

CHAPTER ONE

ALPHA FRIEND OF THE DIAMOND CLASS

Kindergarten Do-Over



ORIGINAL AGE: 5

DO-OVER AGE: 48

ORIGINAL LOCATION: EAST SIDE ELEMENTARY, ATHENS, OHIO

DO-OVER LOCATION: HORACE MANN ELEMENTARY, IOWA CITY, IOWA

Most likely, you don't remember your nemesis in kindergarten, but I remember mine, probably because I had two. Virginia Adams was the teacher's pet, and our teacher, Mrs. Collins, hated me. She told my mother I was going to grow up to be "a thug." Those were her exact words. But she loved Virginia, and Virginia took every opportunity to flaunt her superiority. Often Virginia would sing to me: "I'm named after a state, and you're only named after a bird."

Mrs. Collins hated me because of an unfortunate encounter with a small rubber lobster. When we received our first report cards — full of Es and Ps and other letters hardly ever used beyond

kindergarten — Mrs. Collins told us to bring them home to our parents, who had to sign them. In 1963, *parents* meant “Mom,” and maybe that’s even how Mrs. Collins phrased it: “Bring this report card home, and make sure your mother signs it before you come to class tomorrow.” Most fathers, mine included, left the signatures and just about everything else to moms.

After my mother signed, I took a bath, and she allowed me to look at the card while in the water. I loved the pink report card and all those letters and words I couldn’t read, and I loved my mom’s signature, which was bigger than any other words inside the card.

Enter the lobster. Somehow, one of my little bathtub playthings, a thin rubber lobster about three inches long, found its way into my report card. Wet when it entered the report card, it dried and stuck between the thick pages. My older brother Jonathan probably did it, perhaps in payment for my flushing of his goldfish down the toilet the week before. I just liked magic. Now the fish is swimming in the toilet bowl. Flush. Now it’s not.

When Mrs. Collins opened the report card the next day and brought it to her eyes to look at my mother’s bold and beautiful signature, we both had a nasty surprise. The lobster popped up from the fold of the report card as though attacking her lips. She dropped the card and screamed, and after that I don’t remember anything except that Mrs. Collins called my mother to school for an emergency conference and ranted for half an hour about me growing up to be “a thug.”

At home, this type of incident would have provided great amusement for my family. But in my school life, this was serious. After the lobster, Mrs. Collins started a campaign against me. At sing-along, she accused me of mouthing the words (I most certainly did not! I shouted them!). When we finger painted, she accused me of finger painting “wrong” (is that even *possible*?!). For each offense, she sent me to sit facing the corner. At nap time, she’d hover over me and then press her foot into my back. She stepped on me almost every day.

Our classroom had its own bathroom, and we had to line up for it when we wanted to use it. Whenever I reached the front of the line, Mrs. Collins would grab my hand roughly and lead me to the

back of the line. Of course, I'd do things in my pants as a result and then I'd get punished for that.

If I could have flunked kindergarten, I would have.

But I didn't hate Mrs. Collins. I was just baffled and wanted more than anything else to figure her out. The only clue I had that Mrs. Collins's Laws were not universally observed was when I tested her graham-crackers-and-milk rule at home. Mrs. Collins absolutely forbade us to dip our graham crackers in milk at snack time. Nothing upset her more, except maybe rubber lobsters. She explained to us that soggy graham crumbs, breaking off the Mother Graham Cracker, bobbed like little drowned bugs on the surface of a swimming pool or sank to the bottom like dead babies. And. This. Was. Disgusting! And she wouldn't tolerate it! Did we understand?!

So, of course, whenever she turned her back, we dipped our graham crackers in our milk, like some precision dipping team, and then stuck them in our mouths, gumming the soggy and delicious crackers. Nothing tastes better than disobedience. And one day when I went home, my mother asked me what I wanted for a snack, and I said, "Graham crackers and milk!" When she set them down in front of me at the kitchen table, I started defiantly dipping my graham crackers in my glass of milk and eating them. My mother seemed not to care. In fact, she turned her back on me!

"Look, Mom," I said. "Look what I'm doing!"

She turned around. "What?"

I dipped my graham cracker in my milk and stuck it in my mouth and bit down. Hard. There were crumbs in my glass, floating and sinking.

She thought this was a joke. She laughed. I was cute.

This should have been my first clue that all was not right in the grown-up world, but I thought the fault lay with my mother, that she had not been properly educated. I started to cry, ashamed that my mother was so uncouth.

On the last day of school, Mrs. Collins took me from the front of the bathroom line and put me in the back. Once again, I pooped in my pants, and I was mortified that Mrs. Collins would find out. While not quite as awful as dipping graham crackers in milk, pooping in your pants was right up there.

Every day, we had cubbyhole inspection. It's where we kept our blankets neatly folded and extra supplies. Before she'd dismiss us for the summer, on that fateful day, Mrs. Collins made us stand at attention beside our closed cubbies and await her verdict. She told us that we would not have summer if our cubbies were dirty, that we would stay in kindergarten forever and never go home. Ever. We all stood cowering, terrified by this possibility. Not having summer was one thing, but having to stay with Mrs. Collins forever seemed too much to bear. I was sure she was going to smell what I'd done when she approached my cubby, so I reached into my pants and pulled out what I'd done, which was luckily very hard and dry, and I secretly opened Virginia's cubby next to mine, expertly palming the turd, and snuck it inside. Then I closed the door.

When Mrs. Collins approached my cubby, I stood at the straightest attention I could muster, my eyes locked ahead of me.

"Step aside," she said and slid open the cubby and sniffed tentatively. She closed the door, said nothing, and moved on to Virginia's cubby.

"Why hello, Virginia," she said. "Do you have any pleasant plans for the summer?"

