

CHAPTER TEN

Hulk Lonely, Hulk Want Friend

January 12, 1988

On the drive home from our embarrassing appointment with Dr. Greenberg, Dad redeemed himself by offering a feasible plan to improve my daily commute. “If we break it down: you have trouble on the bus ride, in the hallways, during lunchtime, in chorus, in gym, and in the mainstream classes. Those are a lot of danger points during any given day. Altogether, it is very overwhelming. If we take each problem in isolation, we can come up with solutions to at least some. It seems to me you can try again to get moved back into the gifted program, since you belong there. I’m not sure why you’re getting resistance. The easiest problem to solve is the bus. A completely different school bus makes two stops near our house: one in front of Young Israel and one near St. Luke’s on Bradley Avenue. Try that second bus. If the kids on it are any less belligerent, take it every day, and say goodbye to Tony and the Merry Men.”

“How do I know those kids aren’t worse?” I asked glumly.

Dad shrugged. “I drove past them this morning to scope them out. There seemed to be a bunch of calm kids with yarmulkes, a couple of quiet Japanese boys, and a few Saudis and Indians from India. Heck of a change from the goofballs you’ve been dealing with.”

I smirked. “I can switch to the bus with the ‘model immigrants.’”

Dad cocked his head to the side. “What’s a ‘model immigrant?’”

“Left-handed compliment. Doesn’t matter. I’ll try it.”

Astonishingly, Dad wound up being correct. The people on that bus were either harmless or nice to me. As a wacky bonus, they constituted exactly the interesting racial and ethnic mix of students I had been hungering for. It was Mr. Rogers’ Yellow School Bus. Dad’s simple suggestion lowered my overall blood pressure and decreased the total number of bad experiences I had for the remainder of junior high. I still had the rest of the school day to contend with, but my commute was painless from then on. As Chief Brody would say, “Thank Christ.”

When Dad and I got home from Dr. Greenberg’s, I filled my mother in on my sprained wrist and the doctor’s suggestion I get counseling. I

conveniently forgot to mention Dad's obnoxious flirtation. The three of us stood by the stove in the orange kitchen as Mom boiled water for ravioli. "You don't need a psychiatrist or a counselor," Mom concluded. "Just go to Confession. I'm thinking of talking to Monsignor Tobin about helping you spend more time around the church. You can take sanctuary in the rectory and do part-time work there."

I stared dubiously at her. Church was dull. "I'd rather take shelter in a comic store."

"We should all go to church more. There's a really good new Jesuit."

I sucked my teeth. "Anybody is better than Monsignor Tobin. Forty-minute homilies on *Footprints in the Sand*? Twenty-minute prologues to his homilies about how the homily he is about to give won't go on for too long this time! Insisting that, even if he is a little long-winded, we shouldn't time him. Then, two minutes into his homily about the day's reading, he segues into a fifteen-minute golf story and a brief aside about how attractive a young Elizabeth Taylor was in *The Courage of Lassie*. And how does he work golf *and* Elizabeth Taylor into *every* homily? I swear to God, if I become a priest, I won't talk about *Jaws* or *Doctor Who* every week! I don't even have fun timing this guy, because Leo is better at guessing how long he'll waffle on for. Each time I think I got it, Leo adds another three minutes to my guess and wins the bet!"

"I'm half deaf, so I can't hear him," Mom said. "I only know he's talking too long."

"Be thankful you're deaf. He's worse than a Vagon poet."

"The church is near Dad's new bus stop, if you need a place to hide from any Irish kids."

I frowned. "What Irish kids?"

Mom was confused that I was confused. "The bullies. I assumed they were Irish."

"Where'd you get that idea? I never said they were Irish. They were Italian."

Dad thought it improper to discuss race and ethnicity. Anxious, he left the kitchen, lingering in the hall, pacing and grumbling as Mom and I trafficked in ethnic stereotypes. Mom didn't notice Dad's performance. I ignored it because I found it hypocritical. He often said

outrageous and culturally insensitive things. Of course, Dad knew he didn't *mean* the prejudiced things he said, but when he heard others say similar things, he worried they were *serious*. Frankly, all three of us needed to bone up on our Critical Race Theory. If only Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED talk "The Danger of a Single Story" had been available to us at the time.

Mom shook her head. "No way. Italians would never act this way. They must have been Irish. The Irish are all drunk racists who like to start fights."

