

Some people say high school is the most awkward and humiliating time of your life. Those people must have blocked out middle school, which marks the formative stage between childhood and adolescence, when you don't quite have acne but you definitely have prepubescent BO that smells like somebody threw up a Big Mac on a pile of pig shit. The smell that radiated off my twelve-year-old body caused my own mother to keep her distance from me. I remember one night when my mom sat on the other side of the couch while we watched *MTV Cribs*, which was very out of character for her because that was our favorite show to snuggle up to while we talked about our dream house.

Anyways, I knew that middle school was going to be a challenge for me. None of my friends from elementary school were going to be there because I had moved to another city after my parents got divorced. Most kids in my position would have been thinking more about the fact that their family had been torn apart and they were stuck between two fighting parents. I was more worried about having no friends to help me get my backpack out of the toilet after someone stole it and then peed on it. Which, by the way, actually happened to me. Except not only did someone pee on it, she perioded on it as well. I'm not sure if "perioded" is a word, but you get the point. It was graphic.

The night before my first day of sixth grade my brother Jerid sat me down to give me some very wise advice.

JERID: Don't wear black.

ME: Why?

JERID: You already have the face of someone who's gonna shoot up the school. Don't dress like one.

ME: Got it.

JERID: Also, don't use your pencil case. No one uses pencil cases.

ME: Then what am I gonna hold my pencils in??

JERID: Your backpack.

ME: Then what's gonna protect them from the pee and period blood?

JERID: What?

ME: My life is different than yours.

The next morning I woke up extra early so I could pick out something to wear that didn't make me look like a total idiot. FOUND IT! My SeaWorld shirt that had three dolphins swimming in a circle with the words "Poetry in Motion" on it. IN CURSIVE. Nailed it! While riding in my mom's car on the way to school I started thinking about all the things I was most nervous about, and I started sweating so hard that the dolphins were literally swimming in water. It was actually kind of beautiful, poetic if you will.

My biggest fear was the boys' locker room. The thought of changing in front of a group of guys made me want to jump out of my mom's car and get hit by a semi. Which, by the way, I used to think about every day. Thank God for child-safety locks. They're not just for curious toddlers, they're for sad, fat tweenagers with micro-dicks too. As my mom pulled up to my new prison she gave me a hug, while holding her breath to avoid smelling my tuna pits, and told me she was proud of me.

ME: For what?

MOM: For growing into such a wonderful man.

ME: But I'm only twelve.

MOM: Eh, you look thirty.

As I walked up the steps and into the gates I took a look around and noticed I was the only person wearing beautiful mammals on his shirt, and I felt pretty cool. Maybe this wouldn't be so hard. Maybe I would have a great yea—

DOUCHE: Nice shirt, dumb ass!

Ok, he didn't like it, but maybe someone els—

HOT GIRL: Poetry in Motion?! Here's a poem for you: Roses are red, violets are blue, I would rather choke on a coat hanger and die than fuck you.

I mean, I have to hand it to her. It was kinda good. As I walked to my first class I searched the halls, trying to find a familiar face. I knew my friends from elementary wouldn't be here, but maybe a kid I knew from my social life would. Of course by social life I mean the ball pit at McDonald's and the waiting room at my children's therapist's office. Unfortunately I didn't see any other fatties or crazies, so it was just me surviving this day alone.

A few hours later the lunch bell rang, and I had no idea what to do. If I were to sit in the grass patch by the quad alone, everyone would know what a loser I was. Although my shirt wasn't helping that situation. So I decided the only thing for me to do was hang out in the hallway and pretend like I was working on something. I'd rather people think I was an overachiever than a friendless mam-

mal activist. So I took out my lunch and grabbed a notebook out of my backpack and started writing down nonsense. As I was on my third page of pointless scribble I heard a voice from behind me. It was a teacher, and her name tag read “Mrs. Rose.” She was an older woman wearing a HIDEOUS cat sweater and an even more hideous wig. She looked like a crazy person you would see on a sitcom. You know, the lady who lives next door with eighty cats who plays marching band music out of her xylophone.

MRS. ROSE: That’s a beautiful shirt.

I’m burning this shirt.

MRS. ROSE: What’s your name?

ME: Shane.

MRS. ROSE: That’s the name of my ex-husband.

ME: Oh. Cool. What was he like?

MRS. ROSE: He was a hero. He was eaten by rats while hiding from the enemy in a hole for two months.

ME: Wow, he was in the army?

MRS. ROSE: Nope.

Suddenly I wasn’t the saddest person in the hallway.

MRS. ROSE: Are you in need of some company?

ME: Um . . .

There’s nothing creepier to me than a student who hangs out with the teachers. I had one teacher in high school who would hang out with all the cheerleaders during lunch and buy them Quiznos on Fridays.

ME: I'm ok. Just working on my homework.