"My parents —" Virginia started and then stopped as soon as Mrs. Collins slid the door open and peeked inside. Mrs. Collins jumped back as though my dry turd would leap toward her mouth the way my rubber lobster had.

"Virginia!" she screamed, high-pitched, sounding like a bird in a state.

And then the scene blanks, and all I remember is looking in the window of the kindergarten after she had dismissed all of us but Virginia, who stood with her face in her hands, crying, while Mrs. Collins stood above her.

As much as I didn't like Virginia, I did not want her to lose summer and have to spend the rest of her life with Mrs. Collins. But I wasn't going to stick around to spend it with her either!

That turned out to be the last year Mrs. Collins ever taught. She was carted away shortly after to the Athens Lunatic Asylum, also known as the Ridges, an imposing Victorian brick institution that sternly overlooked Athens and warehoused its misaligned and mis-

anthropic. I can't say that I tipped her over the edge or that the cubby incident did, but I'm sure I was a contributing factor. She died there and undoubtedly still haunts the place, which was featured a while back on a TV show titled *The Scariest Places on Earth*. And I have no doubt that the place is just like kindergarten was for me, with Mrs. Collins keeping all the other ghosts in line.



I often wondered in the intervening years what had happened to Virginia and how she remembered me. Since kindergarten I'd seen her only once, when we were both eighteen and I'd returned to Athens to visit my brother Jonathan who was attending Ohio University. My childhood friend John Kortlander pointed her out to me at a party — she had blond curly hair and radiated poise and confidence, which completely undid me. I had neither. At eighteen, I looked like a stalk of broccoli: emaciated, wearing seventies polyester, sporting a Jewfro. So I didn't approach her to tell her what I'd done to her when I was five. I thought she'd think I was crazy or trying some weird line to pick her up. So, I went back to my life and she to hers.

But I had a chance to meet her again years later when John Kortlander and some other childhood friends from Athens decided to piggyback an elementary school reunion and the thirtieth reunion of the Athens High Class of 1976. I've never been big on reunions, but an elementary school reunion was too enticing for me to pass up. I hadn't seen most of my old classmates since fifth grade, when my family moved to Slippery Rock. And I wasn't the only one lured to Athens by the prospect of this reunion. About 80 percent of my old classmates showed up. Virginia and I hadn't been classmates since kindergarten, but she graduated from Athens High, and my friend John dragged me to several Athens High events that weekend, including a party at a local watering hole where many of my old schoolmates gathered, including Virginia. My friend John, who knew the whole story of Virginia and me, made a point of reintroducing us as soon as he spotted her among the crush of middle-aged men and women in the bar. John had suggested in an e-mail that I might want to bring some poop with me for old times' sake. I

let that one pass. Virginia looked almost as I remembered her from when I was eighteen, and I suddenly had the urge to run. But I reasoned that the statute of limitations should apply to things you did when you were five. Maybe she'd think the incident of the Poop in the Cubby was funny.

Happily, she *did* think it was funny, but she had no memory of the incident. Still, I think the episode must have had an impact on her. She'd grown up to be a therapist. Not a Freudian therapist, but even so, the surprise of poop in your cubby has implications you might like (or need) to spend a lifetime exploring . . .

"I'm glad you told me all this," she said. "I always wondered if I had imagined the things that Mrs. Collins did. I remember her sitting on some of the kids — even then, that troubled me."

This was news to me. "She *sat* on some of the kids?" I asked. "I remember her stepping on my back, but not sitting on me."

"I remember her sitting," she said.

Mrs. Collins was a small woman, but I was an even smaller boy. What Virginia was telling me gave me the oddest feeling. If Mrs. Collins sat on kids, then I was the most eminently sittable kid in that class. I would have been the equivalent of a plush Victorian loveseat to her. If she sat on anyone, she had certainly sat on me. Either I had translated this into stepping on my back (still despicable but slightly less so in my mind), or Virginia was misremembering. Regardless. Though stepping on kindergartners is creepy, sitting on them redefines *creepy*. It takes a connoisseur of malevolence to sit on five-year-olds. Did this qualify as abuse? I had never thought of myself as abused, and the word seems too loaded, potentially fraught with societal baggage and the Look-at-Me brand of sensationalism and self-pity. I wasn't having a Talk Show Moment, but I was having *some* kind of moment, a reassessment, one of those cartoon word bubbles filled with exclamation points and symbols that are non-verbal but absolutely expressive of inner turmoil and alarm. Something that can only be approached in a curse.

Shortly after that reunion and meeting Virginia again, I began my do-overs. There definitely were things from my childhood I needed to investigate, to redefine, to get over, and kindergarten was chief among them. I wasn't going to let Mrs. Collins haunt me forever.

But wanting a do-over and setting one up are two different things, I quickly learned. For reasons that should be obvious, most school districts do not simply welcome forty-eight-year-old men into kindergarten as students. There are a lot of logistics involved: writing letters, cold-calling people, getting background checks. Fortunately, a colleague in the education department at the University of Iowa vouched for me and helped me get my foot in the door at Horace Mann Elementary. Before long, I met with my proposed teacher, Janis Statler, and the principal of Horace Mann, Jodi Rickels. Not only did I have to undergo a background check, but I also had to write a letter to the parents of Janis's kindergarten class to tell them about my project. If any of them objected, that would be the end of it, at least at this school. Thankfully, no one objected. Still, the parents were given a chance to meet with me one evening — a couple of parents and their kids showed up. The parents all seemed amused but supportive. Not only did they think my project was a good idea, but they wished they had the chance to do over a few episodes from their own lives too.

One of my new classmates, Haley, and her mom told me about the routine. I learned that hands are for helping, not hurting. This seemed like a good rule, something that Mrs. Collins hadn't subscribed to. Haley also mentioned something about "Alpha Friends," and I tensed. Was she talking about dominance? Shades of Virginia Adams? I vowed to be the Alpha Friend of *this* kindergarten class. But Janis explained that *Alpha Friends* refers to the alphabet; they're personifications of the letters. Alice Aardvark. Bradley Beagle. *Not* Alpha Wolf. I wasn't quite in the kindergarten groove yet.

