

Labor Day-Monday, September 1, 1997. There were approximately 1,260 days until freedom. High school lasts four years. There are 365 days per year, so I multiplied 365 times three which equals 1,095 days. Graduation is in the middle of June, so I added up the number of days in 5 months, plus 15 days for the month of June, which equals 165. Add one day for the leap year in 2000 and I got 1,260 days. Don't check my math, it's just an estimate, but it's close enough. I couldn't wait to leave Nolan High School and the town of Nolan...forever. I was consumed with a deep seeded hatred for the school, the town, everyone in it, and everything about them. After spending my summer away in St. Louis, I was convinced that I had to get away from Nolan.

1,260 days was a long time to go. I had to figure out some way to make it through for most of those days. I was getting ready for another first day of school and as much as I knew otherwise, I was still hopeful that maybe this school year was going to be a better year for me than ones before. My clothes were laid out. My hair was cut. I was fresh and ready for a new beginning.

Very few occasions in life can cause the level of anticipation that one gets the night before the first day of school. Tomorrow, I would be a freshman in high school and I thought I had finally figured out the school thing. It seemed like if you didn't try to be liked, you were able to just get by. If I just kept to myself and minded my own business people would like me better or at least left me alone. The mistake I made in middle school was that I drew too much attention to myself. I had no idea what 6<sup>th</sup> grade was going to be like but I can remember the night before the first day of 6<sup>th</sup> grade vividly...I was excited and completely wrong about what it was going to be like.

Nolan Middle School was a completely different world for me than elementary school. In elementary school, I had plenty of friends that I made easily and I developed into a confident young man. No one said anything about me being gay. But from the moment that I stepped foot into the 6<sup>th</sup> grade at Nolan Middle School, it was like I had repellent on me that repelled everyone from liking me. I didn't fit in with any of the kids at school, no matter how hard I tried. The first day of school I was labelled a faggot by an obnoxious jerk named Xavier Preston. He looked me right in my face, and to my face with hate, called me a faggot for the first time.

Xavier was a mixed boy, but all of his friends were white boys. He quickly spread the word to his flunkies and within a week, I was pegged as a fag by the whole school. His most vocal flunky was Anthony DaVinci, a pimple-faced reject who loved calling me names to deflect from the fact that he looked like his face had been smashed into a pizza everyday. There was something about that gay thing that made everyone hate me. No one cared about who I was on the inside or any of the abilities I had. To everyone, I was just a fag.

Now, I've somewhat embraced the word *faggot* in a similar fashion to how women embrace the word *bitch* or Black people have embraced the term *nigga*. I couldn't do that at the time. As a sixth grader, it hurt to the core. A lot of my human rights were violated at Nolan Middle School. I didn't realize it at the time because my teachers didn't address any of it. In fact, my teachers treated me with just as much disdain as the students. My teachers never called me a faggot but there was this sense that they felt it was my fault that I was being treated in such a way. I could tell that everyone hated gays.

The adults didn't stick up for me or stop the kids from treating me like crap. I felt like I deserved the treatment even though deep down inside I knew I didn't. I felt crazy and I couldn't figure out why I was going through such cruel treatment. I had no one to talk to and didn't have a sense of self or even a higher power. I even stopped believing in GOD.

I couldn't understand why being gay was such a horrible thing to everyone. It wasn't like I was trying to have sex with them. I just wanted to hang out and have friends. I wasn't even sure if I was really gay or not. Some of the girls at our school were pretty to me and I actually wanted a girlfriend many of times. Nevertheless, being the gay kid was the loneliest feeling one could imagine. From the first day of 6<sup>th</sup> grade, I was harassed, bullied, and ostracized universally by nearly every kid at school. My first year at Nolan Middle School was a depressing year and I even contemplated suicide nearly every day.

I also couldn't understand why I was so unpopular during middle school. I didn't dress all that bad and I wasn't ugly, fat, or stupid. The only fault that I had was that I was gay, or at least that's what everyone was saying. It wasn't my fault. I didn't want to be gay. I just grew up playing with girl cousins all the time. I tried to get some of the girls to like me, so I wouldn't be gay but none of them did. They all liked the other boys—the rough types that were always getting into trouble and getting into fights. Even the weirdest boys had girls that liked them. It wasn't just girls that didn't like me, no one liked me, not even as a friend.

That year, I had no friends. By high school, I still had no friends and I expected to continue to have no friends. Our high school and junior high school were in the same building, just in different wings. The 6<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms were in a separate building called the annex. Nolan was a small town, so the same people that I went to middle school with, I was going to high school with. Unless, everyone had a change of heart, they were probably going to still hate me for the next 1,260 days. It wasn't really my goal to have friends. I would've been satisfied just to be left alone or treated with some common decency.

