

## CHAPTER TWO

### *They Thought I Was Spicoli*

September 9, 1987.

Staring at the popcorn ceiling in my bedroom, I was wide awake at two a.m. struggling to drive away gyroscopic negative thoughts. Thanks to my mild hyperthymesia, I had an extraordinary ability to recall verbatim lengthy verbal exchanges from the most emotionally turbulent times in my life. On top of that, select images — setting, clothing, facial expressions, and where people stood or sat in relation to me — were burned in my mind. These memories of often traumatic events were not omnipresent but came back unbidden when triggered by a fresh event reminiscent of the past. Worst of all, the hyperthymesia descended upon me when I tried to sleep. It manifested as an audio track of the most awful moments I'd experienced played on endless, Satanic CD repeat that drowned out all other thoughts. Today's loathsome verbal duel on the bus loomed large in tonight's playlist of dreadful conversations. I looked for something besides my popcorn ceiling to focus on to help me silence the relentless, discordant voices.

Visible from the soft light of my bedside lamp was my newly framed poster of Christina Applegate as Kelly Bundy from the sitcom *Married . . . with Children*. Hugging herself, Kelly wore an enormous black cross over a low-cut black belly shirt with a red rose on it. Denim cutoffs, and black leggings completed the sexy outfit. I focused on Kelly's face, taking in her big, teased blonde hair, luminous hazel eyes, and huge, gold-hoop earrings. Everything about her was gorgeous, but it was her striking eyes that I turned up my table light to see more clearly.

*I'm a mess, Kelly. Can you keep me company?* I didn't *really* expect Kelly to spring to life and emerge from the poster on my bedroom wall. Still, it was a real bummer when she didn't. In the recent Woody Allen picture Mom had rented, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, a fictional hero in a Hollywood film stepped out of a movie, walked up the theater aisle, and took a lonely, star-struck fan into his arms. Be cool if something like that happened to me this evening. Still, as welcome as the Pygmalion fantasy was, it didn't address my actual need: a time machine.

I had made an enormous mistake at the end of last term, during my final days at Public School 12: The Alfred Dreyfus School. I had found out I would not be allowed into the Intellectually Gifted Children program in junior high and did not lift a finger to fight this “expulsion.” I should not be too hard on myself for being so cowed. Both the revelation and the justification shocked and dumbfounded me, leaving me ill-equipped to offer a well-reasoned defense of my educational rights and needs. It was all so odd. I was told that the Robert Loggia School required its sixth grade accelerated students to study Spanish, in effect forbidding the study of Italian. Not knowing this in advance, I had informed the administration that I wanted to study the language of my mother country. I did not think I was functionally asking to remove myself from gifted classes at my new school. And yet, thanks to this decision, I was automatically slated to join a mainstream class. My reaction to this news was, essentially, *Oh, yeah? Fuck you, too.* I convinced myself that what was not my choice was, in fact, my call. I pretended to be a leather-jacket-wearing rebel with a switchblade comb, like Fonzie, lifting a middle finger to the gifted class gods. *You jerks are telling me which language I must study, eh? Well, down with you and your snooty program! I abjure you! Ha ha ha ha!* Using this misguided line of thinking, I cut off my schnoz to spite my face. I should have fought back. I didn’t. And so, I sacrificed a first-rate, public-school education, knowledge of America’s most important second language, and denied myself access to a class of intellectual peers.

Was I fighting back against “the Man” by walking away from a gifted program? No. It would be easy to condemn this gifted program as elitist and racially exclusive. It was also terrifyingly competitive: Second- and third-graders never stopped measuring themselves against their peers, desperate to prove themselves the absolute smartest person in the class. Despite these flaws, the program was the best way public school kids could get a private-school-level education. In allowing myself to be crowbarred out of the sanctuary of the gifted program, I embraced exile to an environment where being smart was an enormous liability. As my dreadful first day of mainstream classes in the sixth grade had just confirmed, I’d thrown myself to the wolves by exposing myself

to bullying for the first time. And I would be bullied by *my people*.

