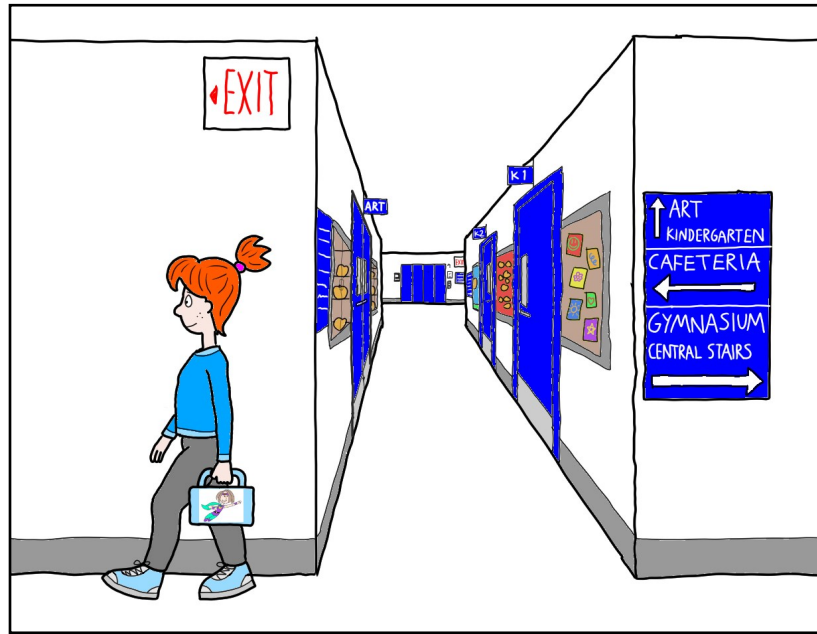


Zoe Richards got up from her desk, along with twenty-two other hungry fourth graders. She went to the cubbies and grabbed her lunchbox. Then she stood in line. Once the whole class was lined up, Mrs. Smith led them out of the room and around the corner to the stairs.

West End Elementary School was in a rather unusual building. It used to be a clock factory, and it was built in the late 1800s. This old brick building was four stories high, five if you counted the basement. Most of the kids didn't like climbing all

those stairs. The school did have two elevators, but kids weren't allowed to use them unless they got permission from the teacher or the school nurse. The kindergarten classes were in the basement, and the fourth and fifth-grade classes were on the top floor. This meant that most of the kids had to climb *up* to get to their classrooms. The stairs didn't bother Zoe too much. Nevertheless, she was glad that West End Elementary wasn't as ridiculously tall as Wayside School. Zoe had read about it in a book by Louis Sachar.





The basement at West End Elementary was where all the “fun stuff” was. Aside from the kindergarten classrooms, the basement was home to the art room, the music room, the gymnasium, and the cafeteria, which was where Zoe and her classmates were headed right now. Everyone was glad the cafeteria was downstairs because it’s not easy to climb *up* so many stairs when you’re hungry.

When they arrived at the cafeteria, Zoe was able to skip the long line and go right to a table, because she had a packed lunch. Zoe ate her lunch slowly and waited patiently for her friend Felix, who



was in line to buy his lunch. Victoria, who also had a packed lunch, sat down next to Zoe.

Was Victoria Zoe's friend? Well, Zoe liked her okay, but Victoria was not the easiest person to get along with. She thought she knew everything. Or at least it seemed like she did.

"Hi, Zoe!" said Victoria. "So, what do you think of our new assignment? Isn't it exciting?"

"The autobiography?" said Zoe. "Oh yes. That does sound like fun."

“You’d better believe it!” said Victoria. “I’ll finally get to tell my life story on stage with a live audience!” Victoria loved attention. She wanted to be a rich and famous movie star when she grew up.

“And so will the rest of us!” said Zoe. “We’ll get to share our life stories, too.”

Victoria snapped out of her daydream and said, “Oh, yes! Of course! Felix is a great storyteller, so I’m sure his presentation will be good. Plus, I’m anxious to hear about where you came from, Zoe. Before you moved here.”

Zoe and her parents had moved into the neighborhood in the summer of 2006. Now it was November, so Zoe had only been at West End Elementary for a few months.

“Hey, Victoria, hi, Zoe!” said Felix, sitting down with his lunch tray.

“Hi, Felix!” said Victoria. “We were just talking about our autobiographies.”

“Yeah,” said Felix. “This is the most interesting assignment we’ve had this year, so far. I think I’ll make mine into a digital slide show.” Felix liked working with computers. “How about you, Victoria?”



