

I Remember Amnesia

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Clifford Irving

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First Edition: October 2006

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN etc.

for Julie

I asked for strength
and God gave me difficulties to make me strong.
I asked for wisdom
and God gave me problems to solve.
I asked for prosperity
and God gave me a brain and muscles to work.
I asked for courage
and God gave me dangers to overcome.
I asked for love
and God gave me people to help.
I asked for favors
and God gave me opportunities.
I received nothing I wanted.
I received everything I needed.

— Anon.

Six years ago, I killed a man. I was twelve years old when it happened. He was the father of my best friend, Amy Bedford.

Did I murder him? That was for the judge to decide after the fact-finding inquiry, which is what they called a juvenile trial in the State of New York. It took place in the Family Court in the town of Riverhead, which is in Suffolk County on Eastern Long Island.

At the arraignment in Riverhead, I pled not guilty to the charges. The Honorable John T. Walsh was chief judge of the juvenile division. He peered down at me from the bench. He was a huge man with a face like an old brown leather bag. I wasn't frightened, but I did feel dwarfed.

He growled, "You're William R. Braverman?"

"Yes, sir."

"Usually called Billy?"

"Yes, sir."

"Says in these papers I'm holding here that you're twelve years old. That a fact, or is someone playing games with me?"

"It's a fact, your honor."

Judge Walsh shook his head in disbelief, even though he knew I was telling the truth, and he cocked his head like some kind of dark, super-large, stressed-out bird.

"You're not quite the youngest human being ever came before me in this court-room," he said, "but you may be the smallest."

He turned to his court reporter and quickly added: "Strike that."

I was careful not to smile. My lawyer, Ginger Casey, had told me: "Billy, you nearly killed a man. Look penitent, even if you don't feel that way."

My family was there in the courtroom to offer me all the support they could muster. My mother, founder of a family of mutual funds, sat behind me in the first row. At her side was my father, senior partner in a New York law firm. Ginger Casey wasn't a member of my dad's firm—Ginger had a small law office next to a pickle factory on Delancey Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. She was twenty-nine years old, curvy and provocative even in a high-necked black summer dress, and she smelled of vanilla and jasmine. She couldn't help that any more than I could help being small.

My case had received national coverage, but Judge Walsh had barred the public and the media from the Family Court. Today the judge had to decide whether to send me to a detention center or let me go free until I was tried and he could figure out a proper long-term fate for me. The worst he could do, down the line, was sentence me to six years, which isn't forever but it certainly seemed like a long time to me. Time enough, I figured, to ruin my life, if it wasn't ruined already by what I'd done.

Judge Walsh had a loud voice, so that he always sounded as if he were talking to a packed courtroom.

"Mr. Braverman," he boomed, "I've seen you on television commercials with your monkey, so I know you're an achiever. This state prosecutor wants to send you to Spofford. That's a juvenile reformatory, by the way, not a country club for children. No tennis courts like you've got out there in Amagansett, where you live. The prosecutor wants you to spend the full six years locked up for the purpose of rehabilitation. Mr. Braverman, do you agree with what your attorney, Ms. Casey, has done? She's pled you not guilty to all charges."

"Your honor," I said, "I agree to the plea."

The judge digested that pithy reply, and he accepted it.

“Within thirty days,” he roared on, “we’re going to have the fact-finding hearing. But first we have to deal with this question:—What do we do with you? A while ago you and young Amy Bedford ran away from home. Three days ago, when I sent you home with your parents, I didn’t know that fact. The record now informs me that earlier this summer, in Jamaica, in the borough of Queens, en route to Manhattan, you and Amy Bedford evaded the pursuit of two police officers on a railroad platform. Caused considerable commotion there in Jamaica. You have any comment?”

“No, sir,” I said.

He looked surprised at the fact that I didn’t want to discuss the matter, and he rustled the papers scattered on his desk.