MRS. ROSE: That paper just has stick figures killing themselves on it.

Wow. I didn't even realize that's what I was scribbling. That's telling.

MRS. ROSE: Come into my classroom. There will be lots of friends for you to make.

She either had a room full of kids or a brain full of different personalities, but it was still better than sitting on a school floor with gum stuck to my ass. I got up and went into her classroom, and to my surprise there were real live kids! Although, I'm guessing she had multiple personalities too. That wig was definitely hiding some demons.

MRS. ROSE: Everyone, this is Shane. Let's all say hi to Shane!

The kids shouted my name in what I can only describe as a clusterfuck of noise and screams. I turned around and saw the sign next to the door, and it all made sense. This was a special ed class, and she thought I belonged here. I looked down at my suicide scribble for some ideas of how to fucking kill myself on the spot. Unfortunately there were no sharp objects to be found, and nobody was wearing belts because elastic shorts were all the rage in this room.

MRS. ROSE: There's a table back by the reading corner with an empty seat. Why don't you go on back there and meet some of the children? They don't bite. Well, Andre does, but only when provoked. He also tends to punch people in the genitals, but that's only when it's cold out.

I walked to the back table, and what I saw surprised me. There was a girl with long brown hair and beautiful blue eyes sitting reading a book. And it was a high school book, not a Dr. Seuss book with lots of pictures. My heart stopped and she put down the book and looked up at me. I was waiting in anticipation to see what was going to come out of her mouth. Were her words going to be slurred? At this point I didn't care. She was so hot I would have let her bite me in the face and punch me in the dick.

GIRL: Hi, my name is Cary.

My whole being went numb. She had the most beautiful voice, and her smile made me feel instantly safe. Something that I didn't feel too often as a kid. This was my moment to woo her. To let her know that I was her man and I was ready for the relationship to blossom.

ME: I'm not retarded!

CARY: What?

ME: I know. I mean, this shirt is retarded, but I'm not retarded. And I know I'm super fat, but I'm not like "retardedly fat," you know? I'm like . . . normal fat.

CARY: You should probably stop talking.

ME: Not that there's anything wrong with being retarded! I have retarded people in my family! I mean, now that I think about it, I probably got some retarded genes passed down to me. I definitely have been told I have a retarded person's forehead.

CARY: Can I talk to you in the hallway real quick?

I could tell I had messed up. Her face was red and it was squinched in anger in a way that reminded me of the times my mom

discovered I'd tried on her lingerie while she was at work. I was in BIG TROUBLE . . . and also had therapy again on Monday.

Cary dragged me into the hallway and closed the door tightly behind her so none of the students could hear.

CARY: What the fuck is wrong with you??

ME: Do you want a list or . . .

CARY: Do you know how offensive the word "retarded" is?

ME: A lot?

CARY: Ya, a lot! And you said it like thirteen times. And what the hell do you mean by a retarded person's forehead?

I lifted my hair up.

CARY: Oh . . . Ya, I guess I can see that.

ME: I'm sorry! I was just nervous! I really do know . . . mentally challenged people, and I would never want to hurt their feelings. I just couldn't shut up, and you're so . . . so . . .

CARY: If you say "retarded," I'm gonna pull an Andre and punch you in the tits.

ME: I thought he punched in the crotch?

CARY: Oh, maybe that's something he only does to me, then.

ME: I don't blame him. I'd punch you in the tits all day if I could.

She looked creeped out. Probably should have just said "retarded" again.

ME: I'm sorry. Can we start over? I have no friends, and I really don't want to spend the rest of the year eating on the floor and having people throw food on me 'cause they think I'm a trash can.

CARY: That happened?

ME: No, but it will. Some people say that when they see me from the corner of their eye, I look like trash.

CARY: Wow, that's dark.

ME: Ya, my grandma gets kinda mean when she misses a pill. One time she told me from far away I looked like the bus.

CARY: Ok, then. Well, let's start over. Hi, I'm Cary.

ME: Hi, I'm Shane.

CARY: Nice to meet you.

She smiled. I smiled back. We had a moment. It was nice. Next step, she would be my girlfriend and I would love her forever.

ME: Can I ask you a question? You seem really cool, and pretty, and normal. Why are you hanging out with the special ed kids?

CARY: Well, my brother is mentally handicapped and I wanted to do something in school to help out people that were struggling like him. So I decided to join the Best Buddies program.

ME: What's that?

She walked me back inside the classroom and explained the program, which was really amazing. It was a club where students would come in during lunch and spend time with the special ed kids. And it wasn't an educational thing. They didn't read to them, or teach them math, they just hung out with them. Treated them like peers. Just chilled with each other and didn't act like anyone was different. Because, as Cary put it, "we're all the same and we're all just as fucked-up as each other." A statement I couldn't have related to more.

