



The
Upside
of
Ordinary

**Susan
Lubner**

Holiday House / New York

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Summary: Eleven-year-old Jermaine's quest for fame as the creator of a reality television show based on her less-than-exciting family and friends teaches her important lessons about unbridled ambition, selfishness, and the upside of ordinary.

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For my father, the late Herbert C. Emple

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The cheer from the audience was loud.

*It felt like I was wearing it, as if it was
a fancy winter coat, warm and special.*

*I tipped my face toward the pink stage
lights above me.*

*Then in a quick swoop, I bowed so
deeply my hair touched the stage floor.*

*I'll never forget how that cheer made
me feel; important and shiny.*

*And I knew in that moment that
someday, somehow, I would be famous.*

Popcorn

A big THANK YOU to Dad and the super-pro vacuum he ordered on the internet. The huge carton it arrived in yesterday is just my size.

Through the little peephole I made in one of the cardboard walls, I film my sister Zelda eating leftover lasagna for breakfast.

I zoom in on her face as she spoons a stack of cheesy noodles into her mouth, her eyes glued to the TV. On the screen, two girls argue and a bad word gets bleeped out.

“Ha! UNBLALEEVABLE!” Zelda says with a stuffed face.

“Mom doesn’t like us to watch this reality show,” I say, popping up from inside the box.

“AAAAHHHHHHHHHH!” My sister screams. A hunk of curly pasta drops out of her mouth. Zelda coughs. “Are you trying to kill me?” she sputters. “I almost choked to death!”

“Sorry,” I say, lifting my leg over the top of the box.

Zelda drops her plate onto the coffee table. It clanks against the wooden top, which makes a great sound effect. Susie shuffles over and gobbles up the rest, the tags on her collar clinking with every lick.

“You’re not sorry!” Zelda sneers. “You’re a sneaky, annoying GERM!”

I’m not really a *germ*. “Jerm” is short for Jermaine, my name. Out of context it sounds like another word for bacteria...gross...I know. But it’s catchy, too...perfect for a famous person.

“You were great!” I tell Zelda. “The element of surprise works for you.”

“Leave me alone!” she snaps. I follow her, filming the back of her head, as she stomps into the kitchen.

Five days ago I started filming the reality show I am making about my family. So far this is what I have for footage: Mom cleaning a chicken for dinner, and thirty minutes of her working up a sweat on the Stairmaster; Susie rolling over for a biscuit; Dad plunging a toilet, sweeping the garage, and grumbling that no one but him ever thinks to throw out the brown bananas. The best stuff I’ve filmed is of my cranky big sister, Zelda. I surprised her when she stepped out of the shower (though Mom made sure I erased it), I caught her hissy fit when she couldn’t find one of her sneakers, and of course there’s this morning’s riveting moment when she spat out that forkful of lasagna. And I’m just getting started! My reality show will be hugely interesting, which will make me hugely famous. I plan to include the seven hamsters living under the Ping-Pong table in my basement, too. I didn’t mean to have seven. I brought only one home from the pet store. But a week or so later, Bernie gave birth to six babies! Dad says we should change Bernie’s name to Bernadette, but

I think her name works just fine. (Note to self: film the cleaning of the cages.)

Then there's the pickle-making side of my mom. Yes! She's *the* pickle lady. Nora's Pickles are available in lots of grocery stores all over the state of Maine. That makes her pretty cool! You'd think that would have made me a *little* famous—Jermaine Davidson, the offspring of the local pickle lady. It's not like Mom is Aunt Jemima or Betty Crocker, but *I* think she's the best pickle-maker in the world. The world just doesn't know that yet, so I plan to film her at work. A cooking segment—great footage! Most people have no idea how much slicing and dicing is involved in the pickle-making process. (Note to self: figure out product placement for the pickles to improve Mom's sales!)

I turn the camera on Dad when he strolls into the kitchen. Dad wears his pants a tad too high to be considered cool. That's fine. It's good to have a variety of characters and personalities for my reality show. He sees the pan of lasagna next to the cornflakes Mom had left out for us on her way to make pickles in the barn behind the house.

"Who's eating lasagna for breakfast?" he asks. "Lasagna is not for breakfast!" Dad slides the lasagna back into the fridge. Then he opens the pantry door and rearranges the cereal boxes according to height, tallest on the left to shortest on the right, returning the cornflakes somewhere in the middle. Dad moves a can of soup back over to the "soup" side of the shelf.

"What's this doing here?" he asks nobody. He turns a few cans of vegetables label-side out before he shuts the door. "Who's going to help me wash the car?"

"I'm busy," Zelda says right away.

"It's too cold," I say.

“It’s perfect car-washing weather!” Dad squints out the window at the bird-shaped thermometer. “It’s already 40 degrees.” He smiles.

