

CHAPTER FOUR

The Empty Set

I will now tell you about some of the best things that happened to me during my first day of school, so that this account isn't uniformly negative. In gym, the sixth graders faced off against the eighth graders in what was supposed to be touch football. The eighth graders tackled us while a gym teacher who looked like Red Buttons made phone calls to his bookie. I have hated football with a burning passion ever since that day. In shop, I asked the bald, emaciated teacher if I *had* to cut a Playboy-bunny-shaped Plexiglas clock when I'd prefer to make a TARDIS-shaped clock. "Yes," he said, laconically. In math, Mr. Preponte — a mullet-wearing insult comedian disguised as a teacher — taught us about sets of numbers, drawing in yellow chalk on the forest green chalkboard. He first wrote up a set of all the even numbers between 2 and 10 $\{2, 4, 6, 8, 10\}$ and followed up with an "empty set" that had no numbers in it, represented by either $\{\}$ or \emptyset . Mr. Preponte pointed at the $\{\}$. "An empty set has nothing in it. Think of it as the set of all the girls in this room who find Damien Cavalieri sexually attractive." Somehow, everyone knew my name already. They turned as one, took in my mortified face, and bust a gut laughing. The math teacher rushed to add, "That was *so* wrong of me. I'm *so sorry*! I meant the number of girls *worldwide* who find Damien sexually attractive! Ha!" I would like to tell you I responded by sarcastically praising his mullet, but I only stared back at him with bloodshot eyes. Twenty minutes into the first lesson, I wanted to murder my math teacher. What a change from a year ago, when the kind and brilliant Mrs. Schuler taught me about the seven bridges of Königsberg, the wheat and chessboard problem, and the prisoner's dilemma.

After a handful of mind-bogglingly poor classes, my brightest hope became history. I had a soft spot for the subject because of the historical films and television shows my parents watched, the military strategy tabletop games dad played with me (like Risk, Stratego, and Axis and Allies), and the summers my family spent visiting battlefields, historic homes, and open-air living history museums in Colonial Williamsburg, Richmondtown, and Gettysburg. Last year, my fifth-

grade honors history teacher, the stiff and conservatively dressed Mr. Dugan, completed the established curriculum quickly enough to leave time at the end of the school year to present an unpacking of the Iran-Contra scandal that was so even-handed the students could not determine Mr. Dugan's political affiliation. Unlike Mr. Dugan, this year's teacher, Mr. Orlov, was a radical Republican who never stopped bashing Democrats. He was also a batshit crazy Korean War veteran with a tablespoon's worth of knowledge of history. He taught by leafing through our textbook in the middle of the class as we sat waiting, trying to cobble together some points on the spot by consulting the photo captions and boldfaced key terms scattered about the chapter. Orlov was just the sort of funny, pathetic, and banal evil older white man who Dabney Coleman or Gene Hackman could play in a film, only senile, charisma-free, and prone to hallucinations. Orlov had a mass of pure white curls on his head and a bushy, dazzling white mustache. Watery gray eyes alternated between haunted, confused, provoked, and flirtatious. On the first day, as with each subsequent, he began the class period by wandering over to the window, standing with his legs spread wide, and his arms up before the classroom window. "All hail, the Sun God, Ra!" Each day, he'd follow up this sunworshipper ritual with a round of attendance, during which he eyeballed the eleven-year-old girls. "Puberty starts earlier every year," he nodded sagely. "I'm seeing some sensational secondary sex characteristics flowering amongst you young ladies." Remarkably, the students of both sexes were so thunderstruck by his words they complained neither to him nor anyone else in authority. Orlov had no remarks to make about the poetic beauty of the pimples breaking out across the faces of the boys, or the melodious qualities of their cracking voices. At no point was Orlov able to recall our names, but he overcame this amnesia by calling every boy "Chief," "Bub," "Cochise," or "Hiawatha" and every girl "honey," "sweetie," "princess," and "sugar." Orlov began the first lesson by asking for the answer to the "Do Now": "Define 'BARBARIAN.'" Naturally, he pointed to yours truly, the boy in the suit. For the umpteenth time, I kicked myself for wearing it. I slouched under his gaze, "Muscular warriors who went around pillaging ancient villages for food, gold, and women."