“Here’s another report,” he said. “This one’s from Child Protective Services in New York County, author is a Mr. Siegel, stating that you escaped from his custody and that of two other police officers in some big midtown Manhattan hotel. Pretty aggressive behavior for a twelve year old. And, as we know, just a few days ago you nearly engineered an extraction of the Bedford girl from the locked premises of number One Jail Road here in Suffolk County. Do you dispute any of these facts?”

I raised my head a few inches higher. I said, “Your honor, in the Mayflower Hotel I wasn’t in anybody’s custody. I fooled Mr. Siegel, that’s true. But I didn’t promise him anything except that I was going to wake Amy in the next room.”

“You’re splitting hairs, young man. I don’t like that. Furthermore, Billy Braverman, you’re an escape artist. Is that, or is it not, a fact?”

“Yes, sir, I’m good at escapes.”

Ginger and I had rehearsed what I was supposed to say, but now I couldn’t help myself. I veered off the track.

“I’ve watched a lot of escape movies,” I explained. “*Cool Hand Luke—Escape from Alcatraz—The Shawshank Redemption*. I figured out how they do it, and . . .”

Ginger coughed sharply. She meant: *Back off, gunfighter*.

So I didn’t finish my sentence.

Judge Walsh said, “If I let you stay free in the custody of your parents, what’s going to stop you from taking off again for parts unknown?”

I returned to the script. “Your honor, I’ve already given my parents enough grief. I want to clear up this whole thing as soon as possible. I want closure. I give you my word of honor that I’ll stay home except to go to the beach and run my lemonade business.”

The judge turned toward Ginger Casey. “A charming child. Charm will not get him through the judicial process. Nevertheless, I don’t like to put a twelve-year-old boy into detention when he hasn’t yet been convicted of anything and he’s pled not guilty.” He sniffed a few times in Ginger’s direction, and I figured that some of her dangerous tropical aroma must have reached him. “What do you think, Ms. Casey?”

Ginger seized the moment. She straightened her back and said, “Your Honor, Billy Braverman’s word of honor is his bond. Ask anyone who knows him.”

“What say the People?” Judge Walsh inquired.

Mr. Hull, the balding, red-faced young prosecutor, argued that I’d proved myself to be what they called a runner, and so the State of New York didn’t accept the risk of my being on the loose. It didn’t matter that I was twelve years old and small for my age, I should be placed behind bars in a secure detention center. Given half an inch of squirm room, Mr. Hull said, I might fly off to Kalamazoo, Key West, or even Katmandu.

Judge Walsh thought it over. He groaned a little, in a baritone, to himself, as if he believed that no one else could hear. Finally he declared to everyone:

“This boy, the respondent, is accused of serious crimes—second-degree murder and

statutory rape—but I don't believe that currently he presents a risk of flight. Because if he flees, the consequences will be grave, and he appears to understand that concept. Nor does society need to be protected from him. His father, Mr. Jacob Braverman, is a criminal defense attorney, a man of high professional stature. His mother, Dr. Diana Adler, is a well-known name in finance. It's been three days since the alleged murder and the boy's stayed home so far and hasn't budged. Provided that he doesn't leave the borders of Suffolk County, I'm going to rule that he can continue to remain under parental custody until the fact-finding inquiry."

We all felt better, at least for the moment. The judge set a date for the inquiry. He then explained that another condition of my release into parental custody was that I not communicate with Amy Bedford. Not even by telephone. And I couldn't approach her physically within a hundred yards.

Judge Walsh's eyes snapped like logs burning in a grate. "Listen carefully, Billy Braverman. You gave your word of honor, now I give you mine. You reach out to that girl, in any way whatsoever, you'll regret it for the rest of your life."

We used to live in Manhattan. But then our apartment on Central Park West was burglarized, the one irreplaceable loss being a baseball autographed by Mickey Mantle, Duke Snider, and Willie Mays, which a doting uncle had presented to my dad on the occasion of my dad's bar mitzvah. A week after the burglary, my mom—a beautiful lady with big cheekbones and fuzzy black hair that looked like a mop fallen into a pot of India ink—left her brokerage office in the financial district and was mugged in the Goldman Sachs parking garage on Broad Street. They took her cash, credit cards, bracelets and wedding ring, and they scared her half out of her wits when one of the guys used a switchblade knife to cut the strand of pearls off her throat.