Janis and Jodi figured that the kids would accept me the way they accept any adult in their room, that they'd see me the way they see student teachers who regularly come over from the education department. That worried me a bit. The important thing, I thought, was not to try too hard. Over twenty years ago, I reviewed a book by educator Vivian Gussin Paley, *Mollie Is Three*. Paley, a recipient of a "genius grant" from the MacArthur Foundation, spent a year observing a class of three-year-olds at the University of Chicago's preschool, and one of her main points was that children spend a lot of their time telling each other stories and role playing as a way of

learning about the world. Simple enough. But what struck me was that when an adult tried to join their play, it freaked them out a bit. Once, when they were pretending to fly to the moon, the dad of one of the kids tried to fly to the moon with them. "It's just pretend," one child said, alarmed. The dad said he knew this but wanted to play. No, grown-ups aren't supposed to pretend.

So that was a depressing possibility. The kindergartners might well freeze me out and refuse to let me fly to the moon with them. Another depressing thought: the Mollie of Paley's book is about twenty-seven now.



On my first day of kindergarten, I'm awakened from a troubled sleep at 6:58 a.m. by the sounds of traffic on rain-slicked streets.

My wife, Margie, stretches and we say good morning.

"I couldn't sleep," I tell her.

"Why not?"

"First day of school."

"Excited?"

"Nervous."

I'm worried of course about how my new classmates will accept me. I'm a new kid and a grown-up besides, and they've been in class for about six weeks already. It's not that I think I'll have any trouble catching up. After all, last night I read a book to my three-year-old daughter, Shoshie, *Small Pig* by Arnold Lobel, an "I Can Read Book." Not many kindergartners know how to read. Fewer have children.

But it's not easy being forty-eight and going back to kindergarten. There's the embarrassment factor, and I figure I'm going to get a few stares, maybe be ridiculed by the older kids, maybe even the teachers. The whole week might be awkward and uncomfortable.

Margie drives me to school before dropping Shoshie at her preschool, and both of them wish me luck as I grab my book bag and my towel for quiet time and hurry to join some kids crossing the street under the benevolent protection of the crossing guard. I'm welcomed to kindergarten by my classmate, Martine, throwing up. I

don't take it personally because kindergartners do a fair amount of that — I remember throwing up on a kid in lunch line in kindergarten, an accident of course, though Mrs. Collins accused me of doing it on purpose. "Why didn't you tell me you were going to throw up?" she yelled at me.

I just looked at her like she was crazy because, well, she was.

From the outset, I can see that Mrs. Statler is a much kinder kindergarten teacher than Mrs. Collins, though, of course, that's not saying much. Mrs. Collins looked and acted much like the original Wicked Witch of the West, and Mrs. Statler seems much more like Glinda the Good Witch, though only superficially. Like Glinda, she's blond, but she's not sickly sweet, and she doesn't float around on a bubble. She's friendly but firm, which I learn almost immediately when I sit on the floor near her chair with the other kindergartners. It's reading time, which precedes the official start of the day, and I've grabbed a book and plunked down with it.

A crowd of children has gathered around me, amazed by my advanced reading skills.

"Can you teach Robin that we don't sit near the books so other kids can get to them?" Mrs. Statler tells the group.

I flush a bit. Oh, so that's why they were crowding around me — because they couldn't get to the books.

But they're definitely curious. One girl with dark hair, Jasmine, book in hand, asks me, "Why did you have a bad time in school, Robin?"

I'm about to tell her about my teacher sitting on me when Stefan asks me a follow-up. "Are you coming back to school to have a great time because when you were a kid you didn't have a great time?"

"Yes, that's it, exactly," I say.

Jasmine nods and shows me her Barbie watch.

At the start of the day, we need to choose what we're having for lunch, and we have to do attendance. Like all the other kindergartners, I have a popsicle stick with my name neatly written on it, and I place that by my choice for lunch today (chicken tenders), and I also have an attendance cube that I stack with the other attendance cubes.

"All right, my little chickadees," Mrs. Statler says, sitting in her

chair, starting the day's activities. We all gather in a semicircle around her, respectful of the paper-toweled vomit spot of our fallen comrade, Martine, who, Mrs. Statler explains, isn't feeling well.

Almost every activity in kindergarten has at least one song attached to it, with the possible exception of vomiting. When I was a kid, we did have a vomit song. Left to our own devices, we sang it for years and years, never growing tired of it. The song was sung to the tune of the theme of *The Bridge on the River Kwai*:

Comet, it makes your mouth turn green.

Comet, it tastes like Listerine.

Comet, it makes you vomit.

So buy some Comet and vomit today.

The Good Morning Song is less memorable and not as much fun to sing, but I don't make the rules here. Maybe the next time someone vomits, I could suggest to Mrs. Statler that she add it to the kindergarten repertoire.

One of the first things that I notice about this kindergarten class as distinct from my kindergarten class is how ethnically diverse this group is. In my day, Erica Marks and I represented multiculturalism, the two Jewish kids in our class. One aspect about Horace Mann that recommends it is that a number of the children are the sons and daughters of international students and other immigrants: Hispanic, Asian American, African American, and Arab American. Shoshie, as a Filipino American, will fit in well in this group. The only sign that all is not hunky-dory — the parents of one Mexican American boy, Jesus, wouldn't sign a photo release for me, Mrs. Statler suspects, because they're illegal immigrants and they're concerned about deportation.

Other than that, the Diamond Class, as they've named themselves, seems as harmonious a place of racial and ethnic harmony as one could find, with Mrs. Statler their benevolent Queen, sitting in her rocking chair dispensing kindergarten justice and compassion.

