

Chapter 1

They say that you never truly escape high school.

I don't know about anyone else, but the idea of spending the rest of my life at Dunkin' Donuts High isn't exactly at the top of my list of Things I Want to Do for Eternity. It's bad enough that I'm only a junior and still have two more years before I graduate. Never leaving high school sounds about as much fun as living with my parents forever. Or becoming a eunuch.

But when it comes to never escaping high school, *they* aren't literally talking about a life sentence to homeroom, Phys Ed, and cafeteria food. It's more of a figurative incarceration. Something you take with you after you graduate. A metaphor for feeling trapped by your past. Unless you end up coming back as a teacher or an administrator. Or a janitor. That would be a bummer.

Let me try to explain...

The thing about high school is that teenagers have a tendency to become preoccupied with labels—not only with who they think they are but with who they appear to be in the eyes of their peers. And with who their peers appear to be to in their eyes. It goes both ways. Labeling and branding your peers based on your personal prejudices and world view is common high school practice, an informal part of the curriculum. It's something you do without even thinking about it, like breathing or swallowing or wondering what it would be like to lose your virginity.

Okay, maybe that last part is just me. But in high school, everyone gets a label, whether you want one or not. And no matter how hard you try to blend in with an existing label or cultivate your own identity in order to stand apart from the crowd, you don't have any control over how you get labeled. Your identity is a matter of opinion, with labels more often thrust

upon you than solicited.

If that's not bad enough, high school is where teenagers often work out their own identities for the first time. Not just in a sociological sense, but in a physiological or biological sense. Right before adolescence, the human prefrontal cortex undergoes a flurry of activity, leading to the formation of an identity and the development of the notion of a sense of self. So teenagers are thrown into the crucible of high school at the same time they're trying to work out who they are, who they're not, and who they want to be.

Talk about a fucked-up science experiment.

It's like that old movie *Frankenstein*, with all of the high school students playing the role of both the monster *and* the angry villagers, chasing each other around with insults and expletives instead of torches and pitchforks while simultaneously trying to escape their attackers.

Which, in a roundabout way, brings us back to the concept of never being able to escape from high school.

High school is more often than not where labels first get applied to us, at the same time that we're coming into our own in terms of who we think we are. And those labels that put us in easy-to-identify classes and categories can end up sticking with us long past graduation, often shaping who we become. For some, we might spend years or decades trying to live up to the glory days of our labels, while for others, we might spend the rest of our lives desperately trying to escape the epithets that were given to us in high school.

Jock. Brain. Fattie. Nerd. Druggie. Rah Rah. Slut. Geek. Princess. Loser. Prude. Nerd. Queer. Stoner. Creek Rat. Teacher's Pet.

At least those were some of the more common labels that kids were given when my grandfather went to high school. Now not only are the labels different, but they can literally stay

with you for the rest of your life. And instead of our peers categorizing us in the crucible of high school, corporations have already branded us while we're still in the womb.

As one of my grandfather's favorite bands once said: Meet the new boss, same as the old boss.

Chapter 2

Mrs. Archibald claps her hands three times to get our attention. It's always three times. Never more, never less. Either three is her favorite number or else she has OCD.

“Okay students!” Her sharp voice cuts through the classroom like a Samurai's katana, severing all conversation. “Take your seats!”

The final first period bell hasn't rung yet but no one bothers to make Mrs. Archibald aware of this fact, probably because she has a quick trigger finger when it comes to assigning detention. Rumor has it she once gave detention to a student who showed up two seconds after the final bell, which seems kind of fascist. But we're not exactly in a position to file any formal complaints. So everyone stops talking and starts making their way toward their assigned seats as if we were all just given a death sentence.

As I'm waiting for a couple of students to move out of the way so I can get to my desk, Papa John's bumps into me and nearly knocks me over.

At 6' 2" and a conservative 225 pounds, Papa John's is nearly half a foot taller than I am and outweighs me by a good seventy-five pounds. He's also the starting middle linebacker for the varsity football team. so I try to avoid running into him, both literally and figuratively.

“Watch where you're going, Star-Butts.” He stares down at me, his oily, acne-cratered face hovering above me like a malignant moon. PepsiCo thinks Papa John's face looks more like a greasy pepperoni pizza, which has pretty much ruined my appetite for pizza.

I consider making a smart-ass comment about his face, but I don't feel like getting my ass kicked. So instead of getting punched in the face, I watch Papa John's bull his way to his desk and imagine a world where assholes don't get to impose their will simply because they're bigger

or stronger or because they wear a letterman jacket.