"Mom, they were Italian kids right out of central casting for *Grease 3*. The only kids who have treated me like a human being have been four Irish boys, three Jewish boys, and one Black boy. That's it. Nobody else has been nice to me. Unfortunately, they told me in fifth grade that one of my main skills is pattern recognition, so I'm convincing myself to stick close to those ethnic groups and give the others a wide berth. Not very healthy behavior, I'll admit, but I'm a whipped dog these days."

"Pretty soon you'll find a nice Italian girl to date and everything will be fine."

"Not with whatever pheromone I'm giving off. I make Italian girls retch. Near as I can tell, all Italian girls are as tough as nails and don't respect weak men. They need to be with hardcore alphas, like Gary Cooper or Robert DeNiro. None of them have anything but disdain for a marshmallow peep like me, and I don't blame them. Half of them are, legitimately, too tough for me, and I *like* tough women. Realistically, I'm gonna wind up dating an Irish or a Jewish girl. You know why I think this? Precedent! Pattern recognition."

Dad's voice came from the hall. "The whole 'no group is a monolithic entity' thing doesn't register with you two?"

"Who mugged you again?" I asked. "Puerto Ricans? You never forget that detail."

Mom scowled. "I don't know how I'd react if you dated an Irish girl. The Italians and the Irish were born enemies. Irish cops, nuns, and priests treated my family badly all the time."

"I don't understand why that would be the case. We're all Catholic immigrants here. It should be us all standing united against the Klan, right?"

Mom sighed. "As bad as the Irish treat Italians, they treat the Blacks even worse."

I began to object and stopped. "Well, yeah. *Actually, they do.* They've turned treating Blacks like shit into an art form."

Mom placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder and looked me in the eyes. "One day, you'll meet a wonderful Italian girl who loves you."

I threw my arms up in the air. "When? *2010: The Year We Make Contact?*"

"Wouldn't you love to have an Italian girlfriend?"

"Sure! I would also love to ride Pegasus."

"Oh, don't be melodramatic."

"I'm going by verifiable empirical evidence. I'm gonna end up a sixty-year-old bachelor hermit beekeeper, like Sherlock Holmes." I pressed an index finger against my temple. "I can see it in my mind as if it has already happened."

Dad stuck his head back in the kitchen. "Is our son being melodramatic again? Showering the kitchen with hyperbole?"

I threw my hands in the air for the second time in under a minute. "Just don't get too attached to the idea I'm gonna wind up with an Italian girl. I asked my Magic 8-Ball about it fifty times, and each time I got 'Outlook not so good.'"

"Listen," Dad said calmly, "don't go looking for an Italian girl. Find a level-headed, overly organized German girl who can do your taxes for you."

"A German?"

"Yeah. A German."

I smirked. "Speaking of ethnic stereotyping, I have a joke for you, Dad."

"Uh-oh," Dad said.

"How many Germans does it take to screw in a lightbulb?"

Dad frowned. "I have no idea."

"One!"

Dad was left waiting for the punchline. "I don't get it."

"They're efficient and not very funny."

After midnight, I laid in bed, staring at the popcorn ceiling, listening to the radio on my headphones. I stumbled upon an honors

student my age telling a radio therapist about her mother beating and blaming her for being molested by her father. She still lived at home with both parents, maintained her A-average, and moonlighted as a high-priced call girl to earn enough money to move out. It was the kind of story you might find in an exploitation film like *Angel* (“High School Honor Student by Day, Hollywood Hooker by Night: Her Two Worlds Are About to Collide!”), only this was real life. The young woman on the phone used elevated vocabulary, was deeply self-aware, and had a mordant sense of humor. I felt sympathy pains for her, wished I could be her friend, and tried to tramp down any stirrings of romantic feelings because almost all her suffering was rooted in male sexual desire and violence. I also berated myself for being so taken with her eloquence, as if she would not have been worthy of my sympathy had she been less articulate. When the next three callers were women with equally bleak stories, I became too upset to listen to any more nighttime confessions. As much as I had suffered so far in sixth grade, this evening’s listening had opened my eyes. My pain was *nothing* compared to the agonies that these radio callers had experienced.

Things could be worse; I could be a woman. Who knew the mountains of shit they have to climb every day? Jesus H. Christ.

Knowing other people had things worse than me made me more sympathetic to them, because I knew if I felt this bad, how fucking awful did they feel dealing with much worse trauma? Crikey. On the other hand, knowing that others had it worse didn’t make me feel any better about my own problems. Dealing with the other students in junior high still sucked, even if it didn’t suck as bad as the problems faced by the night callers.