Not long after that mugging, my older brother Simon went roller-blading in Central Park, veered off the path into the bushes to take a leak, and got groped there by a pervert with a razor blade in one hand and his dick in the other. Simon was lucky, however; a border collie came loping by and jumped at the perp, who bolted. Simon ran screaming in the other direction and never knew how it turned out between the other two.

My mom was shaken by these events and took some time off from work. That weekend, over blueberries and Häagen-Daz vanilla, we sat down in the dining room for a family summit. “Jack,” she said to my dad, “the universe is sending us a message.”

“And what is that message, Diana?”

“Leave the city.”

“To where, sweetheart?”

“Oak Lane.”

Oak Lane was what we called our country home in Amagansett, on Long Island, in Suffolk County, because it sat on a short, tree-lined street bearing that name. We'd owned it then for four years, and we went there every Memorial Day for most of the summer. All of us loved Oak Lane.

My dad said, “Year-round, Diana?”

“Jack, one door closes and the draft opens another one. Yes, year-round. I can do what I've always wanted to do”—and she raised her pinky and index finger, in the direction of Central park, to ward off the Evil Eye.

She meant Modern Age Green, whose name and purpose she had already registered with the Securities & Exchange Commission.

My dad asked, “And what do you suggest I do about my law practice?”

“Jack, you're out half the week-nights anyway for drinks and dinner with clients. If not, you're in Dixie holding the hand of some poor schlemiel on Death Row. Get a pied-à-terre on the East Side near the firm. Walk to work. Come out to Oak Lane for weekends and holidays. We'll have quality time together.”

At the end of the discussion she turned to me and Simon. “How do you guys vote?”

We voted the way she wanted us to.

They sold the apartment for \$2.5 million and we moved to Amagansett, whose name meant, in the old Algonquian language, “the place of good water.” Amagansett was located at the eastern end of Long Island, which on the map looks like an open-jawed alligator flopped out into the Atlantic Ocean from New York City. The lower jaw of the alligator is often called the South Fork, and its lanes and roads are lined by oak, elm, maple, flowering dogwood, and huckleberry. Sweet corn and good Katahdin potatoes grow; in summer the lawns are as green as English meadows. In those days Amagansett kids past elementary school level either biked or were bused to schools five miles west in East Hampton. My parents and quite a few other people

didn't lock their doors when they went out. On the South Fork, in that final decade of the last century, you could smell high taxes, salt air, and a sense of self-congratulation. "This is the right way to live, and we are blessed."

My mom bought a farmhouse outside the nearby village of Sag Harbor, converted it into an office complex, and started a mutual fund that refused to buy shares in companies that polluted the environment or the lungs. When Modern Age Green doubled in value its first year, *Barrons* called it "the tiny new superstar of ecologically-responsible no-load mutual funds." My mom became a New Age hero: she lectured at womens' clubs, was given an honorary Ph.D. by her alma mater, Brown University, and was invited by Hillary to the White House. The President joined them at tea.

Later, Oprah interviewed my mom, and asked, "Dr. Adler, what was your reaction to President Clinton?"

"Kinda cute," my mom said, which brought the house down.

My dad, Jacob Braverman, Esq., a trim, fresh-faced, handsome man with feet so small you'd think his parents had bound them when he was a boy, was almost always called Jack. If he was at a party he seemed to vanish among the bigger people, but when he held forth in his mellow voice on subjects such as white-collar crime, opera at the Met, the current crisis in the Middle East, or the Yankees' chances in the playoffs, people always clammed up and listened. His major passion, however, was defending convicted murderers on various death rows in the Deep South. He did it for free, flying to Florida or some other state once or twice a month, and he had a contract with a New York publisher to write a book about all the men and women in this country who had been convicted of murder, then executed, and later shown to have been innocent.

