

CHAPTER FIVE

How Was Your Day?

Hyperventilating and drenched in perspiration, I barged into the outer chamber of Principal Polisenio's office. The beige, non-descript waiting room had a dark ash finished secretary's desk with a faux Fiddle Leaf Tree in a pot beside it. Polisenio's secretary, Ms. Pac-Man, asked what I wanted. Gasping for air, I requested an audience with the man himself. His Super-Mario-like presence filled his office doorway, the logo of the New York City Board of Education hanging just overhead. "Yes?" He made no gesture to invite me in.

I huffed, holding my side when I felt a mystery twinge of pain. "I turned down a spot in the gifted program here. It was a mistake. I've changed my mind. I want in."

"I don't understand," Polisenio said. "The rosters were triple-checked for accuracy."

I dragged the back of my hand across my forehead to wipe away some of the sweat. "I wanted to take Italian, but there's a policy that people in gifted classes can't take Italian here, so I was placed in a mainstream class. I want to be in the gifted program and take Italian. Or be in honors and take Spanish. Whichever you allow."

Mr. Polisenio frowned. "There's no such policy."

I continued to struggle to control my ragged breathing. I was an asthmatic and didn't know it. I wouldn't be diagnosed for another thirteen years. I was also mildly bipolar and wouldn't be prescribed Bupropion until I was forty (on November 9, 2016, for obvious reasons). "Why was my fifth-grade teacher told about that policy when he called to ask about me?"

Mr. Polisenio shook his head. "We don't have that policy."

"Great. I'll take Italian and the gifted class, then."

Mr. Polisenio shook his head. "Listen, I don't know who you think you are barging in and making demands, but if you were placed in a mainstream class, then that's where you belong, especially since this policy you are referring to is a total fiction."

I pulled myself up to my full height. "*I am Damien Cavalieri!*"

“‘I am Damien Cavalieri!’ Like that’s supposed to mean something to me.”

“I’m a gifted student. I deserve to be in the gifted class.”

“Oh, yeah? Where’s your proof?”

A prideful Klingon, I pounded my fist against my chest. “In the pudding! Talk to me for five minutes. You’ll see I’m brilliant! Head and shoulders above any other sixth grader.”

“You seem to think highly of yourself!”

“I do! I give myself four stars . . . *out of four!*”

Mr. Polisenio waved me away dismissively, “Yeah, yeah. Tell your story walkin’.” He stepped back into his office and closed the door.

The yellow school bus dropped me off in the same place it had picked me up a lifetime ago that morning, on Willowbrook Road across the street from a ditch with a stream running from the backyards of the neighborhood houses into a pond in nearby Willowbrook Park. Surprisingly, Tony Nocerino and his band of Merry Men split up and went home after spending the bus ride flipping me off at regular intervals. Normally, they spent every afternoon frolicking beside the stream, listening to Guns N’ Roses, and throwing rocks at the cardinals in the White Oak trees. I was eager to flee enemy occupied territory for the safety of my home, but I didn’t trust myself not to disintegrate into tears in front of my parents the second I walked through the door. The relief of being home would be too much for me. Would some exposure to nature give me some small sense of calm before I stepped over the threshold, into our living room? I also wasn’t sure how much information I wanted to dump on my parents about my day. So much of it had been filled with abject misery. Compounding the problem, there wasn’t much I imagined they could do to solve my problems, except send me to Catholic school, where I wasn’t sure I wanted to go. I crossed the street. Slipping on the slickness of the grass but gaining surer footing as I made my way downhill into the ditch, I reached the rocky bottom at the edge of the small stream. From where I stood, I could see the sky, the trees, and the stream, but

my view of the street above and the houses across it was obscured by the slope I had just descended. The area was dotted with White Oak trees. I saw one cardinal. This little waterway was a delightful secret in the middle of such suburban sprawl. No wonder Tony came here every day. I counted myself lucky I would have this one chance to enjoy it. I didn't want to stay long because, with my luck, the jackasses would be here any second. As afraid as I was of discovery, I needed this. I was grateful to have it. The gentle sounds the stream made as it flowed past my feet were already having a medicating effect on me. I smiled, remembering the absurd Mr. Orlov and that maniac in Italian running around yelling "Bangkok!" and punching people in the balls. Then, even those colorful characters left my thoughts. The stream washed the day from my mind. I loved nature. The best part of Staten Island was the Greenbelt Conservancy. I lived in the Borough of Parks.