Orlov glowered at me. “Okay, what’s your name?”

“Damien Cavalieri.”

His voice rose in a crescendo of rage. “You want to get up here and teach this class, Damien? You think you’re smarter than me? Because I knew smart guys in Korea! Guess where they are today? They’re dead! That’s what happens to smart guys! Where’d you learn this stuff so young that you think you’re smarter than me?”

I sat back up. “*Conan the Barbarian* with Arnold Schwarzenegger. But the barbarians were good guys. They fought James Earl Jones’ serpent cult.”

Somewhere in the back, Arwen Undómiel Pokatny giggled. Her voice rang out, “Damien! ‘What is good in life?’”

I turned around to face her and started mimicking Arnold’s thick Austrian accent. “‘To crush your enemies, see them driven before you, and hear the lamentations of their women!’”

Orlov waved an impatient hand to silence us. His eyes were losing focus as his memories of the Korean War flooded over him. “Think you’re hot shit now, Damian? Well, one of these days, your prostate is gonna swell to the size of a watermelon. A watermelon, I say!”

Now my eyes glazed over. Good memories of past ALEC classes washed over me. In the fifth-grade ALEC science class, they taught us about evolution, and we discussed the greenhouse effect. In my ALEC civics class, we debated the pros and cons of the death penalty and immigration, and learned how Altamont, the murder of Sharon Tate, and the election of Richard Nixon laid the groundwork for the Reagan Revolution. I missed my ALEC psychology class, where we studied the bystander effect by learning about the Queens stabbing murder of Kitty Genovese, who could have been rescued by any one of thirty-eight witnesses, only none intervened. During this heartbreaking lesson, I became certain that, had I been outside of her apartment building on March 13, 1964, I would have been just as big a coward as those thirty-eight. Her blood would have been on my hands as well. I hoped that, should I ever encounter a new Kitty Genovese, I would be man enough to intervene, instead of do nothing.

“Are you with me?” Orlov barked. “Pay attention!”

“Can I have the bathroom pass?” I asked. “I’m feeling under the weather.”

The class cracked up. Several students mimicked me, delighted by my use of such quaint terminology. “‘Under the weather’ he said! ‘Under the weather!’”

Mitchell and I entered the pale-blue-tiled lavatory at almost precisely the same time, both holding a vinyl-record-sized hunk of wood with “HALL PASS” written on it in navy blue magic marker. We stood by the sinks as someone in the middle of three lavatory stalls moaned in agony over the world’s worst case of constipation. Mitchell asked the boy if he needed the nurse and the boy replied he was fine. Mitchell seemed pleased by our chance meeting. “How’s it going?”

My shoulders slumped. I somehow managed to avoid bursting into tears. “Awful.”

Mitchell nodded. “The gifted class isn’t what it used to be. I had to put two bullies in their place when they started mocking the quirkier kids.”

Mitchell was a hero, just like his late father, who had died tragically in a freak accident a few years back. A “Central Park Horse and Carriage Ride” horse had broken free of its harness and trotted into multiple lanes of fast-moving car traffic. Mitchell’s father, an uninvolved bystander, had intervened to lead the horse back to the safety of the sidewalk. When he reached out to grab the horse’s bridle, it got spooked, reared up, and kicked him in the head, killing him. Since his father’s passing, Mitchell had been raised by his young, widowed mother, a feminist nurse, with an assist from his older sister and active, gregarious grandparents. Mitchell, like the other surviving members of his family, had chosen to honor his fallen father by living life according to the same code: do good whenever you can, even if you place yourself in danger in the process. Personally, I worried when Mitchell would place himself in harm’s way for others, especially given what happened to his father. After all, my mother’s go-to advice was *keep your head down and stay neutral*. “You sticking your nose in where it doesn’t belong again?” I teased. “My momma told me if it didn’t concern me or the family directly, don’t get involved.”

"I had to chase away some idiot named Dietrich Krebs from bothering Tsvi-Mayer."

"Tsvi-Mayer? He's cool! He has a stutter? So what? Damn. What's wrong with people?"

