

CHAPTER THREE

Sharped-Dressed Man

September 8, 1987

7:44 a.m.

Yup. I'm the only idiot in a gray pinstriped suit and purple shirt.

Stepping off the yellow school bus onto the grounds of the Robert Loggia School in New Springville, I scanned the several dozen students milling about outside the institutional, unremarkable three-story building. These sixth, seventh, and eighth graders were not sporting suits. In fact, they weren't dressed in anything like what I'd pictured a modern-day tween or teen wearing. When I'd imagined Staten Island kids in Rockabilly clothes, prohibition wear, or Catholic school uniforms, I couldn't have landed farther outside the zeitgeist if I had planned. These were not "movie" or "TV show" kids from a nostalgic yarn about a modern-day filmmaker's glory days, which took place before Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and "The Big Bopper" got on that plane. This was a school of students who had all chosen to dress according to a small handful of mainstream and counterculture "types." In the fall of 1987, the most popular clothes among Staten Island Italian boys between eleven and fifteen were Reebok or Nike high-top sneakers and either track suits, parachute pants, or Z. Cavariccis. Almost all these boys had "Billy Idol" spiked hair, wore gold chains and Christ heads around their necks, and strutted instead of walked. In contrast, heavy metal fans wore big, permed hair, black pants, silver chains, and band T-shirts featuring Eddie the Head or Dr. Feelgood. A small handful of Jewish honor students wandered around in single-color polo shirts and beige slacks. They stuck out like sore thumbs but were not as ridiculous as I was in my suit.

A few exceptions notwithstanding, the eleven-year-old girls tended to have massive, teased hairstyles — high, wide, and curly — and wore huge hoop earrings, ripped jeans, and washed denim jackets over airbrushed t-shirts. A few metal head girls also wore the Eddie the Head t-shirts. A jaw-dropping number of young women wore tennis-to-soccer-ball-sized *New Kids on the Block* badges. If you listened in on their exchanges, the girls spent a ton of time engaged in friendly

debate over which *New Kid* was the “cutest” or “hottest.”

Naturally, I had no idea who in hell *The New Kids on the Block* were, and I felt like a horse’s ass. In fact, I had never heard of *any* of the bands or soloists featured on any of the clothing items and accessories worn by the other students. I certainly didn’t know a single one of their songs. My parents were both of the opinion that popular music stopped being worth listening to when the Beatles arrived, brought the rest of the uncouth, drug-addled bands of the British Invasion with them, and drove all the Italian Do Wop performers of the 1950s into hiding. Mom listened exclusively to early 1950s rock, especially Dion DiMucci, Fabian Forte, Bobby Darin, Frankie Valli, and the Platters. Dad preferred old country music (think “Mule Train” and “Ghost Riders in the Sky”), big band music (Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman), and Irish drinking songs by the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem. With only the smallest handful of exceptions — Elton John, Madonna, Willie Nelson, John Denver, Blondie, Simon and Garfunkel, and Lionel Richie — my parents never listened to any song produced after 1961. Since I listened to what they listened to, I had heard virtually no music, popular or underground, produced between 1961 and 1987. I had never heard of Pink Floyd or listened to “The Wall.” I hadn’t heard of the Beastie Boys and didn’t know this “Paul Revere” song students kept rapping. Nor had I heard of Aerosmith, Billy Joel, the Carpenters, the Doors, ELO, Europe, the Grateful Dead, Led Zeppelin, Ozzy Osbourne, the Police, Queen, Rush, Toto, Velvet Underground, the Who, or any of the Woodstock performers. Only Michael Jackson was famous enough for me to have heard of, and I knew exactly two songs: “Thriller” and “Beat It.” From a music history perspective, I arrived in sixth grade a freshly thawed Captain America, awakened after spending the decades since World War II frozen in ice. Like Steve Rogers, I would be forced to ask my new friends about the music I missed out on while I was asleep, and jot down their favorites into a spiral notebook for future reference. (Note: Mitchell says I’ll love “Boris the Spider,” “Sunday Morning” (1967), “The Trees,” and “On the Turning Away.” UPDATE: HE WAS RIGHT!)

Overcoming my terror of the other students and their mysterious rock band t-shirts, I stepped away from the bus and onto the curb,

heading towards the brick building. I found it a challenge not to fixate on the five letters missing from the words “In er ediate Sc ool 420: T e Robert Loggia Sch ol” written in plain black letters on the façade. In my mind’s eye, I saw the sign welcoming new souls to hell in Dante’s *Inferno* displayed over the front entrance. Flaming letters scorched into white marble read:

I am the way into the city of woe,
I am the way into eternal pain,
I am the way to go among the lost . . .