I scrolled through some more stations, stumbling across a mournful country music song called “Fancy” about a dirt-poor teenage girl who had to sell herself into a relationship with a rich man so she could class-jump and become a famous country music star. I had been told by my classmates for years that it wasn’t cool for a New Yorker to like country music, but I had grown up with John Denver, Johnny Cash, Dolly Paton, Willie Nelson, and Kenny Rogers, so I wasn’t opposed to the genre at all. I had just fallen out of touch with it. Who was

singing now? And who knew that a twangy song about a woman's impoverished childhood would become an instant favorite? I wasn't a woman. I wasn't poor. I felt a connection to Fancy. I didn't know why. *Sing to me about being a chick in dire poverty, Fancy! Make me appreciate my charmed life!* Real and fictional, the women on the radio put my pain in perspective, but I still was sad for them all, especially the honors student I had no way to help. When the song ended, the disk jockey explained that I had just been listening to Bobbie Gentry.

Bobbie Gentry. Wild. Never heard of her. I need to go to Tape World in the mall and get myself a Bobbie Gentry cassette at my earliest opportunity.

This course of action decided, I finally drifted to sleep.

January 13, 1988

I stood tenth in line for the lunch counter, but the queue was moving steadily. The sour-faced lunch lady and her mouth-watering assortment of processed meat came into view. Shortly before I reached the counter, four Black male students ambled into view and slotted themselves into the line right in front of me. The "Great Cut" was a daily cafeteria occurrence: These four students inserted themselves halfway up the line, leaving the other students they had just cut fuming in impotent silence. Rather than stand there, staring angrily at their backs, letting racist thoughts fester, I lanced the boil of my own bitterness and cut them right back. The tallest of the four men couldn't believe the worm had turned. He stared at me.

"Good afternoon," I chirped.

The four circled me. The tallest stared me down. "You startin' somethin', motherfucker?"

I stared up at the tall man and smiled, wearily. "Nah. Just hungry."

Another voice called out from a yard away, "Hey, Tyrone! What's going on here?" A fifth Black student appeared and cut the line in the same place as the other four. I recognized him right away. It was Doug Brooks, my best friend from kindergarten. We had once been inseparable, playing endless hours of LEGO together. Then we were placed into two different classes and never saw each other in any

meaningful capacity again. Doug held up his hand to slap me five and — somehow — I managed to pull it off without missing, like a spaz. Thankfully, Doug learned his lesson from the last time we bumped into each other, in fifth grade. He had tried the dap with me then, and I got exactly zero steps of the handshake right. We had a good laugh over it. “How are you doin’, my brother?”

“How you doin’, Doug?” I asked, sadly.

Tyrone jerked a finger in my direction. “He’s not your brother! He’s ‘mayonnaise made with olive oil,’ and he’s startin’ trouble, homey.”

Doug shrugged. “He don’t wanna eat your shit. That don’t make him racist.”

No, allowing our friendship to end makes me racist, Doug.

“I don’t like the way he cut us. Like he’s makin’ a point of puttin’ us back in our place!”

“Damien don’t take kindly to bein’ disrespected. He’s got a lot of pride.” Doug indicated my obvious injuries. “He fights back. I seen him having trouble with the goombahs around here, just like us. You think he’s inna mood for you after he’s been through serious shit with them?”

Tyrone sucked his teeth. “He’s just like the rest of them.”

“I’m tellin’ you he ain’t one of them,” Doug added. “I want you to cut him some slack.”

“Next!” the lunch lady yelled, staring at nobody.

It was Tyrone’s turn. Tyrone bowed at me while gesturing theatrically at the impatient woman. “Oh, please, *do* go on ahead!”

I froze, not sure what to do. Doug patted me on the shoulder. “You get your lunch.”

I cleared my throat nervously and walked up to the counter. As I passed Tyrone, I said, “Thanks, Tyrone. I appreciate it.” Tyrone rolled his eyes at me. After securing a terrible, processed chicken lunch, I sat at the nearest empty table, harboring some small hope that Doug and his friends would join me. I looked in their direction, planning to wave them over, but they headed to the back of the cafeteria to sit with the other Black students, not even noticing I was watching them. *I should have stayed near Doug, not sat down like an idiot. Sure, I’m not making a love connection with Tyrone, but I just missed an opportunity.*

I swallowed a sporkful of flavorless processed chicken as two of Tony Nocerino's main lieutenants — Rocco Tentori and Bobby Mammolito — led a handful of C-list Merry Men to sit at the other end of my chrome cafeteria bench table. *Shit. I'm not on their bus anymore, but we still cross paths in the lunchroom. Don't make eye contact. Just eat.* Rolling down the table, an apple struck my gray, cardboard lunch tray. My tiny carton of milk tipped over, drenching my processed chicken and green beans. "What the flying—?"