Dad washes his car every Saturday. If it’s *freezing* cold he’ll drive it through a car wash, otherwise he’ll do it by hand. Zelda says Dad is such a neat freak because his job as a pharmacist is so boring. “He counts hundreds of pills every day of his life. Of course washing his car and cleaning out the garage seem exciting,” she pointed out.

Through the lens of my camera I double-check the mercury on the bird.

“Actually, Dad, the temperature is thirty-nine degrees. It’s supposed to snow later today.” Dad spots the dog-licked lasagna plate on the coffee table. A stray dish getting Dad in a twist will make for some nice drama. I zoom in.

“Who left that plate there?” he asks.

Hoping for another round of conflict, I rat out my sister. “Zelda.”

“I’m not going to leave it there,” she assures him.

“Please rinse it before it goes in the dishwasher,” he tells her. The plate looks perfectly clean. And Dad doesn’t look too ruffled. “I’m going to wash the car,” he says. “Feel free to help. I’d enjoy the company.”

After Dad leaves, Zelda opens the pantry and takes out some popcorn. She puts the flat packet into the microwave and closes the door.

Zelda punches the numbers on the panel but accidentally sets the timer for thirty minutes instead of three! I decide to keep that mistake to myself. Both of us stand in front of the glass door waiting and watching as the bag grows bigger and bigger. I focus on the expanding bag.

“This is a long three minutes,” Zelda says just as I smell smoke. I glance at the timer counting backward. It says

22 minutes and 36 seconds remaining. Zelda seems to notice the timer, too. Just as she says, “Whoops,” the bag bursts into flames. Whoa...and I was just hoping for an *exploding* bag of popcorn!

Black smoke fills the microwave. The smoke alarm starts wailing. Susie barks and runs out of the room.

“Get Dad!” Zelda shouts at me, but I’m too busy filming the blaze, which is poking out the sides of the microwave door. The alarm is screeching. Zelda darts around looking for the portable phone, which is never where it’s supposed to be. “Call 911!” she screams.

“Yes! Do that!” I order her. *Let’s get some firemen in the scene!* But before either of us can find a phone, Dad practically flies into the kitchen with soap bubbles on his sleeves. He flings open a cabinet door, grabs a box of baking soda, and throws the white powder at the flames. It snuffs out the fire. The popcorn bag is completely charred, and so is the inside of the microwave.

“You could have burned the house down!” Dad says, panting. “Who’s eating popcorn for breakfast?” he frantically asks us. “Popcorn is not for breakfast!”

My camera continues to roll: incinerated popcorn, and Dad flipping his lid. That’s exactly the kind of footage that makes for great reality TV. So awesome, it’s sure to put me on the map.

Here I come, world!

2 Scrabble

Before I got the idea to make a reality-TV show, I was already planning to become a star. Ever since my huge success playing Pinocchio in the school play last month I could not stop thinking about all the clapping and cheering from the audience when I took my final bow. I felt *shiny*. It's no wonder famous people are called stars. I decided right then and there that I would become famous. Limo-riding, camera-flashing, crowd-cheering famous!

So I made a list of ways to make that happen:

Movie star
Supermodel

Being a movie star was my number one choice. But I'd need to get to Hollywood. My parents would never move to Hollywood. They're totally un-Californian—especially Dad. I'd have to wait until I was old enough to get my own apartment, and I'm in too much of a hurry for that.

The supermodel option was really just wishful thinking. Let's face it, how many supermodels can you think of that have frizzy brown hair and a palate expander? Even my Magic 8 Ball said "*Don't count on it*" when I asked it for advice.

So why the reality show? Here's how it all started.

A few days before I figured out how to launch myself to stardom, Mom had dropped my best friend, Nina; Zelda; and me off at the Bluebird Nest & Rest Senior Home where we often visit Nina's granny, Viola Church, and spend time with the other residents. We were supposed to play bingo with the old folks, but most of them fell asleep around the table, and Granny V had a hard time remembering the numbers, even with our help. So we wheeled her into the TV room and watched *Who Wants to Marry the Rock Star*. When Mom returned and saw us watching TV, and Granny V snoring in her wheelchair, she was miffed with a capital M.

"This is a far cry from bingo!" she said just as the TV bleeped out a bad word. "Where is Pat?" she asked, referring to the nurse's aide. Mom's not too keen on reality shows (though she and Dad will admit *So You Want to Be a Pastry Chef*, *Dance 'til You Drop*, and *Real or Toupee* are "harmless fun" and "family-appropriate").

"They should make a show about kids who study hard and read a lot," Mom said to us when we left the rest home.

"Watching someone read is boring," I said.

"There's no value in that rock-star show! It's shocking!" she continued. I could see her point. Thirty women compete to be the bride, and they can be nasty!

"That's true," I admitted, "but sometimes it's fun to be shocked."