So we lived the good life, the honorable life, the purposeful life, the life that just about everybody in this country would want to live and profit by. And then I messed up big-time.

Early one Sunday morning in August I watched while my mom dove into the twenty-meter pool in the garden at Oak Lane. In swimming goggles and a black bikini, she always swam at least thirty laps, and when she finished she was never out of breath. She shook out a yoga mat, did half an hour of poses under an elm tree, chanted her oms, and then settled in the shade of the cabana to work her way through *Barrons* and the Monday Special edition of *Investors Business Daily*.

My dad was out biking, and my brother Simon was out eating pizza and yakking with his buddies about all the disgusting things they'd like to do to girls. I was still eleven years old at the time; I hated the thought of being a teen-ager and was trying to figure out a way to skip it.

I curled up in a deck chair next to my mom, and began reading another Horatio Hornblower sea story. I loved adventure books, except that the love parts bored me.

"Am I bothering you, Mom?"

"Oh, no, darling just the opposite. I adore it that you're here. Come give me a hug."

After the hug, she folded up her well-marked copy of *IBD* and said, "Billy darling, can I ask you a personal question?"

"Sure, Mom."

"Are you ever lonely?"

"Why should I be lonely?"

"Because your dad's in the city so much of the time, and down in Florida trying to keep people from being executed, and I work late in Sag Harbor, and I travel a lot, too—I have to, you understand, because I feel personally responsible to everyone who buys a single share in any of my funds. But you're alone so much. I know that you and your brother fight. So . . . I was just

wondering if you were lonely.”

“No, Mom, I’m fine,” I said. “I read. I go online. I have e-mail pals in Buenos Aires and Paris. I’m going to find one in Rome, too, as soon as my Italian gets good enough. And I climb. I’d be climbing today, except the gym’s closed on Sundays.”

I was crazy about climbing. If you climb to the top of anything, even if it’s no more than the climbing wall at the high school gym, you feel as if you’re on top of the world. My mom often reminded me that even before I could crawl I climbed out of my crib, fell to the carpet, turned red, and later purple and blue, but didn’t cry. I’d climbed all the big elms and oaks on our property and I’d climbed all the rafters of the garage. I’d been punished for it often, but that never stopped me. Punishment, I figured, was part of a kid’s life.

This was my plan. Before I was eighteen I was going to climb Mount Everest, so that I’d be the youngest Western climber ever to do it. Our housekeeper Inez was teaching me Spanish, French, and Italian, and *cuisine à la françaises*. I intended to become a gourmet chef, cook a five-course amazing meal at base camp, carry it up to the summit of Everest, heat it and eat it, and broadcast the menu to the world in several languages. Then, after I graduated Harvard, I would start a chain of gourmet restaurants called Everest. This plan couldn’t miss, I thought.

When I first told it to my mom, she said, “Do you know how many people have died trying to climb Mt. Everest?”

“One hundred and sixty seven far in this century. But that won’t happen to me.”

“Billy, do you think you’re immortal? And that you can’t be hurt? Or crippled?”

“Sort of,” I admitted.

Another time, when she was talking to my dad outside the pool cabana, I was up a nearby tree and heard her say, “Jack, when he goes to the beach, the lifeguard has to whistle him back from the deep water. He plays with snakes in the garden. This passion for climbing frightens me. He’s got a reckless streak. And he’s still so *small*.”

“But he’s tough,” my dad said, “like me.”

I loved him for saying that.

“No, Mom,” I said, that day at the pool, “I’m not lonely at all. I’m one of the luckiest kids I know.”

A household chore of mine was to take out the garbage first thing on Tuesday mornings. Later I’d see the guys in their overalls dumping the plastic sacks and I’d get a whiff of what was in the guts of the garbage truck. I figured that had to be the worst job a man could have.