“I’m going to put together a ‘me’ collage, just like Judy Moody!” Victoria loved to read, and *Judy Moody* was one of her favorite books. “So, what do you have in mind for your project, Zoe?”

“I’m not sure yet. But I will start my research tonight. Maybe I’ll come up with something as I go along.” Zoe liked writing papers for school, but she felt very nervous about having to present something on stage. This school didn’t have an auditorium, but there was a stage in the gymnasium. Mrs. Smith had said that they were going to set up folding chairs in the gym, and lots of kids and their parents were

going to be watching each presentation. Zoe had never done anything like that at her old school.

Felix said, “I wonder what Joshua will put in his autobiography?”

“Which one is Joshua again?” asked Zoe.

Victoria looked shocked. “You mean you haven’t met Josh yet?”

Zoe shook her head. “Aside from Felix, I don’t know the boys here very well.” In fact, Felix and Victoria were the only two kids Zoe spent much time with. They had both helped Zoe get acquainted with the school when she first started. Felix was also Zoe’s new next-door neighbor, and Zoe would often hang out at his house when her parents worked late. Zoe knew the names of most of the kids in her class, but she didn’t know much about Joshua.

Victoria pointed to a skinny kid with brown hair. “That’s Josh, over there.”

Zoe saw him. “You mean he’s that guy over there who always sits alone?”

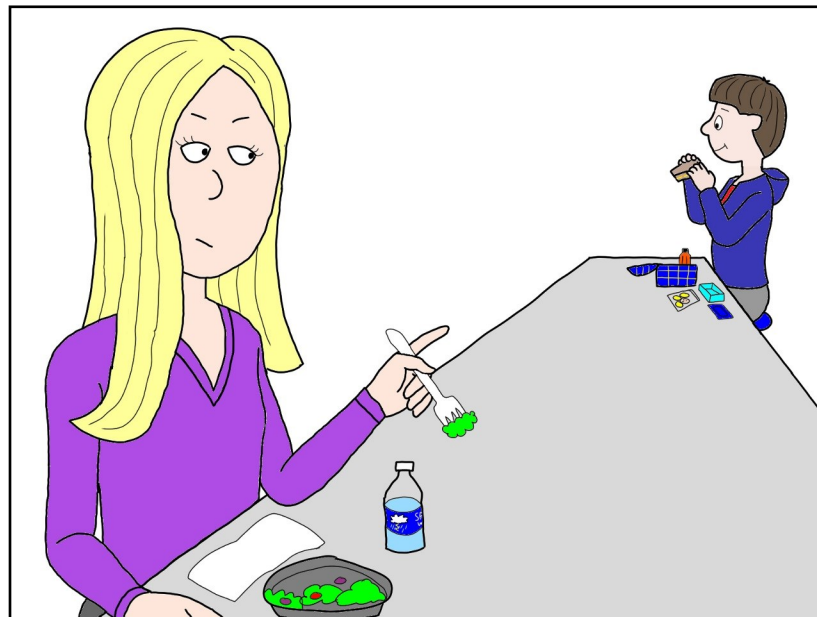
“That’s him, all right,” said Victoria. “He has no friends.”

“Why not?” said Zoe.

“Because he doesn’t have anything in common with other kids, not even the other boys.”

Felix looked like he wanted to say something, but he didn’t want to talk with his mouth full.

Victoria went on, “Josh doesn’t like any of the same movies or TV shows that most of us do, he doesn’t know anything about sports, and he’s way behind on his vocabulary skills. Whenever we try to talk to him, he usually doesn’t have a clue what we’re talking about. Something’s seriously wrong with him. He’s got some kind of brain disorder.”



Felix finally spoke up. “Vikki, I’ve told you before! Joshua has autism. It’s not his fault that he’s different from everyone. And please quit making it sound like it’s a bad thing. Zoe hasn’t even met the guy yet!”

“Do you know him, Felix?” asked Zoe.

“He was in our class last year. If you ask me, I think he’s a cool guy.”

“What kinds of things does he like?”

“Right now, car washes are his favorite things.”

Victoria interrupted, “He knows more about car washes than he does about cars. It’s ridiculous!”

“Last year it was vacuum cleaners,” said Felix.

Victoria said, “Remember the time when Josh missed recess just so he could watch the janitor vacuum the morning kindergarten classroom? As if it were a big deal!”

“To Joshua, it probably was,” said Felix.

Victoria rolled her eyes. “Well, anyway,” she said, “I wouldn’t be the least bit surprised if Josh filled up his autobiography with a bunch of boring stuff that nobody cares about.”

“Now wait a minute,” said Zoe. “Are you trying to tell me that nobody cares about vacuums or car washes?”

“*You do?*” said Victoria.