I could count on one hand how many people had actually been nice or at least decent to me from 6<sup>th</sup> grade up until my freshman year in high school. There was one boy who was in the 6th grade for the third year in a row. He had a really deep voice and a beard. Yes, he had facial hair and a beard in the 6th grade. I don't know how old he was but he shouldn't have been there with us.

His name was Michael. Michael would talk to me every morning when I arrived early for school. He smoked cigarettes and gave you that good old American bad boy vibe except he wasn't a white boy with a leather jacket and a motorcycle. He was a black boy with baggy jeans, Timberland boots, and he got around using public transportation.

Michael was what society would call a thug. He dressed and acted like all the members of the Wu-Tang Clan. He was clearly a fan. The kids at school were intimidated by him and I was too, at first. Even though the 6th graders were fully capable of being cruel and derogatory on a grown-up level, they were not ready to interact with someone as rough around the edges as Michael. As I got to know him, I just felt like he had hit a rough patch at a young age. He actually had very intelligent conversations and knew a lot for someone who had failed so many times.

You could tell that Michael had learned more from life than school. Sometimes he talked about sex, which was something I knew nothing about. He didn't care though; it was like he just wanted me to listen. I was willing to listen to whatever he said because I felt better when he was around. People didn't make fun of me when they saw me talking to Michael. Any other time, it was like I had a target on my head. They talked about me, my clothes, my hair, pretty much everything but mainly the fact that I was gay. When Michael was around, they stood around as if they were waiting for him to leave so they could attack, like some jungle animals that wait for the stronger animal to leave to attack their prey.

Michael referred to all the other 6<sup>th</sup> graders as “kids” and he didn't have much respect for any of them. He had younger siblings that were close in age to the 6th graders, so he must have felt much older. I knew he was in 6th grade for a third time but I'm not sure as to whether he failed any other grades. Michael seemed so much older, he probably should've been a freshman in high school then. He would address the staff by their first names and they acted as if he was an old friend.

The fact that he actually held conversations with me and not the other kids made me feel just a little bit better about myself. When you're in a dark place, such as I was, the smallest sign of compassion can make a world of difference. Michael didn't stay the whole year, he was transferred to an alternative school and socially promoted. It made sense for him to go because he was clearly too mature for the kids in our grade.

After Michael left, it felt like all out warfare. I spent my time feeling ostracized and alone. I remember listening to “My Life” by Mary J. Blige everyday in my room and lamenting on my daily struggles. I would contemplate different routes of escape such as running away or ending my own life. I wanted nothing more than freedom—freedom to be me without anyone constantly attacking me. I thought about suicide almost every day, thinking that if I was dead, I would be free and everyone would regret what they had done to me. I soon learned that suicide wasn't an option.

One Monday morning, there was a startling announcement made over the PA system. A boy in the 7th grade committed suicide. The boy had been bullied and teased since he arrived at the annex, just like me. The same teachers let it go on just as they let it go on with me and other kids. I can't remember exactly who made the announcement, but I do remember there was clear emotion in their voice. I had become cynical at that point because I'm sure no one had stood up for the boy when they had a chance. I sat stunned and wondered how this happened. He had hung himself from his bedroom window. Some of the kids in my class laughed. That's when it became clear that these people were not going to stop with me anytime soon. If I killed myself, they would laugh or see me as weak. I had to tough it out.

There was only one other black student in my class. Her name was Missy. I think it was months before I even heard Missy speak a word. She was quiet as a mouse, very focused, and seemed very mature for her age. I remember seeing her on the first day of school as we followed our new teacher to the annex from the auditorium in the main building. When I realized that we were the only two black students in our class, Xavier didn't count to me, I just assumed that we were going to be friends.

It turned out that the class Missy and I ended up in was the class for gifted students. We didn't have a class like that when I was in elementary school and I didn't even know that I was gifted. There was a black teacher named Mrs. Tyson, who had all the black students in her class, and I wanted to be in her class. She let me know that the class I was in meant that I was gifted. So, on the first day of 6<sup>th</sup> grade I found out I was gifted and I was a *faggot*. Later, I found out that Missy had been held back in a lower grade. So, she wasn't as advanced as the rest of us but she had the behavior of a model student.