Once everyone has taken their seats, Mrs. Archibald holds up a single hand for silence until the bell rings. After the last echoes of the first period bell fade away, she starts taking roll.

“Applebee’s?”

“Here.”

“Best Buy?”

“Here.”

“eBay?”

“Here!”

eBay answers with her usual enthusiasm, but she comes off sounding like a sycophant. I have her in two of my other classes and her hand is always the first one in the air whenever Mrs. Archibald or one of the other teachers asks a question or solicits volunteers. Plus, she always seems to have the right answer, which makes the rest of us look bad. eBay is not a team player. It’s a safe bet that she’s going to wreck the grading curve.

“Febreze?”

“Here.”

“GrubHub?”

“Here.”

“Hasbro?”

“Here!”

Hasbro nearly shouts his answer, but he’s not an obsequious ass-kisser like eBay. He’s just passive-aggressively trolling her. But even when he’s not making fun of eBay, Hasbro is always in a good mood. Who can blame him? Since most sponsors provide lots of free SWAG

(Stuff We All Get) from the moment we take our first screaming breath, growing up while being sponsored by one of the world's largest toymakers is better than believing in Santa Claus.

“Home Depot?”

“Here.”

“Instagram?”

“Here.”

“Johnson & Johnson?”

Several of the other students turn to look at the empty desk behind Instagram. This is the second time since the start of the semester that Johnson & Johnson has missed class with some sort of health problem, which is kind of ironic when you think about it. But when you live in a society where Catholic kids are named Quaker Oats and students in remedial English classes are named Oracle, irony is part of the landscape.

“Krispy Kreme?”

“Here.”

“Liberty Mutual?”

“Here.”

“McDonald's?”

“Here.”

Someone fake coughs and says “Supersized!” at the same time, eliciting a few stifled snickers and giggles from a few of the resident assholes.

McDonald's is thirty pounds overweight and one of the biggest kids at school, although she has stiff competition from Burger King and KFC. That's the double-edged sword of Life Sponsorship discounts and benefits, especially when those benefits involve empty carbs, trans-

fats, and an unhealthy amount of sodium. But even though kids sponsored by fast-food chains tend to be easy targets for teasing and bullying, there's nothing more onerous than being overweight and spending your childhood carrying around the burden of a name like Nationwide.

McDonald's doesn't offer up any kind of a comeback or defend herself but just folds her hands in her lap and stares at her desk in an embarrassed silence, her cheeks as red as the background of her sponsor's logo. I feel sorry for her, but there's not much I can do without drawing attention to myself. Plus I'd probably end up in detention for talking out of turn.

"Who said that?" Mrs. Archibald scans the classroom over the top of her glasses, her thin lips pursed and her bony hands on her hips. Maybe it's just me, but she looks like a bird of prey.

No one comes clean or shows any sign of cracking, but my money is on Papa John's or United Healthcare, who is an elitist dick when it comes to kids who are overweight, out of shape, or who don't get enough exercise. Plus, he's always offering to help other students and then scaling back on any promised benefits. What a douche.

"Name calling will not be tolerated." Mrs. Archibald scowls at us, although to be honest it's kind of her default expression. "The next time it happens, if the culprit isn't identified or doesn't step forward, the entire class will receive an hour of detention. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Mrs. Archibald," everyone answers.

She stares out at us over the top of her glasses, her eyes narrowed and her lips pursed, looking as if she's trying to squeeze out a fart rather than reprimand us, until she finally pushes her glasses back up on her nose and returns to taking roll.

"Old Navy?"

"Here."

"Papa John's?"

“Yeah.”

“Raytheon?”

“Here.”

Raytheon cuts an intimidating figure in his black leather jacket, dyed black hair, and resting fuck-you-face. I’m not sure if he’s rebelling against his sponsor’s military contracts or just going through a phase, but even without the defiant punk-rock attitude, no one wants to get on Raytheon’s shit list since he’s sponsored by the world’s largest producer of guided missiles.

I’ve always wondered how much of an influence a kid’s sponsor has on their personality. The whole nurture vs nature thing. Had Raytheon been sponsored by Microsoft would he have a friendly smile and brown hair parted on one side while dressed in a blue oxford button-down and khakis? If McDonald’s had been sponsored by Adidas, would she be fit and athletic and possess a low LDL cholesterol level?

But it’s not as if parents always have a choice when choosing a Life Sponsor, since most small businesses and corporations place a moratorium on the number of annual sponsorships they offer. So it’s a first-come, first-served process, often leaving parents having to take what they can get. And when it comes to choosing a sponsor, most parents are probably thinking more about the economic benefits they’ll receive rather than what kind of impact the sponsor name might have on their children. That’s how you end up with kids named Vaseline and Hot Topic and Asian Box.