Abandon all hope you who enter here.

I navigated a vast crowd of mostly Italian American tweens and teens blocking the concrete path to the main doors, loitering on the surrounding lawn, talking, smoking, and skateboarding. (Wait. I’m remembering it wrong. Nobody was skateboarding. Bloody “Mandela effect” false memory inspired by *Clueless*!) I strove to avoid eye-contact with each individual Guido and Guidette and put some daylight between me and the southern Italian collective. Unfortunately, these folks were not as interested in living and let live as I was. Each student noticed my gray pinstriped suit and purple dress shirt as I passed. Some burst out into raucous laughter, others launched gum, paper airplanes, and wadded up balls of paper in my direction. Most of the projectiles missed me, but some ricocheted off my head and back. These projectiles didn’t come all at once, like in a 1980s teen sex comedy scene, but regularly, throughout the day, in the hallways, in the classrooms, in the lunchroom, on the bus, and pretty much anywhere my feet took me, beginning on my long walk to the front entrance. A steady stream of jeers, taunts, and catcalls burned themselves onto my bad memory CD, ready to be played the minute I tucked myself into bed. These Catskills-worthy insults included: “Queer!” “Snapperhead!” “Sissy!” “Weirdo!” “Faggot!” “Pasty-faced piece of shit.” “Geek!” “Strunz!” “Nerd!” “Pansy!” “Gay-ass motherfucker!” “Pillow-biter!” “Fudgepacker!” Borscht Belt-level material, right? I kept my head down and kept moving.

These damned kids seemed to really hate my suit, which confused me, because Giorgio Armani was an Italian, and Italians liked to look good. My outfit was intended as an ethnic solidarity signal flare: my people would know me from my flashy clothes, just as I would know them from theirs. Never in a million years did I expect track suits to be the staple outfit of a stylish tribe known for designing the Maserati and clothes with bold colors and cool accessories like scarves and sunglasses. I had worn this pinstriped suit at Cousin Concetta Basile's wedding a month before. It had been my first-ever wedding. It was also the evening I learned how to dance. At the start of the reception, Mom taught me to do both slow and "disco" dancing. Less than half an hour later, I found myself dancing with First-Cousin-Once-Removed Baby Bianca Natali. We danced to Billy Idol's "Mony Mony," Kylie Minogue's "Locomotion," and Belinda Carlisle's "Mad About You." In the weeks following the wedding, I made several attempts to listen to radio stations that played cool recent songs like those. Dad invariably came in the room, complained the music was loud and uncouth, and demanded I turn it off.

I wish I'd gone to Catholic school instead of public school, I thought as I passed through the front doors of the Robert Loggia school for the first time, finding a sea of the same kind of students awaiting me. *Those kids wear suits, right? Nuns beat the shit out of them if they step out of line?* I followed a series of paper arrows taped up on walls at the most confusing intersections, pointing me to the auditorium. Us newbies herded inside looking for seats in a three-row, multiple aisle seating arrangement with a two-hundred-and-fifty-person capacity. Not yet sure how to sort into classes, the students who had arrived before me had opted for an "ethnic identity" seating theme. Serene Jewish students collected themselves in the front of the auditorium. Fidgeting Irish kids sat in the rows behind them. Then followed a sea of whooping, paper-airplane-tossing Italian kids, followed by a hodgepodge of Spanish, Greek, and Thai kids towards the back rows. These poor kids were outnumbered and looked hunched and haunted.

This ethnic seating arrangement troubled me. If birds of a feather flock together, then why do the feathers have to be "racial" feathers or "ethnic" feathers? Couldn't they be "taste in music" feathers or "my