The rules are posted on the wall near her chair, though I suspect I'm one of the few kindergartners who can read them:

and

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I-CARE RULES

1. We listen to each other.
2. Hands are for helping, not hurting.
3. We use I-care language.
4. We care about each other's feelings.
5. We are responsible for what we say and do.
6. Different is great.

and

1. Ignore.
2. Tell to stop.
3. Walk away.
4. Get help.

My three best buddies from the get-go are Louis, a kid with blond hair; Stefan, an African American kid; and Abdul, an Arab American boy. Stefan takes it upon himself to show me the kindergarten ropes. My classmates, though they don't know my checkered kindergarten past, are leaving nothing to chance. Stefan gives me the lay of the bathroom land. He shows me the "bathroom clip" that you take when you need to go — and what an innovation — you don't need to tell anyone you're going. If you've got to go, you've got to go. He shows me the bathroom, shows me the water fountain, and starts to tell me how to stay out of trouble. But Mrs. Statler's attention lands on him. "Signals on, Stefan and Robin," she says. "It's time for learning, not talking," and I fold my hands in my lap as does Stefan. When she says this, Mrs. Statler uses hand signals, pointing to her eyes or her ears, as though she's interpreting for the deaf. No one in class is deaf, but we're attention impaired. Nothing as serious as ADD as far as I can tell, but it's not easy to pay attention when you're five — we're a visual culture. Point to your eyes when you're telling me to watch you. Point to your ears when you're telling me to listen.

We're going to learn about our new Alpha Friend for the week, the moment we've all been waiting for.

"The Alpha Friend," Mrs. Statler starts in her soothing voice, "is

red on the outside and white on the inside . . . and he's an acrobat. Can anyone tell me what an acrobat is?"

"Signals on," she says. "Thanks for raising your hand, Abdul."

"It's a stick you throw in the air and then you catch it," he says.

Not exactly, Mrs. Statler says, but finds the closest correlation to Abdul's interpretation. She asks if anyone knows what a trapeze is. No one has the foggiest, so she draws a person on a trapeze and then introduces our Alpha Friend, Andy Apple, a smiling apple on a card. "Andy Apple is an acrobat," she says in a lilting voice that I know will now get stuck in my head and make me hate Andy Apple and want to crush him underfoot if he ever gets off his trapeze. Hands are for helping, I know, but no one said anything about feet. We repeat Andy Apple's occupation back to her, though I have a very kindergarten urge to tell Mrs. Statler and the rest of the class that I've been on a trapeze before. Signals on, Robin!

And so it goes in orderly fashion through much of the morning. It looks like it might rain outside and who knows what the family lives of these kids are like, though I suspect most come from pretty stable homes, but, boy, does it feel safe in here, even with the ever-present threat of a time-out hovering in the wings. Despite my initial antipathy toward Andy Apple, I make my peace with him and alliterate my way along with my twenty-two classmates, minus Martine the Nauseated and one or two other absentees. After we have exhausted all possible avenues of discussion about Andy Apple and his day, we get up and, just like that, run, hop, skip, tiptoe, and skate to music as if this were the most natural thing in the world.

Besides the I-Care Rules, I learn two important things on day one of kindergarten. First, I learn that kindergarten is hard work. It may look easy, but it's not. By 10:45, we've already done eight activities, and I'm exhausted. The second thing I learn is that I've missed recess terribly all these long adult years. Out on the playground, Stefan wants to play tetherball with me, so he smacks the ball my way, and I smack it back and it busts him in the jaw. Although he seems fine, he takes the opportunity to lecture me on proper playground etiquette.

"You can't hurt anyone on the playground," he tells me. "And you really can't hit or else you get a time-out for a long, *long* time, a



time-out until school is over. And you can't run. And if you get a time-out for a long, *long* time, that wouldn't be much fun because people like to play."

Stefan gets stuck on his "If you do really bad things" speech, I suppose, in part, because I'm listening so intently, even taking notes. He's struck a bit of a self-important pose, like some politico outlining his platform. "If you do a really *really* bad thing," he says, "you'll be taken to the office."

I was only taken to the office once as a child, in fourth grade, when I yelled at my teacher, Mrs. Hill, not because I was angry but because I felt like yelling at her. It was an experiment. I told her so, and she told me she felt like taking me to the office, the direct result of my experiment. Most of the stuff I did in grade school couldn't be considered bad so much as misguided. That same year, I wore my pajamas to school one day after telling my mother that I thought they looked like street clothes. She said they didn't, that they looked like pajamas, and I said no, they looked exactly like regular clothes. They had a collar and were made of corduroy, and that somehow struck me as unpajama-like, despite the elastic waistband and the fact that they were obviously, in all important respects, pajamas. "Okay, wear them then," she said. In this way, she really was an enlightened parent,

knowing that experience is indeed the best teacher. So I wore my pajamas to class and, amazingly, the only one who noticed was Mrs. Hill. During a math quiz, she called me over to her desk, where she and her student teacher were trying to stifle their laughter.

"Robin," she said. "Are you wearing your pajamas?"

"No, Mrs. Hill," I said.

That was my real problem, lying. I was an inveterate liar. I suppose the flip side is that I had an imagination and saw all things as possible.

When, in first grade, a classmate brought in some rabbits, our teacher told us we could have one if we brought back a note from a parent the next day. I knew my mother wouldn't allow me to have a rabbit, so I went home and that night forged a note from my mother in my best first-grade block lettering.

Robin can hav rabbi

Sined Mom

That's the kind of thing I got in trouble for, not hitting people.