On the Tuesday before Labor Day Weekend, I rolled the big green cans from the garage to the driveway. An hour later I started out with my ten-speed to the A & P to stock up on lemons for my beach business, Yummy-in-the-Tummy Lemonade Company, of which I was founder, boss, and sole employee. I stopped on the gravel to adjust my backpack, and the gray garbage truck pulled into our crescent-shaped loop, its back gate clanking.

One of the garbage men hopped down out of the truck and walked up to me. He was a lean guy in his late thirties with pale reddish hair and the biceps of a bodybuilder. He wore denim shorts, a sleeveless white T-shirt that said BONACKER PRIDE, and a blue silk scarf tied around his neck, like he was Cary Grant playing the role of a jaunty hard-muscled garbage man. His teeth were as white as bathroom tiles. He had shifty silver eyes, but now they bore right into me.

He said in a friendly voice, “How you doing, sonny?”

“I’m doing fine.”

“I’ve seen you before. What’s your name?”

“Billy.”

“Mine’s Carter.”

“Well, that fits,” I said.

Those watery eyes grew twenty degrees colder. “What the fuck’s that supposed to mean?” I was a wiseass. I tried not to be, but I didn’t always succeed.

“I meant that your name is Carter, and you’re in the carting business.”

He kept glowering. His intensity scared me, but I didn’t back down. “Carting is another word for taking things away,” I said. “A lot of last names in English come from professions. Baker. Hunter. Smith. Carpenter. Carter. See?”

The garbage man squared his shoulders. “Except my last name ain’t Carter. Carter is my Christian name. My last name is Bedford.”

While his two brown-skinned associates dumped our cans into the truck, Carter Bedford snorted and honked a load of phlegm up his nose. Then he made a funny sound at the back of his throat. He didn’t spit. He swallowed it. That was gross.

He angled his head toward the big white house at the end of the driveway. Oak Lane had been remodeled quite a few times through the centuries, and it was still a stop on the summer house tours conducted by the Ladies Village Improvement Society. “Nice little shack,” Carter Bedford said.

The breeze shifted, and I caught the smell of his breath, which was like the smell of the stuff in the truck.

I spun my pedals. “I have to go now.”

“You headed for the beach?”

“No, sir, the supermarket.”

Carter Bedford took a step that blocked my path. “I knew about Bedford being the name of a place in the old country. I’m a Bonacker, but my people come over here a couple hundred years ago. In England we probably lived in one of those castles with a moat. All I know, I might be related to William Shakespeare.”

The Latino guy behind the wheel of the garbage truck tapped on the horn, but Carter Bedford ignored him. He pulled a bent pack of Camels from his overalls and shook one out, so that it dribbled tobacco flakes on the gravel.

“What school you go to, Billy?”

“Middle School, East Hampton.”

“Which grade?”

“I start sixth next week.”

“No kidding.” Those gray watery eyes sparkled. “My daughter’s going into sixth. She’s got hair same color as mine. Real pretty. Name’s Amy.”

“I know who she is,” I said. “But I haven’t ever talked to her.”

“That’s because she don’t talk to strangers. She’s shy.” He had lit up, and he pushed his pack of cigarettes in my face. “Want one?”

“No.”

“You should get to know my daughter,” Carter Bedford said.

“Maybe next term.”

“Don’t get fresh with her, though. That’ll piss her off.”

What an asshole, I thought. Still, I went for the bait. I said, “Why would I get fresh with her?”

“Cause your little pecker might twitch and you couldn’t help yourself, that’s why.” He brayed a laugh.

“I have to go, Mr. Bedford. Nice to have met you.”

He studied me with those polished silver eyes. “Yeah, you definitely oughta get to know Amy.”

I pedaled onto the grass, veering around Carter Bedford. I could feel his stare on the back of my neck. I left him dragging on his limp cigarette, flexing his ropy muscles, and snorting snot.

