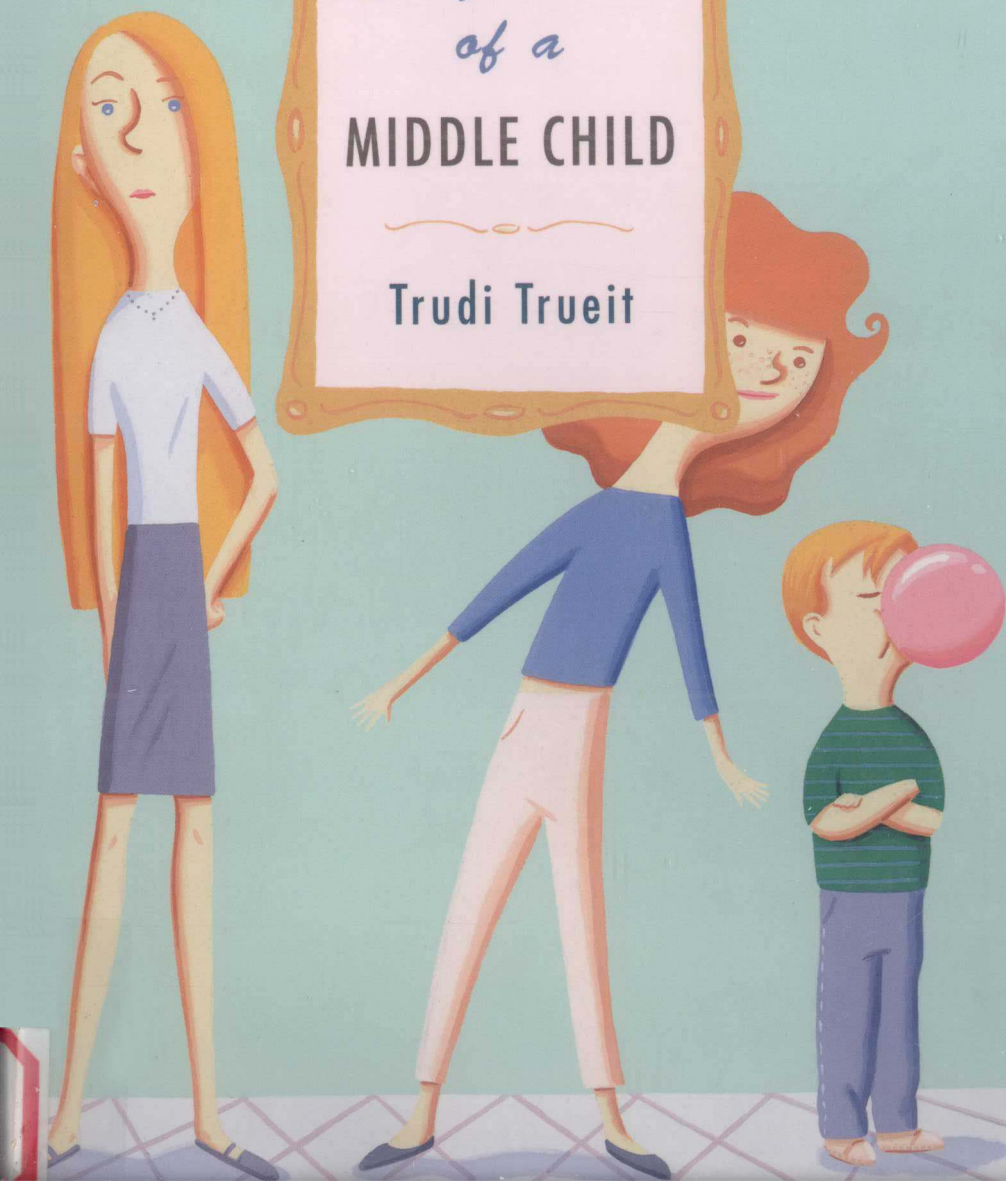


Tulep O'Toole

*Confessions
of a*
MIDDLE CHILD

Trudi Trueit



Tulep O'Toole

*Confessions
of a*

江苏工业学院图书馆

藏书章



DUTTON CHILDREN'S BOOKS

DUTTON CHILDREN'S BOOKS A division of Penguin Young Readers Group
Published by the Penguin Group • Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street,
New York, New York 10014, U.S.A. • Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue
East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin
Canada Inc.) • Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England •
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin
Books Ltd) • Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria
3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd) • Penguin Books
India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi - 110 017, India •
Penguin Group (NZ), Cnr Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany, Auckland 1310,
New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd) • Penguin Books (South
Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa •
Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

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.

Copyright © 2005 by Trudi Strain Trueit

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced
or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including
photocopying, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system now known
or to be invented, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a
reviewer who wishes to quote brief passages in connection with a review written for
inclusion in a magazine, newspaper, or broadcast.

CIP Data is available.

Published in the United States by Dutton Children's Books,
a division of Penguin Young Readers Group