One of the nice things about kindergarten is that you can't get too much of a good thing. After we sing with Mrs. Statler and her associate, Laurie, we go to music class. Before lunch there's snack time, and there's recess before lunch *and* after. Music begets music. Food begets food. Play begets more play. It's all very civilized and is probably much the way life was in the Garden of Eden.

At snack time, we have bagels and cream cheese, and in unison we all thank Annie, our classmate who brought the snack today.

Then we have a serious discussion about potential Alpha Friends, at my table at least. Mrs. Statler, meanwhile, patrols the room, gently reminding us of social norms.

"It would be funny if we had a bagel Alpha Friend," says Stefan.

"It would be funny if we had a human Alpha Friend," says Abdul, snorting his juice.

"Maybe we could have a sandwich Alpha Friend," says Haley.

"Make sure you're chewing with your mouth closed," says Mrs. Statler. "Because it's gross if we see your chewed-up food."

"I wish we had an Alpha Friend that was a stop sign," says Haley, showing me a mouthful of gross, chewed-up food. I stifle the urge to show her my chewed-up food too. The teacher is near.

"Make sure you're doing as much eating as talking, Haley," Mrs. Statler says in a grown-up voice I know well, one that I have used on my three daughters that means you are about to pass a boundary from which there is no return. You are about to lose something. You are about to have a (gasp!) consequence. I would like to join in the Alpha Friend Roundup, but they're doling out Alpha Friends faster than I can think, and, anyway, I'm mindful of Vivian Paley's assertion that if I join in, I'll ruin my cover, and they'll just think I'm some odd grown-up who doesn't know Alpha Friends from a hole in the ground.

"I wish we had an octopus Alpha Friend," says Abdul, giggling.

"I was just going to say that," says Haley, opening her mouth as though it's a three-car garage.

Oh, Haley, I think, mentally slapping my forehead with the palm of my hand. But, kindergarten rebel that I am, I wonder why showing your food while you eat isn't simply a sign that you're enjoying your food tremendously. Look what happens when my teeth meet my food! It's delicious, and it's going in *my* stomach! When I was an exchange student in high school, in Osaka, Japan, my host family, the Oshiros, used to constantly prod me to slurp while I ate noodles. My host mother wasn't sure I was enjoying my food.

"Make more noise, Robin," my host brother, Hiroshi, used to tell me, as they all slurped soup or sukiyaki while I sat there primly taking quiet nibbles. It used to really bother them, but, try as I might, I couldn't cast aside my upbringing and make the requisite noises that sounded to my ear only slightly less grating than a pig at a trough.

Of course, kindergarten exists in part to teach us the social norms of America, or at least of Iowa. Andy Apple is Assimilated, and Mrs. Statler asks Haley to leave the table and takes her aside to show her proper table manners. There are no raised voices, no punishments, and no tears. I just see Haley nodding and Mrs. Statler talking softly to her, out of earshot of the rest of us.

Lunch for me is chicken tenders, animal crackers, iceberg lettuce, and applesauce. I squeeze in among my classmates and chow down while the kids instruct me on lunchroom etiquette.

"If you take it, you got to eat it," Jasmine tells me.

"When you're done with lunch, you throw things away and then you come back and sit down," Louis says.

"Robin, you're the only one in our class who took salad," Stefan notices.

What of it? I'm thinking. Obviously, this marks me as different, but then I remember the I-Care Rules. "Different is great," I tell my classmates, and they nod. The I-Care Rules are widely respected in these parts.

At quiet time, I consider asking Mrs. Statler to step on my back for old times' sake. But it wouldn't go with the ambient music she's playing. It's kind of Andean with birds chirping in the background. I can hear pages being turned, small voices reading aloud, "Boys can be friends. Girls can be friends."

"You're having a great day," I hear Mrs. Statler telling Abdul. "You're making a lot of good choices. Way to go, kiddo."

"Babies can be friends. Grown-ups can be friends."

My sentiments exactly, but I'm trying to concentrate. Not only do I have kindergarten every day from 8:25 to 2:55, but I also have a class to teach at the university at night. It's a class about "truth" in contemporary memoirs, and this week we're reading James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*. To keep up, I have to reread the book at nap time, on my blanket. I actually need to have it finished tonight, and it's hard to stress out properly amid all these peaceful sounds.

After quiet time comes choice time, and Stefan asks me if I want to play in the Let's Pretend Center. My first kindergarten wasn't zoned, but this one is. There are different "centers," and a number of children are allowed to play in each at any given time. The Let's Pretend Center has a capacity of four. The Writing Center can handle seven, the Art Center six, and the Building Center four. It's strictly first come, first served. After I stow my blanket back in my cubby, I'm approached by Louis and Abdul, who both ask if I can play a board game with them, but I say sorry, Stefan has first dibs. In my old kindergarten I would have ditched Stefan without remorse, much pre-

ferring board games to the Let's Pretend Center, but I want to do things right this time so my teacher and the others will like me.

The first thing Stefan does is to confiscate my copy of *A Million Little Pieces*.

"Hey, this can be a pretend recipe book," he says.

I agree. I suggest calling it *A Million Little Pizzas*.

"Okay," he says. "What do you want on your pizza?" he says, going to the oven, the centerpiece of the Let's Pretend Center. He pulls out a plastic pizza from the oven and says, "You want sauswidge?" Then he offers me an array of drinks, including Dr Pepper, Coke, and "things that kids can't have," which, he elaborates, means alcohol. A kindergartner serving up pretend alcohol, out of a pretend recipe book, made from a pretend memoir about alcohol addiction, to a pretend kindergartner. Sounds like a dangerous mix, so I opt for water instead.



By the end of my first day, we're all a bit confused. If I wasn't having a midlife crisis before, I am now. And my classmates are having a bit of a beginning-life crisis — not quite sure what to make of the new kid.

As we're waiting at the end of the day to be dismissed, we sit on the floor with our coats and backpacks, legs "crisscross applesauce," which is a little difficult for me.