favorite class is . . . ” feathers, or “I prefer tapioca to brownies” feathers? In the end, weren’t we all more similar than different? That was when I looked behind me and finally noticed the Black students gathered in the extreme rear of the auditorium. They stood against the brick wall, loitered in the aisles, or sat perched on the backs of the chairs, with their feet planted on the seats. Trying not to look as if they were bracing themselves for trouble, they murmured amongst themselves, darting wary glances at the caffeinated, horny, and sleep-deprived white kids in the room. They looked even more worried than I felt. *Wait a minute. Why are the Black kids in the back? Didn’t Rosa Parks put an end to that sort of thing? Are we going backwards as a society and returning to segregation?* Wasn’t this New York City, the great Melting Pot? Wasn’t this the city that stood for the multicultural, pacifist values of Norman Lear, *Sesame Street*, *Mr. Rogers*, *Wonder Woman*, *The Muppet Show*, and *Star Trek* — all the hippie, utopian television shows I had been weaned on though syndication (since I’d been born in 1976, too late to see most of their premieres)? Or was that all baloney after all? Upbeat propaganda? A wish for a better future? No, I wasn’t living on *Sesame Street*. Instead, I was living in the New York that Jesse Jackson had dubbed “Hymie-town.” The New York that had murdered Michael Griffith in Howard Beach and celebrated the vigilantism of Bernhard Goetz. I was living in *Shitty New York* — the New York Snake Plissken had to escape from — not *Mr. Rogers’ New York*. If Staten Island had been part of Mr. Rogers’ neighborhood, I could have sat anywhere in that auditorium. Instead, I could sit nowhere. If my suspicions were correct, I was too Italian for the Jews and too Jewish for the Italians. I had to shoehorn my way into another ethnic group’s section, or I was up shit’s creek.

What the students all seemed to have in common, no matter their ethnicity, was they were scary. I’ll admit, I had the warped perception of a terrified new freshman, but the other students seemed to take being combative and carnal to levels I had yet to dream of attempting. At five-feet tall and eighty pounds, I was tall and slender for an eleven-year-old but had a little boy’s cheeks and brown doe-eyes. My height drew attention to me, making it harder for me to shrink into the background, but it did not make me appear formidable. Now that

I'd made the mistake of drawing attention to myself with a formal, gaudy, and effeminate outfit, could I begin radiating a menacing air to prevent that attention from settling permanently into relentless bullying? I wasn't sure. The first order of business was to pick the least terrifying group of students to sit with. I considered sitting with the Black students, and looking for my old friend Doug once I got back there, but I was too emotionally flattened by my awful experiences so far to have the energy to attempt to cross the color line. Instead, I chose to sit in the most racially mixed part of the auditorium, among the assortment of Greek, Thai, and Hispanic students. I would join the reluctant, ad hoc chapter of Jessie Jackson's rainbow coalition! When I arrived, a lone Italian, I was less politically powerful than they. The motley crew of students saw a unique opportunity to make themselves feel better by punching down at me instead of up at bullies. I nodded hello at a tall-for-his-age Greek and sat in front of him. He jackhammer-kicked the back of my chair, yelling with each strike, "Why you wearin' a suit?" over and over again.

I leaped up, whirled on him, and used one of my mom's quaint insults, "Hey! Why don't you go take a flying leap?" Then I went to find another seat, behind a pre-pubescent girl with gray eyes, shoulder-length blonde hair, and red lipstick. Glammed up, she wasn't instantly recognizable as Debbie Cohen, a once frumpy malcontent in the mainstream classes in our last school. Ari once described her as "a self-hating Jew." She *did* use anti-Semitic slurs casually and frequently. Debbie Cohen turned around, looking blankly at my cherubic face.

"Heeeey, how's it going?" I asked, offering up a smile.

"Fag boy! You're such a fag boy! Fag boy!" She regarded my dumbfounded expression with contempt and returned her eyes to the front of the room.

Principal Polisenio appeared on stage to address the masses. Tiny and confrontational, Mr. Polisenio was Super Mario in a black suit, black tie, and black glasses, flanked on either side by a delegation of teachers and administrators, and the American and New York State flags. Three security guards stood in a row below him, guarding the front of the stage with their arms crossed before them in a power pose. "Quiet!" Mr. Polisenio bellowed, showing off his bullhorn throat. He

won instant silence, roaring that none of us were babies anymore, so we'd better behave ourselves or the teachers would break their feet off in our asses!

Oooh! Even the teachers are violent. Fantastic.

As Polisenio shouted away for what would be half an hour, Debbie Cohen turned around once every five minutes to inform me — just loud enough for me to hear, but not loud enough for anyone else — that I was a “fag boy.” I thought about how much I liked Charles Laughton, Roddy McDowall, Stephen Fry, and other actors and singers who (I had heard somewhere) were gay. I wasn't sure “fag boy” should stand as an insult. Still, her relentless hissing, contemptuous expression, and evident desire to wound whittled away at my patience. I placed my hand over my heart, smiling serenely. “I get to be gay like Capote? Wicked awesome!”