"Yo! Why are yous playing grab-ass with the eggplants?" the pale, gaunt Rocco yelled.

"I like eggplant!" I yelled back. "Besides, we're eggplant parmesan!"

"The hell we are!" some random Merry Man piped in. Bobby Mammolito sat silent.

"What are you, runnin' with the porch monkeys, now?" Rocco added.

"Fuck you, Skeletor!" I picked the apple up and beaned it off Rocco's New-York-Mets-baseball-cap-wearing head. "Don't you talk about Doug!" Not used to nerds fighting back, Rocco rubbed his forehead and shut up. Bobby leaped to his feet, laughing and pointing at me. "I love this fuckin' guy! Yo, Egon! You're fuckin' hilarious when you get angry!"

Bobby's mirth and enthusiasm might have had a cooling effect on my rage had Mrs. Hall not swooped onto the scene. The slender Black woman grabbed me under my arm, pulled me up from my seat, and dragged me towards the cafeteria exit. "Throwing food, eh? If you can't eat like a gentleman, you are no longer welcome in this cafeteria." She nudged me through the red, swinging double doors into the hallway.

Incredulous and exasperated, I spoke in a whiny voice that squeaked: "They were bullying me." I stood in the hall, my arms spread helplessly, hoping to look credible.

Shaking her head, Mrs. Hall tapped her foot impatiently. "I saw you curse and throw an apple at the head of a kid who was minding his own business."

"They rolled the apple first, Mrs. Hall!"

"Sure, sure." Mrs. Hall closed the cafeteria door in my face.

I stared at the closed red doors in mute surprise and confusion.

Wait a minute. Am I banned from the cafeteria just for today, or permanently?

January 13, 1988

5:00 pm

"You sure that's the move you wanna make?"

Withering under Dad's gaze, I lifted my hand off the white queen.

"You've got the blood of two chess Grandmasters in you," Dad reminded me. "Your father and grandfather. You need to focus and be more aggressive."

He was right. I should have won this game already. Dad was down both knights, one rook, and a bishop. I was down a rook, knight, and three pawns. I was well-positioned to checkmate his king. I suspected I was within three moves of victory, but every time I thought I had Dad pinned down, he slipped free. He got out of my last "checkmate" by using his remaining bishop to take the rook I'd cornered his king with. I was getting frustrated.

"You do this every time. You're not a closer. You don't know how to end a game."

"I know."

"You could see moves before. You're psyching yourself out in the endgame. You know, it's okay if you defeat me." Dad certainly didn't hold back the way I did. He defeated me nine out of ten games that day alone. I looked up at him. "I guess I really *don't* want to win if it means beating you. Can I play one-man chess? I want to play against myself."

Dad slumped back in his chair. "You have *one* move left. Can't you at least identify it?"

I looked at the pieces again.

January 14, 1988

Hence from Verona art thou banished.

I should have met with Mrs. Hall, protested my innocence, and clarified the terms of my lunchroom expulsion. Instead, I made a point of not doing this. My “permanent exile” became my justification for never returning to a cafeteria I loathed. During the first day of my banishment, I ventured outside to the empty playground to eat my bagged lunch. (*Thanks, Mom.*) The January air was biting, but my gray raincoat and matching fedora kept me serviceably warm over a brick-red, button-down shirt and blue jeans. I sat cross-legged against the chain link fence, with my back to the school. I faced the residential neighborhood across the street, watching as the occasional car sped by too quickly for a school zone. *They’re gonna get a ticket.* It took me all of five minutes to consume the peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich, apple juice, and mozzarella string cheese. My lactose intolerance would act up not long after I polished off the string cheese, but nobody would be around to smell it after I dealt it. Solitude had its advantages. As a rare bonus, Mom packed me a single Pokatny Confections cupcake for dessert. She didn’t usually pack dessert, and I loved Pokatny cupcakes. Amusingly, as I unwrapped the cupcake, a silver and red Pokatny Confections delivery truck trundled by. “Wild. Today’s Pokatny Day.” I ate it too quickly to appreciate it. I wondered if I’d ever learn to eat slowly, instead of inhale food. *Slow down, dude. Slow down. This food is delicious and nutritious. High in beta-carotene.*