“Well, maybe not those things specifically, but I don’t see anything wrong with him having an unusual interest, as long as it doesn’t hurt himself or other people.”

“I totally agree!” said Felix. “We need more people in the world like Joshua. Kids who see things in different and unique ways can add new perspectives and more variety to the world! Just because Joshua is autistic doesn’t mean he’s not cool.”

Victoria raised her eyebrows at Felix and said, “How come I never see YOU eating lunch with that so-called super-cool guy?”

Felix said, “We’ve talked about that already! Joshua likes eating alone so he can concentrate on his food. Autistic kids like him sometimes need a little extra solitude. You know, personal space.”

“Is it true that he doesn’t have friends?” asked Zoe.

“Well, he’s not very outgoing,” said Felix.
“But he’s not anti-social, either.”

“What do you mean, he’s not anti-social?”
said Victoria. “I hardly ever see him having
conversations with anybody! Of all his weird
interests, talking to people is NOT one of them. Oh,
I’ve heard him talking to himself many times. That
boy is stuck in his own little world. He seems rather
self-centered if you ask me.”

Felix said, “First of all, we did *not* ask you,
and secondly, Joshua is NOT self-centered! Don’t
you remember the time you fell off the monkey bars,
and Joshua ran and got help?”

“Because I told him to do that!”

“Still, would a self-centered person do that? If
he was self-centered, he could have just left you lay.”

Zoe said, “You know what? I think I want to
meet him. It seems like there’s a fifty-fifty chance
that I might like this guy. Maybe I’ll try to talk to
him at recess.”

“If you can get him to stop pacing around in
circles,” said Victoria.

“He does spend a lot of his recess time
wandering around the playground,” said Felix. “But

it usually means he's thinking about stuff. If he's excited or hyper about something, he often walks around in circles to help burn off some of the excess energy. Other times it means he's trying to figure out something complicated with lots of detail. When his brain is in overdrive, I think moving around helps get his blood flowing and he can think better. Anyway, that's the way I understand it."

"Did Joshua tell you all that?" asked Zoe.

Felix said, "He did tell us that he likes to wander around, thinking about things. But I didn't know why he did that. I asked my dad if he knew, but he wasn't too sure either. So we went to the library and checked out some books about autism, and how it affects people. Dad and I went through those books together, and we learned a lot of stuff that helped me understand Joshua a little more. In fact, there was a word in one of those books that described what Joshua does on the playground. Let me think, was it...stam? ...Stem? ...Stimming! That's it."

"I see," said Zoe. "So are you guys saying that recess is not the best time to talk to him?"

"Actually," said Felix, "sometimes it can be. Whenever I want to talk to him, I usually just ask him if we can go for a walk around the playground,

and he seems to be okay with it. So maybe you could try that. But if he's deeply focused on something, he might not be interested in talking. Then you can try again some other time. But for starters, just go up to him and say hi, then see what happens."

"Zoe, are you sure you want to waste your recess on a boy like Josh?" said Victoria.

"I don't know," said Zoe. "But I do think it would be interesting to find out."

Victoria sighed. "Go ahead. But I'm warning you. He'll drive you crazy!"

"But even if he does," said Felix, "just be patient with him. Let me know how it goes. And if you have any questions, just come to me."

"Okay," said Zoe, "I will." She was not exactly sure what she was getting herself into, but Zoe had a feeling that someone should give Joshua a chance to have a friend. Or at least a good acquaintance. Although Zoe didn't know Joshua personally, from what she had seen so far this year, he seemed like an okay guy. Yes, he was quiet. And yes, he was often alone. But Zoe had never seen Joshua hurt anyone. And she didn't see any harm in someone being interested in car washes. Zoe had

been through a car wash or two before, and she wondered what kind of things Joshua knew about them. Maybe she might learn something. As a matter of fact, Zoe even had a few obscure interests herself. Her father and grandfather worked at a flea market. It was one of Zoe's favorite places. She would often use her allowance to buy old books and movies there. She especially liked the ones from the 1980s. She also enjoyed listening to the '80s radio station. Zoe thought all of that '80s stuff was so cool!

Unfortunately, most of the kids at her old school didn't agree. They had often said that Zoe was "old-fashioned" and "lived in the past." Now that she was at West End Elementary, she didn't dare say a word about her interests. But now, here was Victoria, disregarding Joshua's interests, the same way Zoe had been disregarded before. And here was Felix, trying to defend Joshua. Zoe wondered, "If I can get Joshua to share his interests with me, maybe I can share mine with him! I wonder how he feels about the 1980s, or if he even knows what they are at all. I guess there's only one way to find out."