345 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014
www.penguin.com/youngreaders

Designed by Irene Vandervoort

Printed in USA

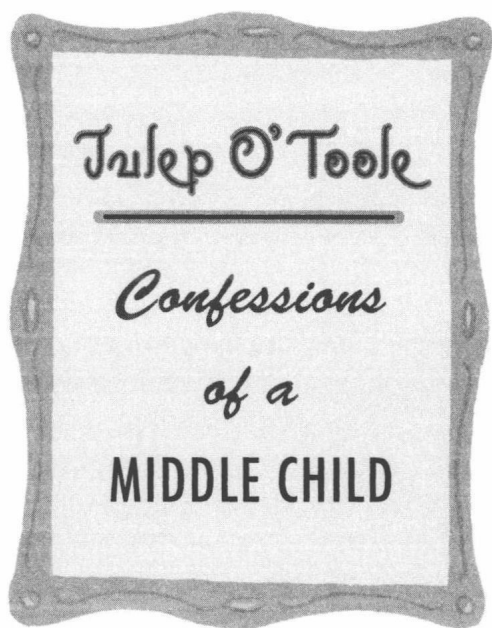
First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 0-525-47619-9

Contents

1	INVISIBLE GIRL	3
2	THE CHICKEN COOP	12
3	REVENGE OF THE BLACK GOO	21
4	THE JULEP TRIANGLE	29
5	IS THIS THING ON?	45
6	A SECRET PACT	59
7	JUMPING JULEP	68
8	MISERY AND MONSTERS	78
9	LIFE'S LITTLE SURPRISES (PART I)	88
10	LIFE'S LITTLE SURPRISES (PART II)	104
11	A BIG IDEA	113
12	JULEP'S JUSTICE	127
13	A REAL SCARE	133
14	COMING UP FOR AIR	139
15	MIRACLES	145
16	A HISTORIC HALLOWEEN	155
17	FROG DREAMS	162



1 INVISIBLE GIRL

Julep stared at the worn carpet less than an inch from her silver toenails. It was a color that could only be described in two words: *dog doo*. Spots of grape juice, pizza sauce, and some yellowish blobs she couldn't identify winked at her. They dared her to hop through the maze of stains without touching them.

"No way," she said, backing up in case the carpet made a sudden grab for her ankle.

Eleven-year-old Julep had always done her best to stay far, far away from her brother's room, a.k.a. the Chicken Coop. The place smelled like her mother's rhubarb-beet-asparagus meatless burgers (with pimentos—gag) and looked a whole lot worse. Old, torn pieces of masking tape, rusted tacks, and bent nails clung to the snot-green walls. The once powder-white vinyl blinds had faded to a dingy yellow. The strings were tangled into a jumble of knots the size of a baseball. The blinds hung lopsidedly over a window smeared with hundreds of dirty fingerprints—every single one of them belonging to Cooper

Maynard O'Toole, the biggest pain-in-the-rumpus little brother ever to exist in the solar system.