After hanging out with her for that lunch period, I decided that I wanted to join the club. Mainly because it sounded like a really cool way to give back, but also I wanted to see Cary get punched in the tit

by her buddy so I could jerk off to it later. This was before Internet porn existed, so don't judge me.

The next day during lunch I walked into Mrs. Rose's class and spotted Cary sitting in the back reading her book. I walked up to her, but before I could get her attention Mrs. Rose stopped me in my tracks.

MRS. ROSE: Shane! I'm so happy you decided to join Best Buddies!

ME: Thanks! I'm gonna go hang out with Cary and her buddy!

MRS. ROSE: Um, Shane. You don't need to hang out with Cary's buddy! You get your own buddy!

For some reason that thought hadn't crossed my mind. I figured I would be hanging out with everyone. Being in charge of one person terrified me. The one time I'd ever babysat, the kid ran into a glass door and got a concussion. And I laughed. I wasn't made for this.

ME: Maybe I could just be like . . . everybody's buddy?

MRS. ROSE: That sounds exactly like something my ex-husband used to say. And do I need to remind you what happened to him?

Rats. Hole. Dead. Moving on.

ME: Where's my buddy?!

She turned around and grabbed a student from a desk. As the student stood up I noticed the name tag on his desk. Andre. The dick-punching, face-biting, eight-foot-tall guy whose dick I could see through his elastic shorts, and it was HUGE. It looked like a toddler hiding behind window curtains. I started to panic. I was not cut out for this. I'm sure he was a sweet kid, but he could literally EAT

ME. He was the tallest person I had ever seen. His head was the size of a train and his teeth looked like the passengers.

MRS. ROSE: Andre, say hi to Shane!

ANDRE: Hi.

BOOM! His voice was so low it ricocheted against the walls and made all the desks vibrate. It was like that scene in *Jurassic Park* where the *T. rex* roars in the face of those kids and they all shit themselves. There was a serious chance I had shit myself too.

ME: Hi, Andre. Nice to meet you.

MRS. ROSE: Put your hand out, Shane.

ME: WHAT?

MRS. ROSE: Put your hand out so Andre can shake it.

PUT MY HAND OUT? Are you fucking crazy?? I'm sure he's sweet, but if he grips my hand with his, it will look like the Jaws of Life CRUSHING a Kia Soul! And I can't lose my right hand! That's the hand I do all my . . . scribbling with.

CARY: Come on, Shane. Shake his hand.

Cary was now standing next to me with a smile on her face. She was loving this. The look of sheer terror plastered across mine was giving her pure oxygen. She was living for it.

ME: Ok. Let's do this.

I put my hand out to shake his, and . . . he shook back. It was fine. He didn't crush me. He didn't punch me. He just shook my

hand, smiled, and let me go. I felt like a total piece of shit. I couldn't believe for a second I had been too scared to treat him like a human being. Just because he was an actual giant and had the voice of a ship horn didn't mean—

ANDRE: BALLS!

CRUNCH! He jabbed my junk and started crying laughing. Cary started to bust up and even Mrs. Rose couldn't hold her laughter. Finally, Cary reached over and placed her hand on my shoulder.

CARY: Welcome to the club, Shane.

Over the next month I went to the classroom every day during lunch and we had the best time with each other. Andre was actually super hilarious and really cool to talk to. He had such an interesting life. His family had moved six times in one year and I related to that a lot. Since my parents divorced I had moved a few times and it was really hard on me. I couldn't imagine dealing with that on top of needing special attention. He was a really extraordinary guy, except for the occasional violence. One day we received an assignment from Mrs. Rose.

MRS. ROSE: Ok, everyone, I thought it would be fun if this weekend you took your buddy out for a fun time! Maybe a movie, or a lunch date, or even a ball game at the park! What do you think?

Everyone was super excited about it. Especially Andre. He gave me a hug and squeezed me tighter than I had ever been squeezed before. It was similar to the footage you see on Animal Planet of the

anaconda SUFFOCATING the goat and swallowing him whole. It was definitely a sweet and terrifying moment that made my sad life flash before my eyes.

I didn't really have anyone to hang out with on the weekends, so I was also excited about this task. Maybe Cary and I could have a double date with our buddies? There was only one way to find out.

ME: Hey, Cary, what are you and your buddy gonna do this weekend?

CARY: We're gonna have a sleepover at my place. You know, girl stuff. What about you?

Crap. She's busy and I had nothing planned.

ME: Same.

CARY: You're gonna have a sleepover with Andre?

Didn't think that one through.

ME: No! We're gonna do guy stuff. You know . . . play with Beanie Babies and probably whip something up in the Easy-Bake Oven.

I didn't know much about guy stuff.

CARY: Cool. Well, have fun, freak.

The bell rang, and it was time to go back to class. She smiled at me as she left, and I couldn't stop smiling back. I needed to ask her out soon, but I didn't know how. What if she just saw me as a . . . buddy?