“You're a fag who likes other fags. You're a fag who likes other fags. Fag boy, fag boy. Who's a little fag boy? Fag boy!”

It dawned upon me that I knew few swear words and racial slurs to toss about, while all these other eleven-year-olds seem to know longshoreman terminology for every possible sexual position and undesirable immigrant population. My mom cursed a little, keeping to the words “fuck” and “shit” when she was in a lather about my dad looking a waitress up and down or not doing enough housework. Dad had a dirty mind, loved showing softcore lesbian vampire movies to me, and was not the most racially sensitive person in the world. Still, my half-Italian, half-German American dad had a German-aristocrat sensibility that prevented him from saying anything “rude.” He would refer to “farts” as “making a flower” and refrain from referencing the most uncouth bodily functions. He was not square enough to use terms like “cheese and crackers” instead of cursing, but he was not far from being that sort of person. I had an awareness of the “n” word and knew the racial slurs thrown at Italians — dago, WOP, and guinea — from Brian DePalma's *Untouchables* movie. My parents themselves *never* used ethnic slurs. Ever. I overheard charming terms like “kike” and “gook” for the first time on the first day of sixth grade. Also, the wide variety of terrible things to call women, such as “split tail” or “cunt” were both new to me in junior high and jarring to hear. I was not

comfortable using any of those terms and never did try very hard to get comfortable using them. Did I ever blurt out oaths? Sure. When I was upset. What words did I use? I'd learned "sonofabitch," "Jesus Christ!" and "God damn it!" from my childhood horror and science fiction heroes, Chief Brody, Ellen Ripley, and Doctor Leonard H. McCoy, so those were my go-to profanities. While the people of the Bible belt might find Ripley's blasphemy worse than the more graphic curses I'd been hearing all morning, it was clear "God damn it" wasn't going to scare anyone in the Robert Loggia School. As David Mamet would observe, confining myself to the PG-13 oaths of my movie heroes was like bringing a knife to a gunfight. Since I had no idea what to say to these people when they insulted me, I felt muzzled. Of course, the more muzzled I felt, the more likely I would resort to physical violence to protect myself when relentlessly nibbled at by a bloodthirsty school of eleven-year-old piranhas. All this preamble is to explain — not excuse — the fact that I eventually wound up striking Debbie. I had lost count of how many times she chanted "fag boy" at me before I snapped and gave her a sharp slap across the face. Mute, frozen, and wide-eyed, she stared at me. I suspect my own expression was similar. I had not intended to hit her. I'd lost total control of my arm. It shot out at her of its own accord. *Did I just slap a Jewish girl? Do I have a Nazi arm I can't control, like Dr. Strangelove? Yeah, she was taunting me, but gentlemen don't hit women! Non-Nazis don't attack Jews! What have I done?*

Debbie gaped at me. "You slapped me? You slapped a *girl*! Why would you do that?"

I stared down at my hand, which had assumed a claw shape. *What? Is it a claw now?*

Debbie kept staring, dumbstruck. "You're a *bad person*."

"Hey! Turn around!" Mr. Polisenio shouted at Debbie.

Debbie mouthed "You're a bad person" at me and turned around to face front. For the following three years, Debbie Cohen said not one more word to me. Moments after Debbie put her back to me, a piece of gum landed on my head. Plucking it out before it glued itself to my hair, I grimaced and flicked it onto the dirty, gray, tiled floor. Sticking my tongue out and making "eeew" sounds, I wiped

my saliva-covered hands off on my pants. The Aryan-looking kid next to me said, “You probably have AIDS now.”

“The AIDS virus dies with contact with the air,” I said testily.

“Nah,” the Aryan boy said. “You totally have AIDS now.”

I shot him a withering look. “Next piece of gum flies my way? I’m making you eat it.”

Assholes. I’m surrounded by total assholes. Fucking multi-ethnic Planet of the Apes around here. Except . . . no. That’s racist and insulting to Cornelius and Zira and Dr. Zaius.

I was never going to enjoy this first day of school, but my life had been made infinitely harder by just how badly this morning had been organized. With “ethnic-centric” thinking foremost in my mind, I wondered if this horror-show had been orchestrated by Mr. Poliseno. *Such incompetence. Never put an Italian in charge of anything.* I thought of an ethnic humor T-shirt my German grandmother Antje once wore, much to my father’s chagrin, since he morally disapproved of ethnic humor. It said:

Heaven is where the cooks are French, the police are British, the mechanics are German, the lovers are Italian, and everything is organized by the Swiss.