The place was ugly. It was stinky. And now, unfortunately, it was all hers.

What's that black goo in the corner?

Julep pulled a lock of wavy, light reddish-brown hair over her eyes. Some things were best left unexplored.

How did this happen? Julep couldn't believe that she'd agreed to swap rooms with her seven-year-old brother. The whole thing had landed with a splat in her lap like a huge ostrich egg—one gigantic, rotten egg that she had never seen flying through the air toward her, though she really ought to have been paying closer attention. Stuff like this was always happening to her.

"Carpets trap dirt, dust mites, pollen, and all kinds of things," Allison Gallardo-O'Toole had told her daughter as they'd driven home from the grocery store one drizzly Saturday morning in late September.

"They do?" Julep didn't know what a dust mite was. She didn't have a carpet in her bedroom, so why worry about something you've never heard of trapped in something you didn't have?

Julep turned to watch a row of maple trees whiz past, their leaves tipped in autumn red. Fall was her favorite time of the year. Halloween was more than a month away, but Julep could hardly wait. Carving pumpkins. Making caramel apples. Getting tons of chocolate. Who didn't love it? Julep's favorite part

was choosing a costume that would transform her into someone famous, beautiful, or heroic—anyone other than who she truly was.

On every other day of the year Julep was—oh, how she cringed at the word—average. She wasn't a walking brain, yet she could hold her own for a few rounds in a spelling bee. She couldn't hit a home run most times she came up to bat, but she wasn't afraid to stick her mitt out to catch a fly ball. Julep's voice wasn't going to win praise from Simon on *American Idol*. Still, her friends didn't plug their ears when she sang. Yep, that was the tragedy that was her life. Julep wasn't good enough to be noticed, and she wasn't bad enough to be noticed. She was, as her former ice-skating instructor had put it, "unexceptional."

Ouch.

More than anything, Julep felt . . . transparent. This was especially true when it came to her family. Her parents, older sister, and younger brother often stared right through her. They talked at her, around her, and about her but rarely to her. Julep was, now that she thought about it, a lot like air: there but not there.

She was Julep Antoinette O'Toole, Invisible Girl.

Julep wondered if there were any Halloween costumes that made a middle child visible. Somehow she doubted it.

"The doctor says it would be better for Cooper's allergies if he had a hardwood floor," her mother had said as she turned onto Bayview Drive. She stole a quick glance in Julep's direc-

tion. "He says it can make a big difference in cutting down asthma attacks."

"Uh-huh." Julep was pretending to use her mind to blow the beads of water diagonally across the car window. She wondered if her mother had remembered to buy her favorite Lorna Doone cookies. Probably not. Julep glanced in the backseat to see the top of a Pringles can sticking out of a bag. Pringles were Harmony's favorite. It figured. Invisible Girl had been overlooked again, while her older sister, Miss Perfect, got everything *she* wanted.

"We managed to buy the air filter for the house, a new mattress and cover for Cooper's bed, and the new vacuum with the HEPA filter, so . . ." Her mother trailed off, tapping the steering wheel with her thumbs. "We thought . . . your dad and I thought that rather than laying a completely new hardwood floor and spending more money, especially with your dad out of work right now . . . uh, it would be easier to . . . I mean, since you already have a birch floor and everything, it might be simplest for you to trade rooms with Cooper."

Julep swiveled around so fast a cramp sliced through her left shoulder blade. "Trade rooms?" She winced, not from the pain, but from the thought of actually living in the totally disgusting, rancid-smelling, bacteria-growing Chicken Coop.

"We're all making small sacrifices. . . ."

Small? SMALL? Was her mother kidding? A small sacrifice was taking a shorter shower or turning off lights around the

house to save money on the utility bill. Giving up her room definitely fit under the heading of *colossal* sacrifice.