He'd called himself a Bonacker. A long time ago that was a beach person who came from Accabonac Harbor, a few miles to the north of Amagansett, and dug for clams and scallops. In hard times Bonackers trapped seagulls and roasted them in sand pits. Now the hardware stores from Water Mill all the way out as far as Montauk sold bumper stickers and T-shirts, like the one Carter Bedford wore, proclaiming BONACKER PRIDE. Bonackers sold tennis balls to the summer residents, repaired their plumbing, tended bar at their lawn parties, filled their speedboats with gas, and hauled away their garbage. I don't think they liked us much but they needed us so that they didn't have to go back to trapping seagulls.

Carter Bedford and his wife—I learned this quite a while later—still lived near Accabonac Harbor in a part of the township called Springs, which was considerably less expensive and more rural than East Hampton Village. There was a self-storage facility out there in Springs, A-1 Self-Storage, in a dusty field on a back road. Attached to it was a small yellow brick building, a former local jail that Springs residents had once called the Yellow Brick Jail. It had a strange shape: although it was a narrow cube, it had three stories. The top story was set to one side of the roof.

After its term as a jail it was empty for a decade, and then for a time it had been used as a warehouse by an auto parts shop on Pantigo Road. In the 1980's, with a minimum of rehab, the warehouse was turned into a residence for the caretakers of a newly-built self-storage facility. The latest caretakers were the Bedfords. The job paid nothing but the family lived rent-free in the yellow brick house, which still had bars on some windows from the era when it had been a jail. The Bedfords kept an old Winnebago RV out in back, and Carter and his wife slept in it. A-1's office occupied the downstairs of the house, with the two Bedford boys sharing a queen bed in the one-bedroom apartment upstairs, and Amy, the oldest child, sleeping on a convertible sofa in the apartment's tiny living room. The top floor was just a small cube of a room connected to the second-floor apartment by a narrow staircase with a barred gate— another relic of jail days. There was one bathroom for everybody, because the pipes in the Winnebago had frozen, cracked, and never been repaired. A fat bulldog and a large hairy young mongrel bunked in Carter's pickup truck. They were supposed to be guard dogs. In some parts of the United States, a family like that would have been called poor white trash. But they hardly ever used words like that on the south fork of Long Island.

Carter Bedford was the man the State of New York accused me of trying to murder. My lawyer, Ginger Casey, said, "I won't lie to you, Billy – the state has a good case. We have a lot of work to do. Are you ready for that?"

"Let's rock and roll," I said.

"Tell me everything that happened," Ginger said.

3

“Girls and boys, welcome Amy Bedford. She’s a transfer from middle school out in Montauk. How about a nice round of applause as our way of saying ‘Good to have you with us, Amy.’?”

Those words were spoken to us by Mrs. Metzger, the fifth-grade teacher in East Hampton Middle School, at the beginning of the spring term a few months before my first meeting with Carter Bedford.

I clapped louder than anybody, and a few kids stared at me as if my enthusiasm confirmed my status as the class nerd. Most people thought I looked like a miniature but pudgy version of Kramer, that geeky guy on *Seinfeld* whose hair stands straight up on his head. I felt sorry for that guy. I didn’t feel sorry for myself. I might grow out of it.

The new girl paid no attention to my clapping. She was seated at a desk in the last row, and she was talking to herself. You could see her lips moving, although you couldn’t make out what words she was saying. It was a murmur, or she could have been singing under her breath. She was somewhere else.

Not cool, I thought. Something wrong with this girl.

She was tall and thin, freckled, with long legs, small fingers, and skin the color of the ivory elephants on our coffee table at home. Her hair was darker and shinier than a carrot, and she wore it in a frayed black ribbon.

During Math hour the first week, she must have felt me staring at her. She looked up, and checked me out like I was a frog on the dissecting table in Science class. Her eyes were a soft brown, like good Belgian milk chocolate, and they slanted upward a bit. She blinked a few times, then looked down, and started talking to herself again.

In a way that was hard to define, I thought she was the prettiest girl in the class. I watched her move through the fluorescent-lit halls of the middle school. She didn’t bounce like the other girls. She glided like a graceful ghost. And she didn’t chew gum.