Missy and I eventually gravitated toward each other as the only two students of color in class together all day. In 6<sup>th</sup> grade, we only switched for two classes. Missy's mother was a single parent and worked a lot. She instilled a strong work ethic in Missy and the value of education. I only saw Missy's mom a few times but I've always respected how she raised her daughters. Missy had two sisters whom she took care of at home, one who was a year behind her and another sister who was much younger.

Missy felt she had to be responsible for the sake of her family. I used to watch Missy in awe at how responsible she was at a young age. She would conserve all her school supplies because she knew that her mother need not waste money due to her being wasteful. Missy kept everything in an orderly fashion and always paid attention to her appearance. Her clothes and shoes were always neatly pressed and clean. Missy kept a toothbrush to clean her sneakers if they ever got smudged. She knew the value of a dollar.

Missy was also easy to talk to and an overall sweet person. We liked the same music and were both big fans of the same artists, mostly artists on Bad Boy Records like The Notorious B.I.G. and Lil' Kim. She could be funny when she wanted to be but most of the time she serious and focused. I considered Missy to be my best friend, basically because she was my only friend. We both wanted to do amazing things at school and in life and shared our goals with each other.

It became obvious to me after a while that Missy didn't consider me to be as much of a friend as I considered her to be. We didn't eat lunch together or speak much outside of our classroom. It almost felt like she avoided me outside of our classroom. Everyone hated me and she didn't appear to want to be associated with me for that reason. She wasn't that popular, but she had her own group of friends that she kept up with. Her best friend was this big girl named Keyshia, who I remember calling me faggots too. That was another thing I noticed about Missy. When I was harassed, she never stood up for me, she just got quiet and stood by like it wasn't her business. She wasn't the best friend to me, but she was my *only* friend at the time. Regardless, Missy and I promised to support one another in our academic endeavors and school goals. As the only two black students in the gifted program we had to stick together.

In the spring of that year, I decided to try out for our local baseball league. I figured it would be a way to make friends. I played baseball the year before and fell in love with it. I loved going to games, eating ice cream afterward, and especially the pool party at the end of the season. I was also so ashamed of my life that I wanted to continue to do the things that I always had done to make sure no one noticed anything different about me. I didn't want to admit to my family that I was being bullied nor that I hated going to school. I pretended like everything was fine. So, playing baseball would make it seem like everything was just fine.

I remember my coach from the year before. His name was Coach Chris. He was the nicest guy you could ever meet. He had a tattoo of his wife's name on his leg and his son played on the team. When I first started playing, I was garbage. Coach Chris pushed me and celebrated me along the way. He was so proud of me as I got better and better. I'm not sure if I was or not but I remember being one of the best players on the team by the end of the season. If I wasn't, that's at least how he made me feel. I received a most improved player trophy and we won the championship.

I signed up for baseball with fond memories of the year before. Most of the kids who played in the league were my classmates, classmates who I hated. I didn't know them the year before because we went to different elementary schools.

My new coach was a woman, Coach Lucy, the only female coach of a boy's team in the league. She probably got stuck with me because none of the other male coaches wanted a little gay boy on their team. Coach Lucy told me that she picked me because I was an excellent fielder, which could've been true. I was an excellent fielder from working with Coach Chris. As a matter of fact, if I could play baseball without batting, I would be something great. Too bad batting is half of the game. I could've gotten better at batting but I was such a wreck that I was afraid to try my best to get better. I felt that if I struck out without trying, it wouldn't feel as bad as striking out from trying.

Coach Lucy was also Xavier's mom. That meant I was on the same team as Xavier. Now we would be together all day at school and after school at baseball practice. And on the weekends. Xavier was an excellent baseball player and his mom was serious about winning. I think she wanted to prove to all the other coaches that a woman could coach just as good as a man. She was not interested in any excuses and she didn't take it easy on us because she was a mother. She was strictly about the game and we won every single one.

Because I was so good at fielding, Coach Lucy eventually put me on first base. Normally, the first baseman would be a power hitter. I was not a good hitter at all. I started out in right field but when the starting first baseman wanted to be the catcher and the shortstop started pitching balls at an extremely fast speed for a kid, some changes were made.

There was a kid who threw the ball so hard that even the catcher's hand would hurt with the catcher's mitt. No one could catch his throws without dropping them. Coach Lucy moved me to first base because I never dropped a ball when that kid threw it to me whether he threw it from the mound or short stop. I grew to take pride in that because all the other boys dropped at least a few.

Everyone would look at me as if they were waiting on me to fail at first base and I never did. When the others would make mistakes, it was always met with consolation. I, however, got the message that a mistake was not going to be accepted. I never made a mistake at first base. Never!