When it came to my naming rights, I’m guessing my parents were more interested in the benefits they would receive rather than how my corporate name might impact my life. Not that my life has been horrible, but it would have been cool to be sponsored by Vans or Quicksilver or Ray-Ban. Talk about some awesome SWAG. Better than Cake Pops, Rip Van Wafels, and

Emerald City green tumblers, that's for sure.

Someone behind me giggles. Probably Yahoo! She's always giggling about something.

Then Target kicks the back of my chair.

"Starbucks?" Mrs. Archibald calls out as she gives me an exasperated look.

"Oh. Here," I say.

Starbucks is one of the most common names among kids my age. It was a trendy pick when I was born, kind of like Dylan or Brittany back before parents had to start applying for corporate sponsorship in order to raise a family. But I shouldn't complain. After all, I could have been named Jiffy Lube. Or Snap-on.

There are more than two dozen Starbucks at Dunkin' Donuts High, the most of any sponsor and nearly twice as many as Coca-Cola, followed closely by Amazon and The Gap. While there's not a Starbucks in every classroom, we're pretty ubiquitous around campus.

I hear it's worse at the high schools in Seattle.

It can get confusing when multiple classmates are named Starbucks or FedEx or Applebee's and the teacher calls on you. It's even worse when you have a twin and both of you are sponsored by Netflix. Or when your two best friends are named Taco Time.

My grandpa tells me it's not any different than when he went to school and there were a couple of Jennifers and Johns in every other class. But at least back then the teacher could call students by their last names and you could differentiate the two Mikes in your social circle by using nicknames. Now, because of the terms of our Life Sponsorship contracts, using anything other than the name of our official sponsor is prohibited, especially in public or formal situations. The only caveat is you can use numbers like Starbucks #1 and Starbucks #2 in order to avoid confusion, although invariably someone ends up suffering from feelings of inadequacy. No one

wants to be referred to as number two. That kind of thing will stick with you for life.

When dealing with students who share the same corporate sponsor, teachers at Dunkin' Donuts High are instructed to number students in alphabetical order based on their historical family surname. This is supposed to help avoid hurting any of the students' feelings or giving someone delusions of grandeur, which is kind of ridiculous when you're named Roto-Rooter.

The teachers are a mix of the sponsored and unsponsored, since some of them are from the same generation as my grandparents, which was the last generation to be born before the implementation of Life Sponsorship. In addition to Mrs. Archibald, my teachers include Mr. Jeep, Mrs. Powell's Books, Mrs. Lyft, Mr. Bold, Mrs. Alvarez, and Mr. Black & Decker.

"Okay class," Mrs. Archibald says once she's finished roll call, the empty whiteboard looming behind her like a threat. "Who can identify one of the basic elements necessary for trademark infringement?"

eBay's hand shoots up in the air. Mrs. Archibald ignores eBay and surveys the classroom before calling on Twitter, who sits three seats behind me between Toyota and Unilever.

"Twitter."

"What?" Twitter says.

"Can you answer the question?" Mrs. Archibald asks.

A few seconds of silence pass, followed by a stifled laugh before Twitter responds.

"What was the question again?"

Twitter tends to have a short attention span.

Rather than repeating the question, Mrs. Archibald calls on Old Navy, even though eBay still has her hand raised.

"How about you?" Mrs. Archibald asks. "Do you know the answer?"

“Confusion?” Old Navy says.

“Is that an answer or your general state of mind?” Mrs. Archibald asks.

Old Navy looks around as if for help before replying. “An answer?”

Mrs. Archibald sighs.

The reason we have to take Intro to Trademark Infringement is so we all understand the importance of protecting our sponsor’s intellectual property. Although I guess if you want to get technical about it, we’re part of that intellectual property, bought and paid for until we turn eighteen and have the option to apply for a new sponsor.

“While the likelihood of confusion *is* the main element of trademark infringement, there are a number of other factors that go into protecting a trademark and filing an infringement claim,” Mrs. Archibald says.

eBay, who still has her hand in the air, starts waving it back and forth as if she’s suffering from an epileptic seizure.

“What?” Mrs. Archibald says, exasperated.

eBay lowers her hand. “I know what the other factors are.”

“I’m sure you do,” Mrs. Archibald says. “But since there are thirty other students in this class, I think it would be a good idea for them to show that they’ve learned something, as well.”

Nobody in the classroom says anything, but I’m guessing every other student hates eBay as much as I do.

“Okay then,” Mrs. Archibald says. “I guess we need to go over the material again. Everyone, open your books to Chapter Two...”