"Are you going to Extended Day?" Stefan asks me.

"No," I say. "I'm going home."

"Do you ride the bus?" Louis asks.

"No."

"Oh. Well, who's picking you up?" Haley asks

"My wife," I say.

There's a long moment of silence as they take that in and blink at me like cats.

"Oh," says Stefan finally. "I thought you were going to say your dad."

I spoke too soon. I wait in front of the building for a while for Margie to pick me up, but she doesn't show. The principal comes by and tells me that I can wait by the second-floor window with the other kids waiting for errant grown-ups to show. After fifteen min-

utes, I grow impatient, and I look for a phone, admittedly not a very kindergarten thing to do, taking charge in this manner. But after 2:55, I'm off the kindergarten clock. Mrs. Statler tells me I can use the phone in her classroom.

Maybe Margie is running behind, I think. Maybe she lost track of the time. But no, it turns out she's only lost track of *me*. This, of course, is one of the negative side effects of going back to kindergarten for a week. Your spouse, in an act of subconscious self-preservation, will completely forget about picking you up after school, claiming that she thought you said 3:55 when you clearly remember telling her 2:55. It's hard to blame her. After all, we're treading on dangerously thin psychic ice here, with the potential of turning her into my mother for a week.

For similar reasons, I'm not going to invite Mrs. Statler over for dinner, though I'd like to thank her for treating me like a real kindergarten. I'm too exhausted after a school day to cook for her, and I wouldn't ask Margie to cook for my teacher and risk turning her irrevocably into my mom. Still, if I were a kid, I'm sure I would have a crush on Mrs. Statler. She radiates a kind of serene and confident poise that would have made me want to marry her when I was five or six. *Marry*, of course, was a murky word when I was five — it was something like being it in freeze tag. At five, I planned to marry a four-year-old named Christy, who suffused me with a sense of inner joy as we played in the sandbox. Shoshie too sees marriage as both flexible and easy. Sometimes she wants to marry me, and sometimes she wants to marry Margie, and she often wants to marry Peter, her classmate in preschool, or Oliver, our three-year-old neighbor. Sometimes she wants to marry the lot of us.

Although I never would have wanted to marry Mrs. Collins, I thought differently about my first-grade teacher, Mrs. Drake, whom, after having Mrs. Collins, I would have followed into the fiery pits of hell. Just the fact that she was nice to me made me love her. I figured we should marry, but I knew that she had to meet my parents first. She was probably in her early twenties, and this was her first year teaching. I invited her to dinner one day, and she asked if I had cleared this with my parents.

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"Yes," I said, not quite understanding what "clearing with parents" meant exactly.

She asked me what time she should show up, and I told her nine, which was actually my bedtime.

I went home and completely forgot about the invitation. That night, my mother and I were in the kitchen at the sink doing dishes from our dinner when the doorbell rang.

"Who can that be at this hour?" my mother wondered, drying her hands on the dish towel. "Robin, go see who it is."

I went downstairs, peeked through the window, and saw Mrs. Drake all dressed up with a fur collar and her hair in a bouffant. She was the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen, but I knew she spelled Trouble with a cursive T. She waved at me, and I waved back, and then I closed the curtain and went upstairs.

"Who was it?" my mother asked.

"No one," I said.

The doorbell rang again, and my mother looked at me and headed downstairs, with me trailing after her, shouting, "No, don't let her in. She wants to eat!"

After my mother let in my teacher, all of us sat around, embarrassed. We didn't have any food left for poor Mrs. Drake, so my mom fixed her a drink, and they tried to relax and chat about me as if I wasn't a holy terror. Even though Mrs. Drake was calm and polite, I knew one thing for sure, that she and I would never marry now.



In most ways, it turns out, I'm the same as a forty-eight-year-old kindergartner as I was as a five-year-old kindergartner. Little has changed internally, I'm afraid. I still love recess as much as I did when I was five, and I still have some of the same problems. When I was five, Erica Marks used to chase after me and tackle me and then plant me with kisses. Now the kids still chase after me, but only because I'm it. I'm always it in freeze tag. From day one, as soon as we're let out on the playground, the kids shout at me, "You're it," and they swarm around me, not only from my class, but from the other kindergarten class as well. Half of them want to be tagged by me,

and the others don't. I chase after those who don't, and I succeed in tagging a boy from the other kindergarten class, who turns around immediately and starts pursuing me. The kids decide en masse that they're all suddenly it and I'm the one who needs to be tagged. Ah yes, the make-up-the-rules-as-you-go version of every game I ever played as a kid. I remember it well. I run close to the building, then dart to the swing sets and around the jungle gym, and I can't shake them, so I head for the big field behind the school, where some older kids are playing. The swarm stops and I stop too, catching my breath, my hands on my knees.

"You're not allowed to go there," Stefan yells at me. "We're not allowed to go there."

Okay, so I head back to the playground and run to home base. Safe. I don't want to play anymore. I'm tired. Happily, a little girl named Sophie who's missing four front teeth comes over to rescue me. She wears a crooked smile and looks up at me mischievously. On the first day of school, I'm told, she came up to her teacher and announced, "I'm in kindergarten!" as though all her ambitions in life had been realized.

"Let's play a new game," she says now. "Princesses!"

"Don't say *Princesses*," Stefan groans. "I hate that game."

Stefan and the others run off to continue playing freeze tag. "I'm Cinderella," she tells me. "And you can be Belle."

Of course, I'm intrigued. I've never played Belle before, but apparently playing Princesses largely entails standing around sipping imaginary tea and admiring each other's ball gowns.

