

# Chapter 1

My name is Catherine Addison Babich and I'm fifteen years old. Most people call me Callie. I don't wear glasses, play the violin, compete in international chess tournaments, and wasn't adopted from Asia or India. I'm not a member of any math club and I've never been in a spelling bee. Despite my obvious lack of supporting qualifications, I have an IQ of 162 and an almost photographic memory. When I say "almost" I don't mean that I retain photographic still-shots of pages in books like some people, it's more that I'm able to process and retain complex step by step processes better than most. If I watch someone do something or I read how to do something, I simply never forget it once I've seen it.

Both of these gifts were "free," but I pay a price for them every day in the form of social isolation. I like to think that I don't need other people, but all of us do. We all need people for validation and a feeling of self-worth. These things are so important that they're right at the top of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, above food, water, and shelter. As a result, all of us are in a near constant quest for the recognition, validation, and reverence of others. Sometimes our search is conscious, sometimes not. What a strange dichotomy it is that we first need to be accepted into an unremarkable homogenous group to be recognized for those unique things in each of us that set us apart.

So, what does somebody who is bright, curious, ambitious, self-directed, focused, and deliberate do if they're completely uninterested in virtually all of the things that completely absorb their peers like social media, television, team sports, gossip, and clothes? What if all of your family members and the people around you have very average IQs and no one you come in contact with on a daily basis reads books or has any interest in the outside world or sees anything wrong with treating women as a somewhat inferior challenged subset of the male species? What if no one recognizes or applauds you for working hard and for outstanding achievement? What if you are shunned by your classmates simply for always doing the work and answering the teacher's questions correctly?

You end up isolated, alone, un-validated and always feel like you're on the outside looking in. Once you sense this isolation, you either modify your behavior to be more like those around you, or you accept who you are and try to move forward without them.

When I first started noticing that I wasn't a part of any group, I didn't understand why inclusion was important, and for longer than I now care to admit I instinctively did things that would make me more like those around me. I'd dumb myself down and say nothing or pretend I didn't know the answers to the teacher's questions when in fact I did. And I'd participate in and do things with my peers that violated my own sense of right and wrong just so I could be part of the gang. I did these things instinctively in my quest for acceptance and validation; until one morning something happened that made me realize that compromising my behavior just to feel less lonely, was no longer going to work for me.

I was twelve years old and showering. My hair was full of soap and my eyes were screwed shut. I'd locked the bathroom door out of habit to prevent family members from inadvertently walking in, but the old-fashioned lockset securing the door was never intended as a serious security measure and proved nothing more than a low speedbump that slowed, but did not stop, the deviants outside from getting in.

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Both of the lock picker's hands were filthy, his nails chipped and broken. The key in the old lockset trembled ever so slightly as he manipulated it from his side of the door with a screwdriver. He felt the initial contact and paused to smile before slowly resuming and gently pushing the key backwards out of the lock. Once clear, it fell end over end to the floor and landed silently on several pages of newsprint that he'd slid under the door in advance. Besides deadening the sound of the key as it landed, the newspaper also allowed him to pull it back under the door to his side.

Once he had it in hand, he proudly held it up in front of his three co-conspirators and smiled cruelly. All of them were dressed in filthy jeans, camouflage shirts, and mud laden work boots. They looked like extras from Deliverance. They shuffled their feet impatiently leaving clods of dirt on the floor.

"Come on, let's do this!" one of them whispered. He looked back nervously over his shoulder down the hallway.

"Yeah, don't jerk us around. We've been waiting for this for a long time," said another.

"Patience boys, good things come to those who wait." He quietly inserted the key into his side of the door and started turning it.

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Do you remember how shy and self-conscious you were at twelve? I could barely stand to look at myself in the mirror. I was spindly, my breasts were just a dream, and I hadn't gotten my period yet. In short, I felt and looked nothing like the women I saw idolized daily in magazines and on TV and was seriously struggling with my self-image. Still a tomboy, I had not yet begun to look on boys and men as anything other than somewhat crude unwashed creatures and certainly didn't yet think of them in sexual ways. I still naively believed that men and women were of the same species and must therefore share similar values. I was also still in my early phase where I was willing to compromise my instincts and behavior to better fit in with those around me.

The first clue I had that something terrible was about to happen was when the warm moist air around me shifted ever so slightly as it will when air starts pouring out of a ceiling vent when the air handler clicks on or off. But we had neither central heat nor A/C in the house I grew up in. My subconscious registered the shift, but it wasn't until I heard the metal curtain

hangers slide along the shower rod that my conscious mind kicked in and said to me, You better check out what's going on. It never even occurred to me that some other person or persons might be in the bathroom with me.

I quickly rinsed the soap out of my hair and eyes, turned off the water, and wiped the water off my eyelids. I still remember how silent it was in that bathroom once I shut off the water. I finally open my eyes to see what on earth was going on with the shower curtain. Standing there, less than two feet away, were my brothers and their two open mouthed friends, all of them staring at me and my wet, naked, teenage body.