Here's one shock I didn't like. At the dinner table that

night Mom announced, “Your father and I have decided that both of you are watching too much television. From now on,” she sang, “Sunday night is family game night!”

Zelda gasped like she’d seen a ghost. “*Game* night?”

Mom wasn’t kidding. That Sunday, a mere three days after her game-night proclamation, we played Scrabble. But it turned out to be a good thing! That’s when I figured out *how* I was going to become famous.

“Let’s keep a list of unfamiliar words that are spelled out tonight,” Dad suggested.

“Yes,” Mom said. “You kids can look up the definitions, and we can put together our own *Davidson Dictionary!*”

“Scrabble is a terrific way to improve your vocabulary!” Dad said.

“*Fart*,” Zelda said, laying her letters out in a row.

“I think you can do better than that,” my father scolded.

“It’s a real word! Look it up!” she protested. At that point, Mom leaned over to double-check Zelda’s letters.

“Ooh, ooh, look, Zel!” Mom bounced excitedly in her seat. She was frantically pointing her finger. “You can spell *farthest* and get an extra fifty points for using all seven letters!”

“Hey, not fair! You’re helping her!” I complained.

“I’m trying to prove a point,” my mother said. “Your sister’s word is offensive.”

“What’s so offensive about *fart*? Susie does it all the time and you don’t give her grief!” Zelda argued.

“Susie is a dog and doesn’t know about good manners!” Mom pointed out. “We should have a rule about which words are not allowed.”

“You can’t change the rules of Scrabble! What are you, the word police?” Zelda was fuming.

“Let’s play, for heaven’s sake!” Dad said.

My mind started to wander. I thought about dessert because I hadn’t had any. That reminded me of Pudding Cakes...a new snack Nina had packed in her lunch. School lunch reminded me of school and that I had forgotten to practice my math facts. Then I started thinking that I would be too tired to practice my math facts anyway and what I really wanted to do was leave this Scrabble game and go watch TV.

Suddenly Zelda flew out of her chair and screamed, “I quit!”

Dad jumped up, too. His lips puckered and twisted like they were trying to fit over the right-sized words.

“Sit back down!” he managed to growl, his arms flailing above his head. “We’re having some quality family time!”

Zelda glared at him. “I’m being forced to use her words!” She pointed at my mother. “I’m not playing if she’s going to choose words for me!”

“I was helping!” Mom squawked in surprise. “Not *forcing*...suggesting!” Mom rearranged her tiles on her letter rack. I saw that she had the Z, which was worth a whopping ten points all by itself.

I quickly concluded that watching Zelda fight with my parents over the word *fart* was actually better than watching television...which made me think of reality TV because really, reality TV is the ultimate eavesdropping experience! Who doesn’t feel a secret thrill listening in on a heated conversation? Show me a person who doesn’t delight in flabbergasting surprises—like overhearing your teacher mumble a swear word (which really happened to me), or discovering that your mom’s friend has a patch of hair growing under her chin (I won’t say which friend).

It's shocking, fascinating, freaky, sometimes all at once. That's reality TV. And we can gawk, gasp, and snicker in the comfort of our own homes.

And then these thoughts swelled into one giant idea, like a tidal wave, splitting open like the Red Sea, TA DA! A wide-open path to fame!

"I'm going to make a reality-TV show!" I announced. Everyone stopped arguing. "It's going to be about our family," I continued excitedly. But even as those words tumbled off my tongue I was thinking... *I'll download my show onto the web! Post it right on one of those sites where everyone can watch it... like Spyonme.com.*

"Guess what?" Mom said. "I think it's a great idea!"

"You do?" my father asked.

"*Making* a TV show means using your brain," Mom continued. "And anything that uses the brain and is creative, I like." Mom leaned over and squeezed my arm.

"What are you going to do with your show when you finish it?" Dad asked. My churning brain must have created some static electricity. Other thoughts kept clinging to it. Like, why limit my fame potential to cyberspace junkies? Why not aim for the stars—I'd be just like Rufus Carmichael, the famous reality-show producer! He's become a *huge* celebrity by hosting some of his own shows! My show doesn't need a host...but it is about *my* family. It makes perfect sense for me to appear on camera, too! I bet Rufus Carmichael will help me get it aired on national TV! He could take credit for discovering me—the first eleven-year-old reality-show prodigy! I'd probably have to take a limo to school since everyone would fight over who got to sit with me on the bus.

"Oh it's just for fun, Clark!" Mom said, interrupting my thoughts. "Jermaine is experimenting. She can have a

special family showing when she's finished. An ordinary, Scrabble-playing family is a fine example of reality TV," she chirped.

"Rrrright," I said. But a family showing wouldn't do, and neither would ordinary—not if I wanted to be famous.

In reality (no pun intended), I had much bigger plans.