Anticipating the need to entertain myself for the rest of my solitary lunch hour, I had filled my crossbody messenger bag with *Secret Wars*, *X-Men*, *Avengers*, and *Aquaman* comic books. I removed *Secret Wars* #6 from the bag, eager to revisit the adorable subplot in which Janet Van Dyne befriended the wounded supervillain, the Lizard, and domesticated him with her affection. *Is there a cuter plot template than Beauty and the Beast, I ask you?* Certainly, it was more morally uplifting and emotionally satisfying than “St. George killing the dragon.” *Make love, not war.* I sat on my heels, crouching, and reading.

The shadow of a seven-foot-tall eighth grader fell over me. Backlit by the sun, the eighth grader was an imposing, spike-haired silhouette wearing a red jacket with a popped collar and a black onyx signet initial ring with a bold “F” on it. Did the “F” stand for “Fuckhead?” He spoke in an authentic, high-pitched General Patton voice: “So,

we got a nerd all alone, huh?”

“Want to join me? I’ve got comics to share. We can read together.” I made this unusual offer because it was exactly the sort of idealistic, tactically brilliant move Wonder Woman would make to disarm her enemies. After all, her Amazon code of military ethics went: “Don’t kill if you can wound. Don’t wound if you can subdue. Don’t subdue if you can pacify. Don’t raise your hand at all until you’ve first extended it.” She was my go-to hero to mimic when I was feeling generous. If my Wonder Woman overture failed, I had other heroes I could emulate in times of conflict that employed less pleasant approaches to conflict resolution.

“If you give me one of them, I’ll rip it to pieces,” Fuckhead replied.

“God bless you. Arrivaderci.”

“I know you. You’re the dick cheese Tony beat up.”

“If you call twelve-on-one a fair fight then, yeah, I guess you can say he beat me up. And what the heck is dick cheese? Dicks don’t have cheese!”

“How about you and me go a round?”

“What are you, twice my size? I’m five-foot-four.”

“I’m *six*-foot-four,” Fuckhead said proudly.

I grinned. “Taking me on makes you a real hero, then.”

“I don’t like what you did to Viola. You need to remember that the guy doesn’t unzip himself in front of the girl. He waits for the girl to unzip *him*. You remember that, pervert!”

Fascinating. “I like that rule and am going to adopt it. Seriously.”

Fuckhead’s tone grew more threatening. “You ain’t gonna live to adopt it!”

“Listen, I like that you’re defending your friend, but we’re wandering into some seriously morally gray territory here. I’m less totally guilty than you think I am. I’m borderline innocent.”

“Get up.”

I glanced down at my satchel bag laden with dozens of comics. If I used the shoulder strap to swing it like a weapon, the satchel bag would make a perfect mace in a sling. It might even feel like swinging Thor’s hammer, Mjolnir, from the leather strap. *Mjolnir. Awesome.* I lowered my voice to a baritone level for the first time as I quoted the

Mighty Thor, hero of the Marvel Comics Universe: “When life doth seem too much to bear — ‘tis not the time to renounce the struggle. The ostrich hides. The jackal flees. BUT *MAN* — AND GOD — *DO PERSEVERE!*” I gathered the shoulder strap in my fist.

“What?” Fuckhead’s silhouette acted confused.

“How dare thee threaten, Thor, son of Odin? Get thee back to Jotunheim, frost giant, or prepare to taste the might of Mjolnir!” I rose to my feet.

“What the hell are you-”

In one, swift, smooth motion, I arced Mjolnir through the air, crashing it against the side of Fuckhead’s face. He dropped, rolled on his back, clutched his face, and howled in pain.

“Are we done, here?” I asked.

“No!” He looked up at me, holding his crimson face, tears streaming from his eyes. He’d be back on his feet, attacking me in another moment.

“Okay, then.” I raised the saddle bag over my head and brought it down with all my strength on the tall, crying boy’s head.

Then I smashed my bag against him again.

And again and again and again.

One half hour later, Fuckhead and I stood before Mrs. Hall in her office. I stared at my shoes, hiding the thin smile on my face. Crying, Fuckhead clutched his bleeding face. “He hit me with his bag. A lot. Like gettin’ slammed by Cassius Clay!”

“Muhammad Ali,” Mrs. Hall corrected. “Tell me, are you a full foot taller than Damien?”

Fuckhead cried silently, knowing what was coming.