I watched her often, but after that five-second look during Math hour, she ignored me.

One evening after we’d eaten paella in the kitchen and Inez had written out the recipe for me to enter into my computer, my brother Simon and I cruised into the den. I grabbed the remote so that Simon couldn’t turn on the TV. Simon, who was fourteen, played the drums, read sports car and professional wrestling magazines, and hung out with a bunch of guys I considered dorks; but now and then, since he had good genes, he was capable of intelligent observations. Hoping that this would be one of those occasions, I told him what I knew about Amy Bedford.

“I know a few chicks in your class,” he said. “Which does she hang with?”

“None. They think she’s weird.”

“So do you.”

“But I’m interested in her.”

“You think you can get into her panties?”

“Simon, I’m eleven. I just want to get to know her. Maybe she’s a medium and she’s getting messages from the astral sphere. Maybe she’s talking a foreign language. It’s called ‘speaking in tongues.’”

“Bullshit. You want to get to second base, bro. Play with her titties.”

“She doesn’t have any.”

I should never have said that. For Simon, that put her in the category of what he and his

friends called a “Tug” — Totally Uninteresting Girl. He grabbed the remote, shoved and kicked me off the sofa, and began watching TV.

When the other girls sneaked off to the baseball field during lunch hour to smoke cigarettes, Amy Bedford sat alone on the stone steps in front of the school. In class, when she wasn’t talking to herself, she drew in her notebook, covering the page with a pale arm so no one could see what she was doing. Her clothes were wrinkled. She never wore any makeup.

Then, in late August, her father, the garbage man, introduced himself to me in our driveway. A few days after school started up again, I stood outside on the steps at three o’clock of a sunny afternoon, waiting.

The girls of our class came out of the building in clumps of three and four, stopping to put their lipstick on because they weren’t allowed to wear it during school hours—plus, no mascara, no rouge, no high heels or clothes that let their belly buttons show. They were always talking about movie stars like Nicole Kidman and Leonardo DiCaprio. For me, these girls were from another planet. The boys, barging out behind the girls, wore studded leather jackets and baggy pants that hung way below their knees. They fiddled with their peckers in class when they thought no one was looking. They were into heavy metal, the Mets, the Giants, and the Knicks, but they didn’t know dick about climbing.

Toting her book bag, wearing old blue jeans and scuffed sneakers, Amy slipped out of the school alone, trailing behind everyone else. I stood in her path, just like Carter Bedford had done to me, and then I planted myself at her side and began walking down the steps with her. My heartbeats were so strong, so deep, and so loud, that I was a little frightened by them.

“Beautiful day, isn’t it?”

Dumb, but it got her attention. She swiveled her head toward me.

“I wanted to ask you,” I said, “what you thought of us saying the pledge of allegiance every morning. ‘I pledge allegiance to the flag’ . . . blah blah blah.’ Do you ever think about what the words mean? I mean, I didn’t until a few days ago. We’re like robots. A lot of things we do in life are robotic. That’s my point. You seem like an intelligent and interesting girl, so I’d like your opinion.”

Amy kept moving at a fair pace down the steps, then turned up the street toward where the school buses stopped. She was taller than me, and she had long legs, so I had a hard time keeping up with her and talking to her at the same time.

I thought of showing her my Swiss army knife. I’d bought it for myself as an tenth-birthday present. It had thirteen blades. I played mumblety-peg with it on our front lawn. But deep down I knew she wouldn’t be interested.

“I met your dad one morning in front of our house,” I said. “He believes his ancestors are English, maybe from Stratford-on-Avon. Did you ever discuss that with him?”

She shot a quick sharp frown at me.

“He suggested I get to know you,” I said. “He made a big point of it.”

We reached the bus stop. She didn’t give me any more looks to make me feel I’d just crawled out from under a slimy rock, but that’s because she was peering down Newtown Lane for her bus.