Drifting on the wind, caressing my ears, the dulcet tones of Axl Rose moved closer. Someone was playing "Welcome to the Jungle" on a boombox. The song was now directly above me. Tony stopped at the top of the ditch, looking down on me. The Merry Men were behind him. "Yo! Cavalieri! That's our creek! Step off!"

"I like it," I called back up. "I kinda wanna keep it for myself!"

Tony bent over and scooped up a round, smooth, palm-sized rock. The others picked up rocks of their own. "You had your chance to join us this morning. You read *Jaws* instead."

Ten rocks flew towards me. One connected with my stomach. Another my right temple. A third my left knee. Mercifully, the others missed. I toppled over backwards, sinking my well-dressed butt into the muddy creek bank and banging the back of my head on the wet rocks. The group of boys skidded down the grass to join me beside the water. I sat up, looking frantically for an escape route. I struggled to my feet. Three more rocks struck me in my back. One bounced off the top of my head. I lost consciousness and fell face forward into the grass.

I didn't know where I was when I woke up and rolled over onto my back. Looking to my side, I saw the Merry Men sitting, sharing a bag of Twizzlers, listening to a new song that seemed to be about

dancing in a brownstone. I propped myself up on my elbows. There was something obscuring my vision on my left eyeglass lens. Drying blood. Bruised and wet, I wasn't sure if my damp clothes had soaked up more water or blood.

The Billy-Idol haired Bobby Mammolito nodded at me. "You okay over there?" I gave Bobby a dumbfounded look. Bobby pressed on. "Lemme ax you something. If you wake up in a tent, and your pants are unzipped, and your underwears are sticky, and your asshole hurt, but you didn't see anybody around, would you tell anyone?"

"I don't know." I grimaced. "I guess not."

Bobby brightened. "Great! Wanna come camping with me?"

Half of the others burst out laughing. The rest flinched at the joke. Tony eyed Bobby warily. "What's with the gay shit?"

"Chill out, man." Bobby hocked a loogie into the stream. "It's just a joke."

Tony pointed an angry finger at me. "None of us fucked yur ass when you wuz asleep, just soz ya know!"

"Jolly decent of you, Tony," I said in an ineptly recreated "Received Pronunciation" British accent. I glanced about for an escape route, but had trouble focusing my eyes or attention. I had a distracting sense of déjà vu. There was something "Stephen King" about this tableau. Was this real life, or had I wandered into *Stand by Me*? Or that phonebook-sized novel with the demon clown that Mitchell was telling me about? Which one had rocks and bullies by a lake?

"All right, you little bastards! Get the fuck away from my son!"

All of us looked up to see my mother standing on the high ground in her ice gray polo coat, staring down upon us. She held aloft a massive rock and a small plastic grocery bag filled to bursting with other huge rocks she had gathered along the roadside above. The petite forty-three-year-old with a round face and curly, shoulder-length black hair was Italy's answer to Shirley Temple, Betty Boop, and the Utz potato chips girl. Adorable as she was usually, she was now far less cute and far more red-faced with rage. She looked ready to murder.

"What're you gonna do, bitch?" Tony shot back, "Throw rocks at us?"

A rock the size of a volleyball hurtled towards Tony, striking him

in the collarbone. He dropped to the ground. Faced with the options of racing uphill towards the madwoman and her rock arsenal or sprinting off the other way into the backyards of the suburban homes flanking the stream, the others chose retreat. Bobby Mammolito led the retreat, winking at me before he headed off. I wasn't sure what the wink meant. An apology for the rock assault? An olive branch? An acknowledgement that my mom was cool? A promise to lead the others away from Mom when the Merry Men were itching for a rumble? Who knew? I was too tired to care.

Tony hurled a curse at my mom, scrambled to his feet, and ran off after the others, wondering why they were running when they should have been able to beat her in a fight.

I stood up and looked at Mom, who watched the retreating figures until they disappeared. She said to me out of the corner of her mouth, "Can't you walk three blocks home without something like this happening? I can't let you out of my sight for a minute!"

"I know, Mom." I lumbered up the grassy slope and stood beside her. "I feel the same."