“Guess he wasn’t the easy pickings you expected him to be, huh?” asked Mrs. Hall. “That’s what you get for picking a fight with somebody not knowing how tough he is.”

I stopped concealing my smile.

The next day, I tried once again to read my comic in peace.

“SSS-Swamp iss mine!” the Lizard hissed, trying to look menacing as it bled out through an arm injury. The Wasp, who was more of a camp, *Absolutely Fabulous* character than your usual super heroine, realized he was as frightened of her as she was of him. She attempted to defuse the situation with humor, “Right! Your swamp! I was just

passing by on my way to the Plaza so I thought I'd stop in! Charming muck! Tres chic!" I laughed. Female superheroes were the best. Their powers were less impressive, so they had to use their brains. I wondered if any male comic book fan alive liked Janet Van Dyne as much as I did. I doubted it.

My enjoyment of *Secret Wars* #6 ended abruptly when the diminutive Phil McCracken appeared, wearing his trademark all-white track suit, blonde spiked hair, and the massive chip on his shoulder. "I heard what you did to my man Flavio yesterday! Hit him with your school bag! How's that fighting fair? I hear one sleazy story about you after the next!"

"*Flavio*?" *Fuckhead's real name is Flavio. Wild.* I was outside again during lunch hour, my back against the chain-link fence, being confronted by some lunkhead with an enflamed amygdala for the second day running. On a lark, I replied to Phil McCracken in the Incredible Hulk's growling, echoing, Louis Armstrong voice: "Hulk want to be left alone. Hulk hates stupid Phil McCracken."

Phil strutted over, stopping just short of shoving his groin in my face. "Talk regular."

I stared at Phil's crotch. "Phil McCracken tiny. No honor in Hulk swatting fly."

"Are you making fun of my height now, bitch?"

I climbed to my feet. I was twice Phil's size. "Phil McCracken is so angry and so little! Like a baby Hulk! So cute and cuddly!"

Phil thrust his chest against mine, glaring up into my eyes. "I'm not cute! I'm one dangerous bastard. You better not fuck with me."

I threw my arms around Phil, crushing the teeny-tiny bully in a vice-like hug. "Hulk want to adopt Phil McCracken! Hulk loves Phil McCracken!"

"Get off me, you gay motherfucker! Quit hugging me!"

"Hulk wants to kiss Phil McCracken's smooth baby cheeks!" I planted a big, wet smooch on Phil's cheek.

Phil broke free, lurched backwards, and nearly tripped over himself. "You kissed me? Are you out of your mind! You kissed me! Are you gay, or something?"

"No. Hulk love Betty Ross."

Phil shook his fist at me. “You *are* gay, aren’t you?”

I faked wide, sad eyes, and spoke in Hulkish melancholy. “Hulk lonely. Hulk want friend. Will Phil McCracken be Hulk’s friend?” In my head, the sad piano theme to the old *Incredible Hulk* television show played.

“Fuck that!” Phil sprinted away. It would be the last I ever saw of him.

“Homophobe!” I tossed my head back and belly-laughed like a drunk Viking. Then I sat down and checked in on Wasp and Lizard. *I wonder if I’m ever gonna finish this fucking scene?*

Ten minutes later, Michelle-maybe appeared with an expression that somehow blended glee, mischief, and homophobia. “You kissed Phil? No way!”

“Yes, way.” Since Michelle was attractive, I gave my Hulk voice the rest of the day off.

“Why?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Why not? I’m a big fan of Phil’s. I loved him in *Of Mice and Men*.”

“Why would you kiss him? Are you gay?”

“You got me, I am. Wait . . . Psych! I *ain’t*.”

“You’re not gay, but you kissed a man?”

I talked with my hands, gesticulating wildly. “He’s so tiny *and so violent*! I knew he must be extra special anti-gay. So, I did the worst thing to him I possibly could have. Kissed him! Now he’s terrified I’ll fill his crack in!”

“I’ve never seen you with a girl,” Michelle-maybe said.

“I’m very, very uncomfortable with being single. It keeps me up at night. But I’m very comfortable with being straight.”

“I can’t believe you kissed Phil.”

“I don’t see what the big deal is. No skin off my nose. And I have a big fucking nose.”

Michelle-maybe eyeballed me warily. “I think you might be insane.”

“Don’t be *silly*. I’m *definitely* insane.”

The next day at lunch, nobody bothered me. I was able to eat in peace against the fence. I finally made it up to *Secret Wars* #7. Took bloody long enough!