In practical terms, I also lost my best friend, Mitchell. Mitchell was not foolish or masochistic enough to follow me into hell by joining the mainstream class in the Robert Loggia intermediate school. Last spring, he confronted me in the schoolyard during the final recess of fifth grade, brushing an agitated hand through his sandy hair. “You had to take Italian, huh? You couldn’t take Spanish?”

I kicked at the monkey bars, grumbling, “Everyone I know is Irish, Italian, Jewish, or Black. Are there any other ethnicities? I never met even one Mexican. Not one.”

“Such a New Yorker. Try heading to Tombstone, Arizona, where everyone is Mormon, Latino, or Native American.”

I’d only seen people from those backgrounds in Westerns, so I laughed in disbelief. “Sounds like a different country!”

“It kinda is. America is a big place. And demographics are changing, too.”

“I dunno. Mom tells me once you leave New York City, everyone is a Protestant who calls people like us Papists. Better we stay here where it’s safe.”

“Have it your way.” Even when I disappointed Mitchell by acting stubborn, arrogant, and prejudiced, he had faith I’d dig my heart out from under all that detritus one day.

Why *was* studying Italian so important to me? I was Italian and proud, but I sometimes felt like a phony. I worried I was not the genuine article. After all, Mom grew up among Italian friends and family. I hadn’t. Instead of raising my brother and me in her old neighborhood in Brooklyn, Mom moved us to Willowbrook on Staten Island because the neighborhood public school was one of the best in the borough, boasting an innovative gifted program for the young. My parents had hoped I’d join this program in first grade, but I didn’t make the cut. In kindergarten, a multiple-choice exam testing predominantly STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and grammar aptitude vetted prospective gifted students. Those subjects were not my strong suit. Despite my enthusiastic childhood talk of wanting to be a marine biologist, I had always been an artist and a humanist first and foremost. I believed in science, and was fascinated

and impressed by science, but I was not a scientist at heart. What I loved about Great Whites was their majesty, not their biology. By the second grade, I showed advanced spoken and written language skills and an aptitude for art and history. My teacher arranged for me to be tested by an education specialist trained to work with youthful artistic temperaments that rebelled against the regimentation of institutional schooling. That specialist determined that, of the many types of intelligence, I was gifted in linguistic, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and existential areas. He concluded that I had unrealized potential in developing my naturalist and musical abilities, but I was on the poorer side when it came to logical, mathematical, and spatial intelligence. He had me admitted into the Advanced Learners Early Childhood program in the third grade. (At the time, Staten Island parents and teachers referred to the program as ALEC, but I dislike referring to it as ALEC now, since *my* ALEC has since been defunded and shut down by Staten Island Republicans, and one of the world's most evil organizations uses that same acronym these days.) The one student who welcomed me with open arms to the ALEC class was another artist with a slight attention-deficit-disorder: a big-hearted, blonde Irish hippie child name Mitchell Sherry. Mitchell was the one who first taught me about the vital importance of being a champion of social justice, when such concerns were far from my mind as a kid. He was also my hero for introducing me to John Byrne's *Fantastic Four* and Wendy and Richard Pini's *Elfquest* comic books. We drew together, took walks, went swimming at his grandparents' pool club, and had classic movie watch parties. After Mitchell and I became friends, we were inseparable during the school day. Until I chose not to take Spanish.

My brain CD of unpleasant audio memories would not stop playing . . .

Public School 12: The Alfred Dreyfus School

Advanced Learners Early Childhood Program, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade class  
Staten Island, NY, 1984

Fall, 1984

Ari: You've joined the gifted program *now*? Why weren't you in our class since first grade like the rest of us, Damien?

Me: I didn't pass the test in kindergarten. I'm not good at math.

Ari: So, you're in here and you didn't pass? Are your parents in the Mafia?

Me: No, Ari. I'm great at English. I took a new test that wasn't all math questions.

Ari: So, what are your parent's jobs? My dad is a corporate lawyer, and my mother is a plastic surgeon. They make piles of money. I'm going to grow up to be a neurosurgeon. This is my personal jingle: "A neurosurgeon I will be, I'll fix you up for a great big feel!"

Me: My dad makes horror movies on Super 8. My mom teaches college composition classes. They have *real* jobs, not *fake* ones like your parents. And if you become a neurosurgeon, you shouldn't charge a lot of money. Everyone has a right to get treatment they can afford.