Our blue Oldsmobile Cutlass Ciera was half on the grass, half on the street, with the passenger door open. I got in. Mom slipped into the driver's seat. We drove three blocks home.

I sat at the circular oak kitchen table, underneath the tan rotary phone mounted on our hot orange kitchen wall. The rest of the wall was decorated with two of Mom's wooden-framed crewel embroidery scenes — one of an old mill and another of a 19th-century general store interior. Mom had set me up at the kitchen table with a hot cup of tea and three Stella D'oro S-shaped Italian breakfast treats. The tea and cookies had helped, but I still stared sullenly at my snacks, holding my bandaged forehead.

My dad crept into the room, eager to check up on me. With his 1970s pornstache, blue checkered shirt, cotton dockers, and brown penny loafers, my eccentric and loveably reactionary dad looked like Nicolas Cage in *Moonstruck* and used Bruce Dern's most unusual facial expressions and mannerisms. If Dad hadn't looked like a prominent Italian American actor, few would peg him as Italian. Admittedly, he loved eating Italian food as often as possible and had affection

for Mario Lanza. He was familiar with his Italian roots, knowing his Italian-speaking grandparents were natives of Naples and Salerno. His father had been bi-lingual, but dad spoke only English and knew of no living relatives in Italy. Despite these Italian connections and how little he knew about his German relatives and ancestry, he took greater pride in his German bloodline. He fancied himself a German aristocrat and assumed many upper-class mannerisms (when he wasn't behaving like a lecherous Benny Hill comedy sketch character). When asked what part of Italy he came from, he would say, "North. Far north. Munich." Dad was a character.

Dad took a seat next to me, pretending he hadn't heard about my misadventures through Mom. "So, how was your day?"

"Swell." I burst out laughing, provoking dad to chortle. Dad hadn't been sure I would recognize his *Jaws* movie quote until I had responded with the correct follow-up line. In the film, Chief Brody was wrongfully blamed for the death of a little boy who was eaten by the shark, when it had been Mayor Vaughn's fault little Alex Kintner had died. The Chief is brooding at his dining room table when Matt Hooper arrives, sits beside him and asks, "How was your day?" They laugh at the graveyard humor and share a drink. (Hooper is *way* nicer in the movie.)

When dad and I recovered our laughing fit, I nodded approvingly at him. "You know exactly who you're dealing with."

Dad had a broader grin, a more prominent chin, and bigger eyes than me. I tried not to be jealous that he would make the better Joker. "Tell you what," Dad said softly, "if the kids at school are jerks, to hell with them. Have your tea. Have your cookies. To hell with them. Put them right out of your mind. Read a comic book. Watch a movie. Do something you like to do. Don't do homework. When you're sad, always do something you enjoy to get out of it."

I took another bite of the Stella D'Oro cookie. "Good advice."

Lying in bed that night, I remembered every insult. Every disdainful face. Every bruise and cut and piece of wet gum landing in my hair. I hadn't the first idea how to stop obsessing over these things. I'd heard rumors about masturbation being fun and stress relieving, but I hadn't really tried touching myself before. I knew I wasn't supposed to, as a

Roman Catholic, but I was also at a loss how to get through the night if I couldn't sleep. Looking up into Kelly Bundy's hazel eyes, I reached under the elastic waist of my pajama pants and massaged my penis. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine Kelly going down on me, but Aurora and Viola drove her out of my mind, invading my thoughts. Their mocking faces wouldn't go away when I wished them gone. Since I was stuck with them, I tried to imagine them saying the same words to me in my bedroom they whispered in class. This time, they spoke every piece of pornographic dialogue with total conviction. (No. Who was I kidding? When they offered me head, even in the privacy of my room, in my imagination, they were only kidding. Only teasing. Only bullying. The soul-flaying mockery was back in their voices.) After five minutes of frustration and humiliation, I gave up fantasizing about the girls from Chorus. My effort to warp grim reality into something more acceptable hadn't work for an instant. I knew it was a lie. I couldn't begin to make myself aroused.

Those two found the prospect of sex with me endlessly hysterical. Maybe the idea of sex with me is fundamentally funny. I am eleven, after all. I'm just a kid. Or maybe all women will always feel that way about me, no matter how much my body matures? If these two babes thought the very idea of sex with me was absurd, wouldn't every other girl? The number of women worldwide who are attracted to me is an empty set.