A week later, Bobby Mammolito joined five Italian girls and boys I'd never met before in standing in a crescent around me. I sat on the playground floor, my back against the chain-link fence, eating a roll filled with prosciutto, fresh mozzarella, red peppers, and oil and vinegar. I wore beige slacks and a black T-shirt with a picture of the Bates Motel on it that read "I Love Mother." I had forgotten my coat and hat and was freezing my balls off.

"There's a rumor going around that you're a cugine, not a Jew," said the lead girl, who I pretended was named Concetta, because "why the fuck not?"

Chewing slowly, savoring the taste, I was determined to enjoy this amazing ciabatta sandwich. I swallowed the bite and offered Concetta-maybe my attention. "And you are?"

"Don't you know me? Everyone knows me!" said Concetta-maybe.

I took another bite of my sandwich and took my time chewing. I added, "It is so weird how everyone knows me, but I don't know anybody else. I'm keeping a low profile, too."

"Being loud and weird and wearing suits and kissing Phil?" asked Concetta-maybe.

I smiled crookedly. "Isn't that how you keep a low profile?"

"I axed you a question. Are you Italian or not?"

I reached down my Bates Motel t-shirt and withdrew Grandpa Angelo's miraculous medal. Keeping it around my neck, I held it up for all to see.

"No way!" Concetta-maybe said. "Where's your family from?"

"Naples. With some Salerno and Armento seasoning."

"Gnarly," said Concetta-maybe.

"Bombdiggity!" I agreed.

"What's your name again?" Concetta-maybe asked. "We can't agree. We all know you as 'the Jew in the raincoat with the bag of comic books who showed Viola his dick and kissed Phil McCracken.' I guess you gotta have a name, right?"

"I told them your name was Egon Spengler," Bobby Mammolito said.

I brightened. "Bobby! How goes it?"

"Nuttin'. Same shit, different day."

“Ain’t that the truth!”

Concetta-maybe waved Bobby silent and looked at me. “So, what is your name?”

“Orin Scrivello, D.D.S.” I placed the last bite of my amazing ciabatta into my mouth and smiled as I swallowed it.

Concetta-maybe looked confused. “Who?”

Before Concetta-maybe knew what was happening, I leapt to my feet and began singing “Dentist” — one of the most famous songs from the off-Broadway musical and recent film adaptation *Little Shop of Horrors* — in my newly minted baritone. I sang about how, when I was a child, I tormented neighborhood puppies and killed family pet guppies. Realizing I was a sadist, my mother suggested I grow up to be a dentist, so I could cause pain every day and get paid for it. Concetta-maybe took several steps back and held her hands up for protection as I serenaded her, “No, no, no. This ain’t going down. This ain’t going down.” I backed off Concetta-maybe and gave the group a wide berth as I danced and continuing to sing.

Laughing and clapping, Bobby Mammolito exclaimed, “This fucking guy! This fucking guy right over here! Right over here! Lookit ‘em! Egon Spengler in da house!”

When I reached a “call and response” part of the song, I paused and gestured to Bobby, who joined in to provide the response, much to everyone else’s shock and amusement.

“Awesome,” I said. “Good man.”

Bobby smiled shyly. “That’s Steve Martin’s song, man. Couldn’t leave ya hangin’!”

Then I launched into the main chorus. I was in full Steve Martin impersonation mode when I pirouetted and found myself face-to-face with Mrs. Hall. She had probably been there for the entire song. “Are you on something, kid?” Mrs. Hall asked.

I struck a forced casual pose. “High on life, Mrs. Hall. As Harry Harrison likes to say on 101 CBS FM, ‘Every brand-new day should be opened like a precious gift.’”

“And every brand-new day I have another wild story about you to tell my husband over dinner,” Mrs. Hall replied.

“That’s what I’m here for!” Chuckling, I bent down to gather my

stuff. Unable to resist, I sang the do-wop style radio station jingle to myself: “One-oh-one, CBS FM, one-oh-one, CBS FM. We play your favorite oldies, CBS FM! Neeeeeeew Yoooooork.”

“Hold up!” Mrs. Hall raised a finger. “Why are you here instead of in the cafeteria?” I reminded her of the apple-throwing incident. She flinched at my stupidity. “That was for the rest of that period, knucklehead! You were supposed to come back the next day!”

“Oh,” I said, inspiring the other kids to crack up.