Winter, 1984

Ari: I'm scared about this history test, Damien. I don't think I'm going to get a 100. My parents always ground me and beat me with a belt when I don't get a hundred.

Me: We have a history test today? Oh, no!

Ari: We do.

Me: Wait a minute. What's wrong with your parents? Are they crazy, or something?

Spring, 1985

Mr. Aaronovitch: Damien, what was the name of the first human being to land on the moon?

Me: Alice Kramden.

Mr. Aaronovitch: That's funny. Who was it really?

Me: The 'small step for man' dude. Buzz Aldrin.

Mr. Aaronovitch: Buzz was the second man on the lunar surface. You just quoted his mission commander. Who was that?

Me: John Glenn.

Mr. Aaronovitch: He's the first man to orbit the Earth. Name the first man to walk on the moon.

Me: The first moonwalker was Michael Jackson.

Public School 12: The Alfred Dreyfus School

Advanced Learners Early Childhood Program, 4<sup>th</sup> grade class  
Staten Island, NY, 1985

Miss Becker: Everyone who didn't do the homework, stand up. Admit it now. You get in more trouble if I find out later. Ah. Damien. And Mitchell. Again. Why didn't you do it today?

Mitchell: I forgot.

Me: Me too. [BRAP!]

Miss Becker: Was that fart real or fake, Damien?

Me: Do I get in more trouble if it was real, or if it was fake?

Miss Becker: Tell your parents to stop packing mozzarella sticks in your lunch. You may be lactose intolerant.

Me: What's lactose intolerant?

Public School 12: The Alfred Dreyfus School

Advanced Learners Early Childhood Program, 5<sup>th</sup> grade class  
Staten Island, NY, 1986

Mr. Altman: Damien, let me see the back cover of the book you did your report on.

Me: Okay. Here it is, Mr. Altman.

Mr. Altman: Did you like the book?

Me: Mom loves Agatha Christie. She knew I'd like *Ten Little Indians*. I didn't figure it out. I was fooled into thinking the real bad guy died earlier in the book. He faked his death.

Mr. Altman: Your book report wording is different from the back

cover of the book.

Me: Shouldn't it be?

Mr. Altman: Your writing is good. I'm sorry we didn't do more English work this year.

Me: There was a lot of math and science. People kept thinking I was stupid because I couldn't remember 12 times 12 was 144, no matter how hard I tried. Took me all year to remember it. I was better at science. I really liked learning about the transpiration pull.

Mr. Altman: I'm partial to the transpiration pull myself.

Public School 12: The Alfred Dreyfus School

Advanced Learners Early Childhood Program,

5<sup>th</sup> grade graduation week

Staten Island, NY, Spring 1987

Mr. Altman: Damien, I figured out why you aren't in the accelerated program in middle school. You chose Italian as your foreign language instead of Spanish.

Me: Why does that matter, Mr. Altman?

Mr. Altman: The others picked Spanish because that's the language all Americans will need to know. By picking Italian, you self-selected out of gifted classes and chose mainstream.

Me: Why can't I be in all the same gifted classes as the rest of these folks, except I go to a mainstream Italian class?

Mr. Altman: The school doesn't want you ever leaving your homeroom class to link up with other students. They want the same students together all the time.

Me: That's stupid.

Mr. Altman: It is a safety thing. They're worried about losing students in the shuffle. And it is more paperwork for them if they make these concessions.

Me: So, if I leave the gifted program, I get to take Italian and be with Italian students, and if I stay in the gifted program, I take Spanish and there won't be other Italians in the class?

Mr. Altman: Maybe not many. You were the only Italian in this class. But you don't want to sacrifice the quality of your education, do you?

Me: I'm tired of being the only Italian boy in my class. And I want to take Italian. They're being stupid about my choice, but if that's the way it has to be . . . whatever, I guess.

The memory of me saying this to Altman snapped me awake from my half-slumber. The CD in my head skipped:

*I'm tired of being the only Italian boy in my class. And I want to take Italian. They're being stupid about my choice, but if that's the way it has to be . . . whatever, I guess.*

My words repeated and repeated and repeated and repeated and repeated.

I wanted to scream audibly, but could not, so I screamed inside my head.