

## First Day at the New School

I dreaded Monday morning rolling around.

There didn't seem to be any kids my age in the trailer park, so I walked to the bus stop by myself.

I spotted the bad characters right away and they scoped me out just as fast.

Moosie was the ringleader. A true bully. Tiny for his age. But there were storms in this guy's eyes. You could see the darkness swirling around in his head.

He had a couple of big goons. Elwood and Richard. Elwood was a dolt and Richard was a little smarter, but not by much.

Cowering off to the side was this waif named Harry. He clearly was trying to be invisible, but bullies see right through the invisibility cloak. The weaker you are, the better the sport. I wondered what kind of inner anger motivates these fucks. Especially when their clothes and shoes dripped money and mine didn't. What'd they have to be pissed about?

One thing was clear from the get-go. No doubt about it. By all appearances, I was the fuckin' welfare kid.

Moosie flicked Harry behind the ear. It snapped so you knew it hurt. Harry flinched, but didn't react. It would be suicide to do so.

Moosie signaled to Elwood who pushed Harry off the curb into the street right as a car whizzed by, narrowly missing him.

Elwood laughed. "Hey, you better watch out, stupid."

Harry clambered back up on the sidewalk and got his footing.

Moosie swung around Harry and slapped him smartly against his right ear. Boxed it good. The poor kid couldn't help but recoil in defensive posture.

Moosie slapped Harry's left ear harder than he'd slapped his right one. "Fuckin' pussy."

Elwood and Richard thought this was hilarious.

Moosie shoved Harry. "Harry. Harry Balls."

Then Harry fucked up. He started to cry. And at that point, I was just glad it wasn't me. It was also at that moment that Moosie shifted his attention over my way.

The little shrimp glared at me. "What the fuck are you looking at?"

I couldn't help but stare back at him. I know, I'm an idiot, but I had such instant disrespect for his ignorance. This became my undoing.

The lines were drawn without me saying a word.

My first order of business in reporting to the new school was to visit the office and inform the secretary that I was new and in need of free hot lunch tickets. It was a government-sponsored deal for poor kids.

Right as I was handed the tickets, I looked over and saw Moosie walking by the plate glass. He locked onto me right away and stopped in his tracks – stared at me through the window.

He smiled.

Word spread pretty quickly who the poor kids were.

In the cafeteria at lunch, I sat alone at the end of a long flat table. I saw Moosie sit down with Richard and Elwood a couple of tables away. He mouthed "Watch this" to his goofs as he got up and sauntered over to my table.

He parked across from me and leaned in. "Hey. So I saw you at the bus stop this morning. What's your name?"

"Timothy." I hated my name. Timothy. Tim. Timid. It was such a pussy name. Thanks, mom.

"Tim," he mused. "Timmy. Hmm."

Hmm. I'd forgotten about Timmy. I countered with, "What's your name?"

"Moosie."

You gotta be kidding me. I couldn't help but smile. "Moosie. Nice name." Yeah, I'm a fuckin' idiot.

Moosie grinned and glanced over at Elwood and Richard. "I was just talking to my friends over there and we were wondering if you ever watched *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*"

“Sometimes. When my mother isn’t watching something else.”

I’d said way too much. I don’t know why I couldn’t filter myself. Everything you gave them was ammunition and here I was offering up pearls before swine. In the logical recesses of my mind, I guess I always thought that if you were clever or could amuse a bully, they’d back off. But they don’t appreciate your efforts because they’re stupid to start with. They don’t get the jokes.

Moosie knew he had an insecure fish on the line. He could smell it.

“What’s your dad say about that?” he asked.

Always with the trick questions. I blurted out, “My dad’s dead.”

Idiot. I’d handed over the keys to the kingdom.

His interest picked up. “So you don’t have a dad?”

Try for refreshingly honest? “No.”

“And you don’t have your own TV?”

So far, so bad. “No.”

“And you get free lunch tickets,” he summarized matter-of-fact.

I know I must have had a sick expression on my face because I felt sick to my stomach. I wished I’d starved instead of taking the free hot lunch. I wanted to scream at all these ingrates that it wasn’t my fault my mother was a major fuckup.

Moosie smiled like the Grinch looking down on Whoville. “So…” He paused as dramatically as he could. “Are you poor?”

I didn’t answer. I didn’t have to.

Then he pulled a classic bully trick. And like Lucy with that stupid football she pulls away every time at the last minute, I Charlie Browned it.

Moosie’s face softened like we could be friends. Like he wanted to share. Just out of the blue. That’s always the first danger sign. I have no idea why I always fell for this. Maybe because I had a remote hope that I might not get my ass beat again. Sometimes, remote is better than nothing.

“So, on *U.N.C.L.E.* – who’s your favorite – Napoleon or Illya?” he asked.

This seemed safe enough. “Illya.”

He stood up and visually checked with his cohorts, then homed back in on me. “I knew you were gonna say that.”

“You did?”

“Yeah. You know how I knew?”

I shook my head no.

“Cause Illya is a homo.” He laughed and swaggered back to his buds who both smiled their approval.

The worst thing you could be was a homo.

I knew Illya wasn't a homo, but for some reason, I took it personal.

In homeroom, I stuck out like a sore thumb. The differences were obvious. For one, I was the only kid without a professional haircut. My shagginess stood out.

As if I needed to advertise my arrival, I'd tracked in large clods of mud under my shoes that led a straight path to my seat at the back of the room. I became the center of amusement when our battleaxe teacher Miss Barter slammed her book shut and strode down the aisle to my desk. She scowled down at me, then down at the clumps, then back at me. Back at the mud. Back at me. Her blood was boiling. It was everything she could do to control herself. Miss Barter was old school. We would not be having mess in her classroom.

She wagged a finger at me. “You need to get some moistened paper towels and clean this up immediately.”

She turned on her heel, went back to her desk, flipped her book open and continued her lesson without missing a beat.

Kids either looked past you or sneered with malice when you had to do stuff like clean up mud on the floor. Especially when it was your own mud.

Scoping my surroundings at kneeling level put things in perspective for me. If there was any doubt about my financial status, I just had to compare shoes. Their shoes were shined, or brushed if they were Hush Puppies, and mine were worn out welfare issue with butter my mother smeared on them to make them look shiny.

Butter turns. After a while, your shoes smell funky. Bits of grass and dirt stuck to them.

I just had to make it through the next 2 weeks.