Wait a second. Something was wrong here.

Julep narrowed her eyes. "What is Harmony giving up?"

"Your sister? Uh . . . well . . ." Her mother twisted her lips.

Julep knew it! Gritting her teeth, she asked, "Why can't *she* give up her room?"

"Well, Harmony has carpeting, hon."

There was always a reason why Harmony got her way. She was fourteen and the oldest of the three O'Toole kids. She got to wear makeup. And perfume. Her hair didn't come in a thick lump the color of a terra-cotta pot that flipped under when you wanted it to go over and over when you wanted it to go under. Harmony's honey-blond hair, streaked with golden rays of sunshine, always hung perfectly straight down her back. Always. You couldn't play connect the dots with the freckles on Harmony's face, because she didn't have any. Not a single one. Julep had eighty-seven freckles splashed across her nose and cheeks. Eighty-seven little brown dots you couldn't wash or wish away, no matter how hard you tried. Everyone loved Harmony Elizabeth O'Toole. She was perfect. That's what teachers, parents, coaches, kids, and even strangers on the street were forever saying to Julep. "You must feel so lucky to have a sister who's so perfect," they'd say.

Uh-huh. Real lucky. Gag-o-matic. You try using the bathroom after Miss Perfect has gelled, moussed, hair-sprayed, and powdered herself for the day.

Why should her sister get to be beautiful, talented, smart, *and* be able to keep her room? It wasn't fair. Julep let her mother continue telling her about how a hardwood floor would help Cooper's asthma, but inside her mind, the word kept flashing neon blue: No. NO. NO!

She didn't say it, though, because it wouldn't have mattered. That's what it was like when you were little more than a puff of air. People couldn't see you. Couldn't touch you. Couldn't hear you. What you thought didn't count for squat.

"So what do you think?" her mom asked, not taking her eyes off the road.

Julep could fight it, but, in the end, she knew she would lose. There was no point in sharing her opinion because nobody was going to listen to her anyway. Defeated, she turned to draw a sad face in the steam on her window. "Okay," Julep murmured.

She barely felt her mother pat her knee. "Maybe you'd like to do something special with Trig or Bernadette this weekend? I could rent a movie for you."

Julep shook her head.

"Mukilteo Beach?"

While it was certainly fun to have seagulls dive-bomb you for your Doritos, it couldn't begin to make up for losing the one place in the world that was truly and completely yours.

"How about some pizza? I've got a coupon for a large at Luigi's. We could get the veggie special with tomatoes, mushrooms, and roasted zucchini. . . ."

Soggy zucchini? Was she serious? Julep's sandals tasted better than that stuff. But when your mom is a vegetarian, like it or not, so are you. How could anyone eat vegetable pizza? If you couldn't have pepperoni, then it seemed like a waste of perfectly good cheese, sauce, and dough to Julep.

"No, thanks," Julep whispered, suddenly feeling tired.

"Think about it," her mom said softly. "If there's something you'd like, something not too expensive, let me know, okay?"

Julep let her forehead fall against the car window. There *was* something, but . . .

Last week, she'd seen an adorable watch at Mulberry Lane, her favorite gift shop in the mall. It had a hinged mother-of-pearl oval cover that you flipped up when you wanted to see what time it was. Inside, teeny pink rhinestones took the place of the numbers on the pearly white face. The stretchy-silver band held clumps of pink, purple, and clear beads, along with several silver roses. The moment Julep slipped it on, the faceted beads caught the sunlight and painted mini-rainbows on her wrist. Julep had been admiring it when Harmony grabbed her hand. "Dream on," she'd said, shaking her perfect hair. "It's forty dollars."