Mitchell shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe he's bitter his name is Dietrich Krebs?"

"What's so hard about being nice? Do people get up in the morning and say to themselves, 'I'm gonna be the asshole at school today!' How is that their ambition in life?"

There was a tiny splash. The boy in the middle stall whooped with joy. "Yes!"

"Congratulations, man," I said to the unseen porcelain punisher. "Mitchell, how is this school like this? The students and teachers are in a competition to see who's the stupidest, meanest, and most violent. We need a permanent S.W.A.T. team here, or something."

Mitchell shook his head. "Do me a favor. Never read a book by Ayn Rand. Putting armed guards in this school would just add to the total number of bullies in the building and hand heavy ordinance to the most aggressive ones. What are cops but people like Dietrich Krebs all grown up? They'd turn this place into a concentration camp. The school is shit because the politicians don't pay teachers enough. Reagan hasn't socialized medicine, passed the Equal Rights Amendment, or protected the power of unions. In fact, he's done the opposite, and is flushing our whole society down the toilet. The working-classes are feeling the kick in the pants first."

"Yeah, but at least Reagan freed the hostages." I didn't understand anything Mitchell was saying, but I wasn't willing to dismiss it out of hand, no matter how full of non sequiturs his speech appeared to be. "Wait. This school sucks cuz we don't have Canadian health coverage?"

"If the broader society is cruel and Darwinian, schools are going to be cruel and Darwinian." Mitchell made a Möbius strip in the air with his finger. "Everything is connected."

That was the first thing he said that I agreed with instinctively. "Yeah, that tracks."

The boy in the middle stall was back to grunting as he gave birth to a new piece of poo.

Mitchell said, “Get this: Our history teacher, Dave Orange, may be certifiably insane! During attendance, Dietrich Krebs yelled out, ‘I’m here, Agent Orange.’ Turns out Mr. Orange was a Vietnam veteran with vivid memories of Agent Orange attacks. He flipped out at being called that, pushed his desk over on its side, and ran up to Krebs like he was gonna throttle the kid. (Frankly, I would’ve supported him if he had.) Mr. Orange raved for three minutes about how none of us would ever understand Vietnam. Then he started crying and ran away.”

“Yikes!”

“Five minutes after he’d gone, we were all sitting there in the classroom, waiting for him to come back, feeling sad and confused. Principal Poliseno walked by, realized no class was going on, and asked us all where ‘Dave’ was: Dave Orange. Imitating Cheech and Chong, a couple of kids called out, ‘Dave’s not here, man.’ (I have to admit, that was pretty funny.) We told him what happened. Poliseno chewed out Krebs and then ran off to find Dave to make sure he wasn’t trying to hang himself in a utility closet somewhere.”

“Jesus Christ!”

“I know!”

I put both my hands in my pockets and sighed. “I’ve got an unstable military vet for a history teacher, too. Mr. Orlov.”

“No!” Mitchell’s face blanched. “Not Orlov! He was in my grandfather’s unit in Korea!”

“No way!”

“Grandpa said he was an asshole in 1951, and still is. They go to the same church now.”

“Whoa. Imagine knowing *that* guy for thirty-five frickin’ years.”

“Grandpa thinks of Orlov like a poltergeist who follows him around the world, haunting him with endless assholery.”

I couldn’t help myself and chuckled.

“No, it isn’t funny. Orlov drives my grandfather nuts. Now *you* have to deal with him?”

“Me and Mr. Orlov are gonna be fast friends.” I intertwined my fingers. “Like this.”

Mitchell shook his head and muttered something I didn’t hear under his breath.

After all this terrible preamble, I just knew my Italian class was going to be the greatest class I had ever taken, or ever would take. Naturally, I walked into a spitball firing, paper airplane flying classroom from hell. The class was a free-for-all. I had to shut down a little, emotionally, to shield myself from sensory overload. Foot tapping impatiently, a teacher with crystal blue frog eyes and lustrous, shoulder-length blonde hair stood with her arms across her chest. As she waited for the chaos to die down, Stefano Manganiello — a tiny, baby-faced boy with spiked black hair — scurried about the room, grabbing the hands of the male students, placing them over his crotch, and yelling at the top of his lungs, “Caught! Caught trying to grab my balls! Caught!” For the sake of variety, Stefano would sometimes run up to a random boy, ask, “What’s the capital of Thailand?” and punch in the groin anyone dumb enough to reply “Bangkok.” The blonde teacher bellowed a demand for him to stop. He responded by leaping upon his desk and singing “Gloria” by Laura Branigan.