I think I've got this kindergarten thing down. The kids don't seem to have *any* problem accepting me as a fellow kindergartner or accepting me into their play. I would even go so far as to say I'm popular. I think the real reason that the dad of Paley's book wasn't accepted by Mollie and her friends when they went to the moon was because he was so obviously faking it. "Can I come to the moon with you?" he probably said, in that saccharine grown-up voice that some grown-ups think passes for Kidspeak. Get this: It doesn't. They know you're faking it. (I'm not, though; of course, I *know* I'm an adult.) And they think they talk like us!

But this isn't a Peter Pan complex or some *Whatever Happened*

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to *Baby Jane*? psycho thriller. And though I clearly have one, I loathe the term *inner child*. When I was a kid, I used to plunk myself down on strangers' beach blankets in Long Beach, Long Island, where my grandmother had a little beach house, and I'd introduce myself to them. I'd do that still if I wouldn't get arrested.

I actually *was* arrested for this when I was five, though not booked. One time I was begging my mother for a banana popsicle as we walked toward the Borden's Dairy store. I was whining, and my mother was just sick of me and told me I couldn't have a popsicle.

"Fine," I said. "I'll run away."

"Fine. Run away," my mom said and started walking away. I headed in the other direction, and I soon found an alley that I turned down. I hadn't gone more than a hundred yards or so when I spotted a boy about my age playing in his front yard. I went over and introduced myself and told him I had run away and asked if I could play with him.

We played for two or three hours before his mother came to the door and told him it was time for dinner.

"Mom," he said. "This is Robin. Can he live with us?" The request seemed reasonable to us both, but his mother looked puzzled.

A police car then stopped in front of the gate, and a policeman rolled down the window and asked me if my name was Robin Hemley.

That was a nifty trick, I thought. Of all the lucky guesses, that the policeman would know my name. For a moment, I thought of telling him no, it wasn't my name, but I wanted to see where this was going, so I told him yes.

He opened the door. "Get in," he said. "Your mother is worried about you."

My mother. Oh, I'd completely forgotten about her. Yes, she was beyond worry. She was frantic. As she later explained it to me a number of times over the years, she'd walked only fifty feet or so when she turned around to find I'd completely vanished. She didn't see the alley I'd walked down. Maybe it was obscured by bushes. Only now can I truly comprehend how she must have felt. Once in

the Cincinnati airport, Margie and I and Shoshie, who was two, walked into a store together. Both Margie and I thought Shoshie was with the other, and by the time we realized she was with neither of us, she was no longer in the store. We rushed outside, frantically scanning the concourse until finally, a minute or so later, we saw Shoshie holding hands with a woman who, when she saw us, gave us a look of both perplexity and utter condemnation. How could you lose your child? her look said. Actually, it's easy. They're slippery things.

"Are you arresting me?" I asked the policeman as we drove away from my would-be adopted brother and his quizzical mother.

"We'll see," he said. "If you promise not to do that again, I might let you go this time."

"I promise," I said. As we drove by my school, I saw the kids from the afternoon kindergarten class, a number of whom were my friends, playing on the playground. One even pointed at me, and I ducked down. What if this got back to Mrs. Collins? I felt like the thug she thought I was.

The next day, my classroom was abuzz with news that I'd been spotted in a police car. "Were you arrested?" one of my friends asked me.

"No," I said. "That wasn't me. That was just someone who looked like me."

This episode spawned in me a lifelong fear of police. I share this phobia with Alfred Hitchcock, whose father once had him locked up in a jail cell as a very young boy. In his films, the police are always menacing. Margie loves to tease me about this — whenever we pass a police cruiser, she waves, and I cringe. "Don't do that!" I tell her invariably, as though waving to a cop is a crime.



Kindergarten has always implied threat and alienation to me, but in the Diamond Class, no one needs to fear being arrested (with the possible exception of Jesus, the boy whose parents might be illegal immigrants), and everyone is made to feel special in their turn.

"Different is great" is drummed into us day after day. I'm glad of this. I'm glad, for instance, that Jesus doesn't taunt me: "I'm

named after the Messiah, and you're only named after a bird!" But sometimes I feel as though I'm in an indoctrination camp. One day Mrs. Statler reads us a book about ants and explains that ants smell with their antennae, while we smell with our noses.

"But that's okay," she says, "because different is great!" And she makes a raise-the-roof sign.

"Different is *great!*" the kids repeat in unison.

We're talking about ants here.

Sure, different is great, except when it isn't. Different isn't great if you're chewing with your mouth open. Different isn't great if you can't communicate. One day on the playground, Mrs. Statler sees Jesus, who barely understands any English, having trouble comprehending tag. She shows him how to tag a girl. "Say, 'Tag, you're it!'" she says. The boy looks unsure, almost scared, looking at his hands as if Mrs. Statler's asking him to take a swing at the girl. So she gives him a ball and mimics shooting a basket, but he shakes his head. Both Mrs. Statler and the boy earn my sympathy. Sometimes different is different, and it's hard to mitigate the pain of that, though Mrs. Statler tries.

I wonder if part of the reason my classmates have accepted me so readily into their group as a fellow kindergartner is because "different is great." Laurie, Mrs. Statler's classroom associate, tells me one morning that Jeffrey, one of the Asian American kids, told his parents about me. "There's a new kid in class," he told them. "He's very big. I don't know what to think about that."

Maybe I'm the "different is great" slogan taken to its preposterous extreme.

At lunch on Wednesday, I pay for all my hubris about being so easily accepted into this cult of five-year-olds. A boy from another class speaks to me in the lunch line.

"Why are you always here?"

"I'm not always here. Only this week."

"Are you someone's dad?"

"I am, but not here."

"Is this your work?"

"No, it's my experience. I'm going back to kindergarten for the week."

"Cool."

No sooner have I put out this psychic fire than I have an odd encounter with one of my buddies, Abdul. It's my fault. Inadvertently, I slip into my parent role when I see that Abdul isn't eating much of his hamburger.

"Are you not hungry anymore?" I ask him.