If business hadn't been so slow and Julep's dad hadn't had to close his software-design company three months ago, she might have asked for the watch. But not now. Thank goodness her mother still had her public-relations job at the Seattle Art Museum. Even so, with the family down to one income, everybody had to watch their spending. "Too expensive" was

Mom-speak for anything over ten dollars. What decent thing could you possibly buy for less than ten dollars? Nothing good. Okay, food. You could buy food. But Julep had just lost her beloved bedroom. And with it her appetite. She would never eat again. Never. Well, at least, nothing with soggy bits of zucchini in it.

A girl's got to have her limits. Even if she is invisible.

6:59 P.M.

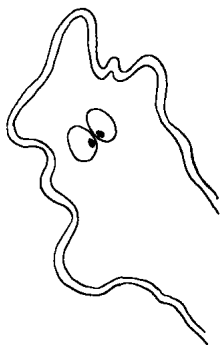
Mood: furious

EMERGENCY JOURNAL ENTRY



Dear Journal:

Bad news. I have to trade rooms with Cooper. Are you okay? I'm definitely not. I need those electric paddles that start your heart 'cause I am in total and complete shock. CLEAR!



There's mold growing in the Coop that science hasn't identified. Not that my mom and dad care that I'm going to have to live in it. All they care about is Cooper's health. That's what happens when you are an M.M.M.C. (see decoder page). It's J.I.C.A.R.T. (again, check the decoder page).

Bernadette says if you believe something with all your heart and focus all your energy on it and put every bit of brain power you have into it, then it has to come true. Okay, here goes . . .



I won't have to live in the Chicken Coop.

I won't have to live in the Chicken Coop.

I won't have to live in the Chicken Coop.

I have to go to the store. You're going to need more pages.

W.A.N.!

C.Y.L.



Love,

Julep, M.M.M.C.

Julep's Secret Decoder Page

PRIVATE! STOP READING NOW!

M.M.M.C.: Miserable Misunderstood Middle Child

J.I.C.A.R.T.: Just In Case Anybody Reads This

W.A.N.: What A Nightmare

C.Y.L.: Check You Later

MAY ANYONE WHO READS THIS GET

V.Z. (VOLCANIC ZITS)!



2 The Chicken Coop

Julep awoke one Saturday morning in early October to odd scraping noises outside her bedroom. Rubbing her eyes and yawning, she slid out of bed and stumbled to the door to tell Cooper to go away. When she opened it, nobody was there; however, the vacuum cleaner and mop were resting side by side against the hallway wall next to her door. Stacks of toys and games blocked the narrow path to her brother's room.

Julep flung her door shut and threw her back against it.

This was it!

Swapping day. Her heart began to pound faster.

Frantic, Julep shoved her desk chair under the doorknob to keep anyone from entering. She needed time to think of a plan to hang on to her precious bedroom. Lots of time. She had barely pulled on a pair of jeans and her gray University of Washington T-shirt when someone knocked on her door.

"Julep?" It was her dad.

The doorknob jiggled.

"Wake up, hon. It's time to move," her mother said.

Julep's bare feet froze to her hardwood floor. If she didn't say a thing or move a muscle, they might go away.

She could hear her parents talking. "There's something blocking the door. . . ."

"Is she even in there?"

"She's in there."

"Julep, open this door right now," her father said firmly.

It was hopeless. She could hold out for three, maybe four hours, but eventually her bladder would betray her. She would have to whiz, and then they would have her. There was nothing Julep could do to stop the injustice. And so she did what anyone in her position would do. Julep surrendered before she got grounded for the remainder of middle school.

Good-bye, buttercup yellow walls.

Good-bye, bay window.

Good-bye, shiny birchwood floor.

Hello, disgusting Chicken Coop.

Life was so not fair. She hoped Harmony hadn't eaten all of the chocolate donuts. Julep was going to need at least two to make it through this morning.

As her parents helped her move into her brother's room, Julep comforted herself with the knowledge that her co-best friends, Bernadette and Trig, had promised to come to her rescue. They were going to help her redecorate the Coop. Although she wondered if it was truly possible to fix the place. Just unraveling the cord to the venetian blinds could take