How would you have felt? At the time I would have preferred Norman Bates from that Hitchcock movie Psycho and his big ol' kitchen knife stabbing into my body that morning. Less than a second passed before I reacted and covered myself, but in that instant, I knew that the horse had already left the barn, that the bank had been robbed, and that something priceless had been stolen from me that I could never recover. Images of me were now permanently etched into their memories. I felt horror and crushing embarrassment, then sadness at the treachery of my brothers, then rage, and finally deep sadness again; all within that instant of time.

The scream that came out of my soul and the abject look of horror on my face as I collapsed to the floor of the tub and tried to hide all my private parts at once, instantly conveyed to those four retards that what they'd just done, crossed a line. It wasn't just another one of their pranks that they'd high-five each other over later. No, what they'd just done was indefensible on any level and a real crime against another human being that all of them would carry around and remember with shame for the rest of their lives.

All four of them pointedly averted their stares, looked down at the floor, and then shuffled silently out of the bathroom and down the hall to my brothers' room. They'd taken something very personal from me that I could never regain, and they knew it before my scream reached the other end of the house and alerted Mam that something bad had just happened.

Mam hadn't punished my brothers since they'd become teenagers. They were simply too big, and she left corporal punishment to Daddy. But that day, she made an exception. After rushing down the hall and into the bathroom in response to my scream and taking in what had obviously happened, she kind of lost it. It's the one time I remember her taking a principled stand against something and did she ever.

She assessed the scene of the crime in less than a second. The bathroom door and the shower curtain were both still open. I was on the floor of the tub, naked and sobbing, with my arms wrapped around my front, desperately trying to disappear. She didn't say one word, she simply wheeled around, marched into my brothers' room, pushed their two friends roughly out of her way, tore the curtains down off the window, extracted the curtain rod, and then commenced to beat my two brothers bloody. I mean she whaled on them.

Before you get all horrified and start calling child services, consider the crime and their ages. My brothers were not innocent little boys. They were fifteen and sixteen at the time. Secondly, the curtain rod was not one of those solid, quality ones from Restoration Hardware that would have broken bones and caused concussions. It was just one of those cheap, two-piece, telescoping, lightweight ones that costs about two dollars at Target. The way she went right for the curtains and stripped out the rod, you'd think she did it every day.

Once armed, she whaled, and she whaled on my brothers until the rod was twisted into two mangled pieces. My brothers cowered afterwards on the floor hurt not so much by the rod but rather from the vehemence that they had witnessed in our mother. Normally, she was like a mouse around the house and careful not to cause controversy of any kind. On this occasion though, she let it out. That mouse roared and my brothers heard it. Someday I'll have to ask her why or how she had the presence of mind to even think of using a curtain rod as a disciplinary tool.

After, she threw the mangled pieces to the floor in disgust and simply said, "You boys think that was something, you just wait until your father gets home." I had put on a robe while my mother was beating them. After she finished, she came back into the bathroom and gathered me into her arms. "Callie, I don't know what's wrong with those boys. Are you okay?"

"I don't know, Mam." I'd sobbed. "I can't believe anyone would do something like that to me."

"Hard to believe, isn't it?"

Hearing that story come out of my mind I realize I still have a couple of resentments that I need to work through. I could say, "it was nothing" but that wouldn't be true. It was something and it made me realize several things that I'd been clueless about until that morning. I realized I was very different from men in general and my brothers in particular. I would never, ever, even think of singling out and objectifying another human being the way they had me. It simply isn't in my DNA and it's against my nature. Most importantly, that was the instant in time where I made the connection that validation and acceptance are only likely and valuable if they are confirmed on you by people who share similar values and standards. They're worthless otherwise and I decided at that moment that I would no longer compromise my values or my behavior for anyone.

I still want and need attention, recognition, and validation, but from that day forward I made a conscious decision to no longer dumb myself down or compromise any aspect of my behavior to get that attention. I simply couldn't and wouldn't be a part of any group that could do something so despicable and unfeeling to another human being. It just wasn't worth it, and I stopped following my brothers and their friends around looking for their acceptance.

I've matured some over the last three years and no longer feel like Gumby, but one thing has not changed, I still want to be seen and acknowledged for who I am and what I've done; for my principles, my values, and my accomplishments, not for how I look. The "shower day" incident reduced me to a thing and made me all the thirstier to be recognized for what I'm capable of doing and who I am, as opposed to just being a pretty face. I will be nobody's object.

To his credit, when Daddy got home later that day and heard what had happened and saw the look in Mam's eyes when she told him, even he understood that it was important that he punish my brothers for what they'd done to me. Some things just cannot be allowed to stand if there is to be any harmony in a family. Despite his love and pride in his two boys, or perhaps because of it, he took my brothers out behind the woodshed (literally) and took his belt to them till his arm was tired. They couldn't sit for two days after.

That incident changed several things. I think it's when my brothers first realized that there were consequences for their actions, and they took their first baby steps into adulthood. It was when I came to understand and believe that men are different from women and that if I

were ever going to ascend to where I wanted to go in a male dominated world that I would need to be even tougher, more focused and self-directed, and less of a sycophant around them.

They were never going to let me into their club and rather than humiliating myself further by trying to get into a club that didn't want me, I decided to start my own. This club would have exactly one member and it would be anchored by my high standards and guided by the unwavering arrow of my moral compass. I was done compromising my values so that I could feel less alone.