He gets a dark look, and suddenly I feel like a spy caught in some World War II flick. Darn. What self-respecting kindergartner would chide another kindergartner for not eating all his food?

"Are you a teacher?" he asks.

"Me? No, I'm one of you," I tell him, perhaps a little too desperately, and he gives me a doubtful look.

Jodi, the principal, comes up to us then. She wasn't eavesdropping — that's impossible in the bedlam that's an elementary school lunchroom. It's just a coincidence that she asks him, "What do you think of Robin?"

He's silent.

"It's kind of silly, isn't it?"

Hey, Principal Lady, I'm thinking. This isn't helping.

Abdul nods. "He's coming back because he had a worst day?" he asks.

"That's right," she says. "And now he's trying to make a new memory."

What a masterful move on her part. Unlike me, by acknowledging his doubts, she gives him a path to understand, in his own way, what I'm doing here. I had a worst day, and now I'm going to replace it with a better day. Simple math. Or, in the lingo of the Diamond Class, "Mustang Math!"

Abdul is having a worst day too, as I find out after lunch at recess when I notice him standing alone, looking glum.

"What's wrong, Abdul?" I say.

"I'm sad."

"Why?"

"No one wants to play with me."

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"I'll play with you," I say, and just like that, in that kindergarten way, we're friends again.



The Octopus Song, the Dracula Song, the Pumpkin Stew Song, the Good Morning Song, the Mustang Math Song. We sing and play our way through the week. Never mind that we shout the lyrics. Never mind that the percussion in music class is so off tempo and so jarring that you envision a Monty Python skit — an ox cart full of plague-ravaged bodies, and the call "Bring out your dead! Bring out your dead!" instead of twenty-two five-year-olds singing about pumpkins. We are the Diamond Class! We know who are our Alpha Friends and who aren't. We are learning to share, and we are learning to make good choices, and we know our I-Care Rules. We know who the line leader is today, and we know what the weather is outside, and we know the days of the week and how many days we've been in school. We are all different, and we are all special, but some are more special than others.

The most special among us are those who are line leaders and those who get to do Surprise Box. The Surprise Box always stays the same, but what goes in it changes from day to day and so does the person who gets to put the surprise in the box. Whoever guesses the surprise correctly gets to take the box home that night and put a surprise in it and write three clues or have Mom or Dad write the clues. You only get to do Surprise Box once until everyone in class has had a turn. So when one of my classmates, Lottie, the daughter of an English department colleague of mine, guesses the surprise correctly one day, she generously turns over the box to me, because she's already had a turn.

That night, I can't sleep. I awake at two in the morning and go to my study where I read work by my students. The strain of the week has shown on both Margie and me. We're both crabby and a little overwhelmed. I was too tired to read to Shoshie tonight, too tired to give her a bath. I just collapsed, which, understandably, didn't make Margie too happy. Or Shoshie. She wants to come to kindergarten with me, but I told her she'd have to wait a couple of

years, an incomprehensible amount of time to her, all too comprehensible to me. I check on her now and give her a kiss, then I roam around the house trying to find something for Surprise Box. In a way, I'm an old hand at Surprise Box, but forty-three years ago, it was a rubber lobster in a report card, and it was as much a surprise for me as for my teacher. After all that time, a rubber lobster just won't do. I find a dragon incense burner I picked up once in a market in Hong Kong.

I write down my clues.

I'm an animal that doesn't exist. A pretend animal.

There are stories of knights in shining armor battling me.

I breathe fire.

Yes, that's right. A dragon. Something transformative and mythic.

The next day, before Surprise Box, we have Writers' Workshop. Although it's called Writers' Workshop, it mostly involves drawing in journals, though my classmates practice their letters and numbers too. Our assignment is to write and draw about what makes us happy. Lottie draws a lamp. Haley draws a hill with an olive on a toothpick on top of it. No, it's a tulip, she says. Jasmine is drawing some kind of green blob. Jeffrey is writing a calendar. Lottie is drawing another lamp. No, it's someone under an umbrella, and it's raining, she tells me. Mrs. Statler is giving Stefan some help with his lowercase *a*'s. I scribble my drawing, and they all tell me not to go so fast. Then they try to decipher what *I've* drawn. "Go show it to the teacher," Jeffrey tells me, and I obey.

I've drawn a hillside with blueberry bushes on it, and people with buckets picking the berries.

I stand in line with the other kindergartners, and when it's my turn, Mrs. Statler asks me if it's a happy memory. Yes, I tell her. It's a picture of blueberry bushes on Mount Baker in Washington State.

"Did you go berry picking?" she asks, and suddenly I find it difficult to speak. I try to tell her about blueberry picking on Mount Baker with my daughters Olivia and Isabel. I try to tell her about making blueberry pies with them and making jam, and how we la-

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beled the jam "Izzy's Jam" and how proud it made her feel to have these delicious wild blueberries named in her honor. But I don't really tell her all that. I only tell her the bare facts. I don't tell her that I haven't made jam or picked wild blueberries since my divorce. I don't tell her how infrequently I get to see my children, even now that we live in adjoining states. I don't tell her that my ex-wife and I divorced when Isabel was in kindergarten. I wasn't expecting this. I wasn't expecting these feelings at all. I thought this would be a lark. It's kind of crazy, I know, but I'm sure something is visible on my face, and besides I can't speak. This is embarrassing, and I'm grateful to Mrs. Statler that her face doesn't betray anything that would shame me further. I guess this is why I needed to return. This picture. This happy memory. This teacher telling me that there's nothing wrong with me drawing the picture the way I want to draw it. "It's very nice," she says, and I rejoin my comrades without glancing at my journal again. Haley looks up from her drawing and politely asks me for my green pencil, if I'm not using it anymore, so that she can put the final touches on her small and indecipherable creation.