“What’s all this *mishegoss*?” I breathed. Since I like to comfort myself in moments of stress by mentally evoking a movie, I chose to imagine myself trapped in the insanity of Dorry’s Tavern in *Gremlins* — a pub overwhelmed by evil, rampaging Muppets. Yes, the Italian kids were the Gremlins. Meanwhile, the six non-Italian kids were as befuddled and frightened as I was, hoping and praying the tornado would pass. *They* were here to learn, but *not the Italians*. I was shocked and confused. I couldn’t fathom why *Italians* would manically derail *Italian class*. Didn’t they have even a trace of ethnic pride? I wondered how many trailblazing Italian American educators had to infiltrate the New York City Board of Education years ago to forge intermediate school Italian language education in the five boroughs. Was this how their efforts were repaid? *My mother wouldn’t behave like this if she were here. She would be sitting quietly, keen to learn the language her parents had jettisoned in the name of becoming real Americans.* I felt the same. What accounted for the gulf between our attitudes? Thinking back on the class as I write these words, I believe I have the solution to the mystery that perplexed me at the time: the incremental cultural assimilation of my parents and their parents. My maternal great-grandparents had emigrated to America from Naples late in life and had a difficult time

adjusting culturally and learning English. They raised their children to speak English. My mother grew up speaking English exclusively. The story was much the same for my dad's family. As a fourth-generation immigrant, I came to this class with as little knowledge of Italian as my great-grandparents had of English. In contrast, most of *these* Italian kids grew up with both English and Italian in their Staten Island homes and spoke both languages, because it was their parents or grandparents who had emigrated. *I* needed this class. *They* didn't.

Complicating matters further, many of these kids were Sicilian, spoke a Sicilian dialect, and resented the fact that this class would be about learning Toscano: a nationally standardized dialect indebted to the writings of Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Machiavelli, and Manzoni. These Staten Island kids were here to learn a language from scratch that they had grown up with and "already knew." The only reason they were here, then, was to hear, "Speak Toscano, not Sicilian!" from the teacher time and again. Of course, the inference would be that Sicily was "nothing" next to Florence. All they needed to see was the word "Toscano" on the blackboard the first day, and they knew what the rest of the year held in store: the teacher would harangue them endlessly for reverting to colloquialisms they had picked up at home, instead of speaking textbook Italian. To prevent the teacher from making them experience both relentless region-based-humiliation and mind-numbing boredom being drilled on all the Italian they already knew — "Today we will learn the months of the year, class!" (*Yawn*) — they began acting out two seconds into the first lesson. It was a brilliant plan. After all, if the teacher couldn't get a word in edgewise, she couldn't bore them to tears or make them feel bad about their dialect.

Meanwhile, I was here, a Neapolitan American, to learn Toscano because I knew *no* form of Italian: not Sicilian, not Toscano, not anything. I was happy to do it. I had come here, by choice, to rediscover a lost heritage. Once again, my attitude placed me in an "establishment position" where I was eager to embrace "upper class" Italian mores and a learning environment that cast the other Italian kids in the role of peasants. No wonder they hated me and my suit. I remain largely ignorant of the history of this conflict, but I assume I was — unintentionally and indirectly — taking the sides of Italian fascists

with a record of striving to eradicate all the regional languages of Italy using Toscano as their main weapon. Not only was this not my intention, I was today years old when I realized that such a view of my intentions was even possible. And yet, square as I can be at times, I have never considered myself “establishment.” Then and now, I saw myself as culturally inferior to these kids, who spoke at least a dialect of Italian, even if it wasn’t “proper” Italian. I was in awe of their bilingual superpowers. When I overheard the girls speaking Sicilian to one another, I found myself as erotically thrilled as Jamie Lee Curtis when Kevin Kline and John Cleese spoke Italian to her in *A Fish Called Wanda*. In my mind, these Sicilian American kids were not the peasants. I was the peasant trying to claw my way up to their plane from the bottom of my monolingual pit. I was the fake Italian hoping to become a real one.