Mrs. Hall stared daggers at them. “That will be all, thank you.” When they grudgingly dispersed, she returned her attention to me. “You’ve been wandering the school grounds every lunch period with nowhere to go? That’s not only ridiculous and against the rules, but it’s also dangerous. You can’t get into all these fistfights and do these song-and-dance routines because you’re out here playing vagabond. You need to return to the lunchroom. If you don’t want to, you need to find a place to be during lunch: the music room, gym, or working as a teacher’s assistant. Personally, I want you back in the lunchroom ASAP.”

“Where are all the Black students?” I asked Assistant Principle John Thomas Pecker.

A lanky man with flushed pink skin, Mr. Pecker had a sandy blonde bowl cut and wore a tan suit. His undecorated tan office included a tan desk, tan wastepaper basket, and tan coat rack with a tan coat hanging on it. I sat across from him in a tan swivel chair, my left foot resting atop my right knee. Dumbfounded, Mr. Pecker repeated my question back to me.

“Yes. Where do they go?” I asked. “I see them at assemblies and lunch. Then I walk the hallways between classes, and I see zero Black students. Zippo. Nada. Zilch. Where are they?”

“If you must know, the Black students tend to self-select for special education classes in the basement. They’re down there with the students with cognitive and physical disabilities . . . ”

My eyes widened theatrically. “And with Freddy Krueger in the boiler room?”

Mr. Pecker shook his head in disapproval. “That’s a prejudiced attitude to take.”

“*I’m* not the one who shoved all the Black kids into the basement.” I spoke quickly to prevent Pecker from objecting to that outrageous sentence. “Anyway, let me get this straight: The honors program has all your ‘model immigrants’ in it: Asians, Jews, the Irish, a couple of guys from Pakistan, and some Greeks. Mainstream classes have Italians, a handful of Hispanics, and two American Indians. Then the basement has special ed classes with people who have actual disabilities, plus Black kids, who are treated like they have disabilities when they don’t.”

Mr. Pecker laced his fingers behind his head. “I’m not sure we have paperwork available to the public identifying student demographics and sorting them.”

“Makes sense,” I said. “If this place is organized the way I think it is, this isn’t a school, but some kind of weird eugenics experiment run by Baroness von Gunther.”

Mr. Pecker adopted an artificial air of extreme patience and self-control that suggested the opposite was going on in his head. “You’re the one who’s got issues with race. I don’t look at people and see their race or ethnicity, so I haven’t noticed this ‘sorting.’ If you’re noticing this, you have an unhealthy obsession. You need to stop labeling people, or you’ll become racist.”

I waved away Mr. Pecker’s response with an impatient wrist flap. “First of all, this is New York. *All anyone talks about* is race. *I’ve had it up to here with race and ethnicity.* Second of all, you mean to tell me there’s not one Black dude or one Hispanic chick in the gifted classes? Not one? Nobody with dark skin has read *Candide* and kinda got a kick out of it?”

Mr. Pecker slapped his palm down on his desk. “There’s a Black girl in the gifted class!”

If I was supposed to be impressed and mollified, I wasn’t. “*One? Stop the presses!*”

“One is one,” declared Pecker.

“*One* Black person is *worse* than *no black people*. No Black people

at all would be an obvious injustice. *One Black person* is a ‘token Black’ and can be accused of being put in there to fill a ‘quota.’ You get a buncha white yahoos crying ‘reverse racism’ because a ‘token Black’ is there. They can’t do that when there are *no* Black people or *more than one token*. You need a good handful of Black people in there, or the whole situation reeks of injustice.”

Pecker calmed himself. “You sound like an ACORN activist.”

A what? “Look, I’ve been miserable here. As my people say, ‘the fish rots from the head down.’ So, here’s the thing. I was denied entry into the gifted program twice, basically because I’m Italian. Now, if I was shut out for being Italian, I guarantee you whatever metric you’re using to assess Black people is off. You need a new rubric, and you should put me and Doug Brooks into the gifted class. Doug is a gifted architect. You should see him make a LEGO castle. It will blow your damn mind. And I bet he wasn’t even vetted for the gifted program because of his skin color. All this time I was worried I was fighting with Black students and Italian students and Jewish students, I thought *I was racist*. But, you know, I’m starting to think the real problem is the school. Somehow, *the school itself* is racist. I think we all need to sit down and figure out how to fix it. Step one is putting me and Doug into the gifted program. You feel me?”

Mr. Pecker noticed there was a security guard milling about in the hallway. He called the guard into the room and had me physically carried from the office.