Hell is where the cooks are British, the police are German, the mechanics are French, the lovers are Swiss, and everything is organized by the Italians.

As problematic as ethnic humor was, the t-shirt seemed apt and true to me, as I found myself trapped in a hell overseen by an Italian organizer: Mr. Poliseno. After Mr. Poliseno finished threatening the students — scaring me and seemingly no one else — he ordered the homeroom teachers to collect their students, line them up, and march them to their respective classrooms. This dumbass process took forever. The morons in charge should have labeled each row in the auditorium with a homeroom teacher’s name in the first place, so the kids sat down pre-sorted. My auditorium experience might have been less colorful had they done this. Instead, these “organizers” had left the seating up to us, thereby sacrificing me to leaderless, chaotic,

and libertarian forces. Still, maybe homeroom would suck less than this sixth-grade pre-game show.

Homeroom was a rough-and-tumble assemblage of mostly Italian kids looking respectively bored, furious, sleepy, lobotomized, and arrogant. Our homeroom teacher was a hundred-and-thirty-seven-year old man in baggy golf clothing who was either too broke to retire or hated his wife and did not enjoy fishing. Tired of staring at my shoes and apologizing to the world for living, I presented myself to my new homies as a wild and crazy guy. I leapt through the doorway, spread my arms dramatically, and sang out, “Warriors! Come out to play! Wa-riorrrrrrrrrs, come out to plaaaaay-aaaaaay!” I gleefully quoted the 1979 cult film *The Warriors*, gambling some of the students would recognize the dialogue, not be offended that I was comparing them to members of near-future dystopian New York street gangs, and introduce themselves to me as fellow cult film aficionados. Instead, the bewildered students stopped, stared, and returned to whatever the fuck it was they were doing.

Since there were, once again, no assigned seats, I chose a temporary spot next to a quiet, stone-faced Thai girl I didn’t know. She wore a black leather jacket over a blue dress with white polka dots. It was exactly the kind of Rockabilly look I had been hoping to see on someone today. “I’m finding all this a bit overwhelming,” I said to her. “How are you holding up?”

The Thai girl continued staring into what I suppose would be called the middle-distance.

I added, “Look, I swear to you, I’m not that bad a guy. You can talk to me.”

The Thai girl remained quiet. *Jezuz Key-rist! It’s like tawkin’ to a fuckin’ brick wall ova heah.* I was so upset, even my thoughts were getting an angry New Yawk accent. I tried again, and said, calmly and all-friendly like: “Nice polka dots.”

The Thai girl remained quiet.

I laughed bitterly. “Leeme give you some advice. If you’re gonna succeed here, you gotta stop being a blabbermouth. Nobody likes folks who talk their ears off.”

The Thai girl remained quiet.

My eyes watered. I lowered my head on the table, hiding my face behind folded arms.

“Hey, yo!” A girl in the back of the room yelled while chewing gum (which seemed dangerous). “That kid in the suit is fucking crying, man! He’s fucking crying! Check out the kid in the suit! He’s wearing a fucking suit and he’s fucking crying!” The response to this outcry was some giggling, followed by a return to regarding me as invisible. At least nobody threw gum at me. With my face buried, I didn’t see Arwen Undómiel Pokatny approach. Arwen was an Irish and Polish girl with a round face, half-moon eyeglasses, and raven-black hair in a pull-through ponytail. She wore a black MA-1 flight jacket covered in left-wing political pins and badges, a black “Iggy and the Stooges T-shirt,” black shorts, black tights, and black Doc Martens. She placed a reassuring hand on my arm, but I was too ashamed of my tears to look up at her. I kept my head hidden in my arms.

Without changing her inflection, Arwen said in a deep, smooth, and whispery voice, “Don’t take it so hard, my friend. This place can’t be as bad as it seems.”

I spoke into my arms. “Leave me alone.”

“I’m as at sea as you are,” Arwen added. “I suspect we are not alone. Everyone else is at least a little scared. Some are more frightened than others, I’ll grant you.”

“Thank you,” I said into my arms, my eyes closed. She sounded nice, but she also sounded pretty. *Funny that people can sound pretty.* I didn’t want a pretty girl to see me crying.

I looked up a minute later. Nobody stood near me anymore. Glancing about the room, I couldn’t tell which girl had been kind to me.