What was the upshot of all this? On that first day, I concluded that I would probably learn nothing this year because of all the screaming, singing, and carrying on. How could I possibly learn to speak Italian under these circumstances? *This* was the class I gave up ALEC for?

Two tiny, steely eyed music teachers stood before an astonishingly quiet and attentive gathering of forty sixth graders assembled in the auditorium. Mrs. Vitali, a stocky woman with short, spiked, gray hair, spoke first. “You are here because you want a music minor. Those with experience playing an instrument will audition here. Anyone interested in chorus will audition with Mrs. Laird in her classroom.” Mrs. Laird, a slim woman with a jet-black bowl cut, nodded. I raised my hand and asked Mrs. Vitali if anyone who had never played an instrument could audition. She replied, “I prefer students with experience. What instrument are you interested in?”

“Flute, guitar, or piano.” I picked them because they struck me as best for solo playing.

“We don’t need anyone else on keyboard.” Mrs. Vitali walked to the auditorium’s elevated stage, poked through the array of instruments she had laid out, and produced a flute and acoustic guitar. As she

handed me the flute, I forced the extrovert side of my personality to the forefront and slipped into a chatty mode. “I like my dad’s Christmas album with James Galway. It has ‘I Saw Three Ships.’ And his Jethro Tull vinyl, *Aqualung*.” This piece of trivia intended to foster intimacy bored Mrs. Vitali. I looked furtively at the other students, who were either equally disinterested or watching attentively, hoping the boy in the gray pinstripe suit would humiliate himself. I placed my lips around the mouth hole and blew. Silence.

“Pretend you’re blowing into a soda bottle.” Mrs. Vitali’s voice was a model of practiced patience. I tried again. Nothing. I tried three more times. I made spitting sounds.

“Damien blows!” one student yelled. I didn’t get it.

“Okay, that’s more than enough of that.” Mrs. Vitali took the flute from me and handed me the guitar. As my fingers curled around the big-hipped, big-bosomed wooden body, I couldn’t shake the feeling that the guitar was a curvaceous woman. All thumbs, I couldn’t get a proper grip on Galatea, play her, and avoid taking liberties. Palms sweaty and terrified of dropping it, I searched for a less suggestive handhold. *Pardon me, ma’am. I know we’ve only just met. Please excuse me for strumming your strings.* Mrs. Vitali let out an impatient sigh and swiped the guitar from my grasp. “I don’t know what you were doing there, but you don’t seem comfortable. Instrument playing just isn’t in your blood. You should audition for chorus.”

“Singing?” I liked to sing along to my parents’ collection of vintage music records as I danced around the turntable in our family basement but singing with others in public performance was an alien and disturbing notion. “Girls sing. Boys don’t sing.” Thanks to what I had heard of rock, folk, country, and hair metal, I was under the impression that women sang songs and men either spoke their way through songs, like Johnny Cash, or screamed their way through songs, like Axl Rose. Bob Dylan, Rod Stewart, and other male singers annoyed me.

“I need more altos,” Mrs. Laird said. “You come with me.” Mrs. Laird looked over my shoulder at the others. “Everyone interested in chorus, come with me.”

Two other boys and twenty girls followed Mrs. Laird and me out of the room and down the hallway. *I'm surrounded by girls? Where are all the boys? What in hell am I supposed to talk to girls about? I bet none of them like dimetrodons!*

We filed into Mrs. Laird's music room, a long affair with three rows of seats. At the front of the room was Mrs. Laird's upright piano and a black chalkboard with a grand staff painted onto it, with a treble clef painted on the upper staff and bass clef on the lower. An overhead projector on a dolly cast the lyrics to "The Cat Came Back" on the side wall. The facing wall had windows with a captivating view of the faculty parking lot seen through open venetian blinds.