My teammates weren't really friendly towards me, even though I was a good player on the team. Most of my teammates were the same people I went to school with, and the ones who didn't go to school with us soon picked up quickly that it was not acceptable to like or be friendly to me. I just started to accept and expect people not liking me. The other teams were also made up of kids we went to school with and many of them wouldn't even give me a "good game" or a high five afterward.

Just like at school, the adults didn't bother to stand up for me. Maybe it wasn't their job to be. Maybe my parents and the adults in my family weren't emotionally supportive enough. It always felt like I was exposed and unprotected from the things that people were doing to me.

We won the championship that year and I managed to actually hit the ball, only once though. But it was a good hit, and I'll never forget that feeling. At the end of the season league ceremony, my teammates and I were honored with championship sweatshirts with our name embroidered on the sleeve. I was actually very proud of the contributions I made and that we had won. I was also happy for Coach Lucy—she had proved her point. I always wanted to tell Coach Lucy how Xavier treated me at school but I never bothered. He always acted like a perfect angel in front of his mother. I always wondered where his dad was, but I just figured he wasn't around—because he wasn't around.

The same day, Anthony DaVinci and his disgusting acne-ridden face approached me about my one hit.

"Why do you get a sweatshirt? Didn't you only have one hit?"

My response was, "Didn't your team come in last place?"

The other boys laughed, even Xavier. Anthony was embarrassed in front of all his little friends and his whole face turned beet-red to match his pimples. From that moment on, Anthony harassed me more than before. He went out of his way to torment me everyday at school. He brought in others to help him, including Xavier.

It's crazy how different my childhood experience was compared to what I saw others go through. Even if I had never hit the ball or sucked, wasn't it about giving your best? Everyone

else was applauded just for trying their best. Not me. I was a damn good player, so what if I couldn't hit. I was good at something. Actually, I was great at something. I played damned first base and I was good at it. That's pretty important! After that season, I never played baseball again. I went out for basketball the next year and then I gave up on sports completely. I never wanted to be the gay kid on the team again. I regret that, because I was actually talented.

I'll never forget the last day of that 6<sup>th</sup> grade school year. Everyone had cleared their desks out and were working on getting yearbooks signed.

There was this one girl named Ashley in my class who I kind of admired and hated at the same time. She was cool to me because she could draw and it seemed like she laughed a lot. Well, she laughed at Xavier's jokes all the time. All the time. It was obvious that she either had a crush on him or was afraid that if she didn't laugh, he'd make a joke about her. Ashley had all these cool markers and school supplies. She had the good stuff.

Ashley seemed like a nice person on the surface. She had a huge smile and was a pretty girl. She loved the rock group Green Day and drew their album cover identically in her notebook. It was impressive. We sat next to each other in our classroom and she would turn around and talk to me every now and then. Somehow, it would end up with me being called a fag.

Still, I would get excited when she would talk to me because I had a feeling that she may actually be nice deep down inside. I remember one time, she asked me if I watched *My So-Called Life* on television. I told her that I had never seen it before. She then proceeded to tell me that I looked like the gay guy on the show. Of course, I was so embarrassed. To make it worse, she made sure that she said it loud enough for everyone to hear and everyone laughed. I continued to fall for it every time. I would talk to her and get humiliated. I would want to punch her in her throat, forget about it, and end up talking to her again. I still had the capability to forgive and see the good in people.

That last day of 6<sup>th</sup> grade, Ashley asked me if she could sign my yearbook. I agreed. No one wanted to sign it anyway. She opened to the very front page where the picture of the school was. She grabbed three or four different color markers and wrote:

*You are a fag!-Ashley.*

She showed Xavier and her friends, who all laughed. I scribbled it out and my \$15 yearbook was ruined in the same humiliating fashion as my entire 6th grade school year.

I was always too embarrassed to tell or make a scene about anything, so I just scratched it out and imagined her gruesome death in my head. Ashley went on signing yearbooks and being funny. When she got to a girl named Cheryl's book, she did something horrible to hers. She took Cheryl's whole inside cover and wrote an entire page of insults. She started by writing:

*I'll use up this whole page because you don't have any friends.*

I felt worse for Cheryl because she was truly a nice person. Cheryl wasn't popular but she was smart and she was even nicer than she was smart.

After that, that was the last time I saw the good in people. It was the last time I gave chances to people. I went to the 7<sup>th</sup> grade bitter, angry, and cynical of the entire human race. That cynicism stuck with me and I was ready to take it with me to high school. I was prepared for high school to be just as horrible as middle school, if not worst. I was still stuck with the same people, just a year older for nearly 1,260 days.