I kept trying. “What book are you going to read for your report? Mrs. Ostrow gave us a good choice, don’t you think? I thought I’d do *The Diary of Ann Frank*, because I’m Jewish, and I got all choked up when I first read it. I have a feeling you’d like *The Hobbit*. It’s cool.”

The yellow bus, the one that took the kids north to Springs, pulled up, brakes hissing. I’d always seen my dad help my mom in and out of cars by taking her arm, or her hand, and I

thought it was a classy thing to do. Amy was about to get on the bus, so I reached out and took hold of her elbow to help her up the step.

She wrenched her arm loose from me, turned, drew her hand back, and hit me in the face. I don't mean she socked me with a closed fist, but neither do I mean that she slapped me. I never had time to figure out what kind of a blow it was. I staggered back a step. Pain ran up the nerves to my brain and then back to my cheekbone.

Some of the kids saw it. They must have figured I'd done something gross.

It was just her *elbow*, for Chrissake . . .

I could feel my cheeks turning bright red. Amy Bedford didn't even wait to see if I'd been knocked out or fallen down into the gutter in a faint. She jumped on the bus, and all I could see of her was her back, moving away into the shadowy interior of the bus, then vanishing from view.

Tears of pain filled my eyes. Or maybe they were tears of shock. Maybe even tears of embarrassment.

I ran to the bike rack, where I unchained my ten-speed. I heard kids giggling. I jumped aboard the bike and pedaled down Newtown Lane, then swerved left into traffic on Main Street, so that a car honked at me; then I took a hard right down the Montauk Highway, and then I flew along Skimhampton Road until I got to Amagansett fifteen minutes later.

What a bitch. What a dummy. What a creepy, stupid, unfriendly, aggressive, arrogant, nasty human being. What did she think I was trying to do? I got a headache from thinking about it.

I couldn't tell my brother. But I had to talk to someone, and that someone was Inez.

Three years ago, when we'd moved from the West Side of Manhattan to the South Fork of Long Island, my mom decided we needed a full-time housekeeper, nanny, and cook, all in one persona. She wanted somebody foreign, on the theory that they were harder workers, better educated, and more traditional as regards how children should be cared for, so she contacted a top domestic help agency in London. Four applicants made the final cut. Two were German, one Scottish, another Spanish. The first three had great references, were under thirty years of age, and appeared attractive in the photographs attached to their applications. They wrote in their resumé's that they loved children and wanted to work in the USA because it was the land of opportunity and it had always been their dream to see America.

The last applicant was Inez Tur, a dark-eyed Catalan woman of forty-two. She gave her height as five-feet-one but that was probably the only direct lie Inez ever told anyone in the Braverman family. She wrote that she had worked as a waitress to put herself through cooking school in Barcelona, then been an assistant to a sous chef at a restaurant in Perpignan, France. "I like most children," she wrote. "I can't have any of my own, which make me sad but that's destiny and I don't argue. I'm living now outside of London, with a rich English family, but my feet are always cold and I'm underpaid for what I do. I have a beloved brother Alfonso is hairdresser in Great Neck, N.Y., Long Island, so a job near to him sounds good to me as long as it's not damp the whole year round and the pay is fair."

My mom was used to analyzing data. "Those first three young women are expecting to have a good time. The Spanish woman, Inez Tur, is a mature spinster. She's realistic. She's straightforward. And she's family-oriented. She looks unattractive—well, let's just say, plain. I'll pay top dollar. She can have her own thermostat."

That evening, after Amy Bedford smacked my head at the bus stop, Inez asked, "Whassamatter with you, Billy? *Qué pasó?* Why's your face so red? Some bad boy socked you, *cariño?*"

“A girl,” I said.

“Oooh. You was fresh?”

“No, Inez. Honestly.”

I told her the story about what happened on Newtown Lane outside the middle school. I told her all about Amy.

“She likes you,” Inez concluded.

That startled me. “I like her, too,” I said.

Inez looked into my eyes. I think she saw something there that had never been there before and that no one else could see. “Be careful, *mi amor*,” she said.

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