The auditions commenced. Each prospective chorus member took turns trying to match with their voices the notes Mrs. Laird played on her saloon piano. Dry-throated, tentative, and quivering, I sang off-key throughout my first effort. My (undiagnosed) asthmatic breathing was odd to boot. Mrs. Laird's expression revealed a determination to wring better from me. "Try again." I took a breath. She played more notes. I matched them perfectly. Mrs. Laird looked at me with relief. "As I suspected. You choke when you're nervous, but you're good when you hit your stride. Don't be nervous."

It was hard not to be nervous being one of only three boys in the class. The first two rows held sopranos. The three altos were sent to the third row, in back of the room. Since no one's voice was deeper than an alto level yet, that was the extent of the sorting. My fellow altos were Viola Costa and Aurora Robertazzi. They had been left back twice, were two years older than the rest of us, and well into puberty. Their world-weary air was one giveaway that they did not belong among us. Their enormous boobs provided additional evidence. They were so curvaceous they made the rest of the girls in chorus look like Charlie Brown. Viola wore Daisy-Duke shorts and an unbuttoned white blouse over a white bustier. Blue-glitter eyeshadow, blood-red lipstick, and blood-red fingernails contributed to an over-made-up look. Her partner-in-crime, Aurora, wore jeans and a turtle-neck sweater, both two sizes too small, and too much make-up. After whispering conspiratorially to one another, Viola and Aurora sat on either side of me. I felt keenly aware of being eleven years old, five-feet tall, and

gawky. These girls were fourteen, five-four, voluptuous, bathed in perfume, and terrifying. They were the predators. I was the prey.

“Nice suit,” Viola whispered in my left ear. “So hot.”

My brain knew enough to be insulted and humiliated, but my crotch didn’t get the memo.

“Does anyone have a stapler?” Mrs. Laird called out to the class. She fiddled with music at her piano. I reached into my backpack, produced a stapler, and brought it to her. She used it and handed it right back. I returned to my seat and slid the stapler into my canvas messenger bag.

“What else you got in there?” Aurora asked, mocking me for being too-well-prepared.

“Deck of cards if you want to play Spades later.”

Digging her red nails into my thigh, Aurora spoke into my ear in a breathy voice. “I want to play with your cock later.” At my other side, Viola coordinated her attack with Aurora’s, pursing her lips and blowing into my other ear. I flushed beat red and looked down at my shoes. *They’re making fun.* Of course, like an idiot, I was in danger of becoming aroused by flirtatious bullying. I hated myself for it. I tried to make my voice firm, but it quivered. “Knock it off.”

“Knock it off,” the girls said to each other, perfectly imitating my shaky tone.

I tried to focus on Mrs. Laird, who explained we would be singing “The Cat Came Back” today. Viola continued the tag-team verbal teasing by directing her next thoughts to Aurora. “Why wait? Why not give him a blowjob right here, right now, in the back of the room?”

Incredible as it might seem in this day and age, I had grown up without cable television in the era before the invention of the internet, so I had managed to reach the sixth grade without ever finding out what a blowjob was. My mind raced as I struggled to use context clues to figure out what it was. *What are they offering me? I take my dick out and they blow on it like they blow in my ear? Tickle it and make it get bigger? No. That can’t be right. Wait. The movie Parenthood. Mary Steenburgen unzipped Steve Martin when he was driving, started sucking on his dick, and they got into a car accident. If that’s it, shouldn’t it be a “suck” job? Man, with all the stupid vampire sex movies Dad showed*

me growing up — Santo vs. the Vampire Women, Lust for a Vampire, The Vampire Lovers — *nobody ever used the term “blowjob” for nuthin’!*

“Whip it out,” Aurora whispered. “I want to see it.”

I forced a smile. “You two are funny. You’re too much.”

Aurora turned “Whip it out” into a whispered mantra. She was remarkably adept at making her yearning sound as genuine as possible.

Little joke between friends. If I’m gonna be teased relentlessly, this is much better than getting tripped, gum spat in my hair, or called “fag” every minute of every day. This is almost nice in comparison, right? Two older chicks with big boobs flirting with me. No problem here. I mean, hey, isn’t one of them wearing lingerie instead of a shirt, for God’s sake? That’s cool! Daisy Duke shorts? Bonus. This is a win-win. Too bad they’re kinda destroying me with this crap. Making me feel like total shit. My stomach was starting to churn. “Okay, that’s enough.”

Aurora rubbed my shoulder, feeling the material of my suit. “This suit is making me wet. My pussy is crying out for you.”

Okay, at least I have some idea of what she’s talking about now because of Jaws. My penis was beginning to wake up in my pants. I attempted to use telepathy to will it back into its usual state of limp submission. No, no! You go back to sleep, moron. It’s a con.

Viola traced her blood red fingernails up and down my thigh. She dug her nails deep into my pant leg, as if trying to puncture the skin underneath. “Whip it out. Fuck my mouth.”

Guess confirmed. Now I know what a blowjob is. Thanks for the assist, Parenthood.

Aurora joined in. “Cum inside my mouth. I wanna swallow it. Suck you dry.”

Oh, great. Sex bullying in stereo. Even more graphic. What happened to the guy who just slapped Debbie Cohen? Where’s he when I need him? The problem was, I was so ashamed of myself for hitting a girl, I promised myself never to raise a hand to a woman again. How could I fight back if I had banished Dr. Strangelove for good? “Cut it out, or I’m gonna hit you,” I lied.

“Ooooooh!” cooed Aurora. “Are you gonna spank us? With a paddle with holes in it?”

“What are you gonna do?” asked Viola.

I had nothing. No idea. *Wouldn't threatening to go to the teacher just sound stupid? What would I say to Mrs. Laird: "Please, make the girls stop flirting with me?"* I crossed my arms in front of my chest, scowled, and looked at my shoes. "This is getting a bit mean, you know."

Viola pretended to be getting more excited by the moment. Her breathing turned ragged. Her chest heaved up and down in her bustier. "But we need you, little boy. We need you inside us. We want to eat your tiny hairless dick."

The blood pounded in my ears. I could barely hear anything Mrs. Laird was saying. Nobody else was in the room but us. I was consumed by rage, shame, fear, and volcanic sexual arousal. "Please stop it."

Viola pretended to be shocked and offended. "You think we don't mean it? Can't you see how much we love you? You're the boy we've been waiting for all our lives. We *love* you."

"That's so not cool. Don't ever say you love someone if you don't mean it." They were about to ruin the word "love" for me for good. Now I understood how Cordelia felt in *King Lear*.

Viola looked past me at Aurora. "He can't know how wet I am right now."

"I need to know," Aurora whispered. "Do you have hair on your dick yet?"

"He hasn't hit puberty," Viola giggled. "I bet he's got nothing down there."

No, I didn't have pubic hair yet. No, I had never once ejaculated.

"He's so tiny and innocent," Viola smirked.

"In his cute little suit, like a little businessman," Aurora said. "Wanna play boss and secretary, little boy?"

I lowered my head between my legs, folding myself into a seated fetal position.

"Are you alright back there?" Mrs. Laird called out, finally noticing something odd.

I looked up. "Stomachache. Can I go to the bathroom?"

"Are you going to throw up?" Mrs. Laird asked. "If you aren't, wait 'til after class. And there's been a lot of talking in that back row. Keep it down." I nodded and said nothing. Mrs. Laird resumed her lecture about what the coming year would entail.

“Thanks for not ratting us out,” Aurora whispered.

I exhaled through my nose. “Please tell me you aren’t going to do this to me every lesson. If this is about the suit, I promise I’ll wear better clothes tomorrow.”

Viola whispered, “As soon as I get home from school, I’m gonna strip naked in my living room. I’m gonna spread out across the couch, and I’m gonna finger-fuck myself until I cum hard. And I’m gonna do it imagining I’m getting pounded by your adorable little hairless cock. And I’m gonna scream out your name when I cum.”

I held my head in my hands like I was massaging a migraine out of my temple. I tried to conceal as much of my face as I could. I had no idea what kind of expression I wore. It must have been grotesque in the extreme: I couldn’t have been more aroused, humiliated, enraged, and nauseated all at once.