That night I was having my man date with Andre. My mom and I drove over to pick him up and he ran out of his house in a way that

reminded me of another scene from *Jurassic Park*. You know, the one where the *T. rex* runs toward the truck and then eats everyone inside?

MOM: That's your friend?

ME: Yep! Big, huh?

MOM: It looks like a toddler hiding behind window curtains.

He got in the car, and my mom took us to the movies. I'm about 90 percent sure my mom thought we were on a date, and I was ok with that. I mean, Andre was a catch, and let's be honest, I was lucky to get what I could get.

As Andre and I waited in the theater for the movie to start we started engaging in "man talk."

ME: Do you think Cary likes me? You know, likes me likes me?

Sorry, spelling error. I meant "girl talk."

ANDRE: Ya. She likes everyone! She's so nice.

ME: Ya . . . but I mean . . . you know . . . **LIKES** me.

ANDRE: Like the way I like Mrs. Rose?

ME: I hope not.

ANDRE: Have you asked her?

ME: No way! What if she says no! What if she laughs at me! What if she makes you punch me in the dick?

ANDRE: You should ask her to the fall dance. I'm gonna ask Mrs. Rose.

ME: Fall dance? That's a thing? Also, you really gotta find a new crush. You know, something not illegal.

ANDRE: The fall dance is coming. It's my favorite dance 'cause there's candy corn everywhere.

ME: Now you're speaking my language. I fucking love candy corn.

ANDRE: Also Mrs. Rose always saves me a slow dance.

ME: You're creeping the fuck out of me, Andre.

That Monday Mrs. Rose told us what our next assignment would be. We were in charge of being our buddies' guardians at the fall dance. This was perfect! It was the perfect time for me to ask Cary if she wanted to take our relationship to the next level.

ME: Hey, Cary, will you go to the dance with me?

CARY: Oh . . . you mean like . . . as a . . . friend?

ME: Um . . . Um . . .

I started to sweat, and I heard a grunt behind me. It was Andre shooting me a "you got this" face. I turned back around to meet my destiny.

ME: No. As more.

CARY: Oh.

OH?! What do you mean OH?! She used the same tone I would have if I found out it was past eleven a.m. and McDonald's wasn't doing breakfast anymore!

CARY: I just don't want to date right now.

ME: Oh.

My "oh" was more in the tone of just hearing that MCDONALD'S HAD JUST BLOWN UP AND THEY WERE NEVER COMING BACK!

CARY: I'm sorry. I just don't want to date until I'm fifteen. We're still kids, you know.

ME: But I look thirty.

CARY: I'm sorry, Shane.

She gave me a hug. Not as tight as an Andre hug but just as sweet.

CARY: Still friends?

ME: Hey, best buddies.

We laughed, but on the inside I was dying. It was the first time I had ever had the courage to ask a girl out, and I got shot down. Luckily Andre was there to lift me up.

ANDRE: Mrs. Rose said yes!

ME: What?

ANDRE: Told you she liked me.

Once again my mentally handicapped friend's life was better than mine. The next week was the dance and I made sure to find the coolest outfit I could. Unfortunately I'd thrown my dolphin shirt in a fire pit and watched it burn to fucking ash, so all I had left was the outfit I'd worn to fifth-grade graduation. It was a button-up shirt and pants that had a rip in the ass. Still a step up from the dolphin shirt.

My mom dropped me off at the dance, and I saw Andre standing at the door waiting for me. He looked awesome. He had on a suit and the shiniest shoes I had ever seen. He looked like a member of OutKast, and I looked like a guy from *American Idol* who lived in his car and got voted out the first week. As we walked in together, lots

of girls were hitting on Andre and staring at his . . . toddler. I tried to make the sexiest face I could, and all I got was a teacher asking me if I was ok. She even mentioned that the nurse was on duty. Once again, nailing it.

CARY: Hey, Shane! Hey, Andre!

ME: Hey! Where's your buddy?

CARY: She's on the dance floor. I can't get her off.

ME: Isn't she . . . deaf?

CARY: Ya! She feels the vibrations of the beat through her feet!

I looked over at Cary's buddy and she looked like she was in an old-school Britney video. Her arms were popping, her hips were shaking, her head was whipping. She was a true pop icon reincarnated. Of course the deaf girl was a better dancer than me, and my buddy had a bigger dick than me. Special ed kids: 2. Me: 0.

CARY: Are you gonna dance?

ME: Nah, probably not. Just gonna make sure all the buddies are safe. Maybe have some punch or something.

CARY: Well, I'm going to dance, so if you wanna join, that's where I'll be.

I wanted to be there more than anything. Dancing with her. Watching her hair fly through the air as she jumped around to the beat. It sounded like heaven. Too bad I was a big pussy who watched everyone else have fun while I ate deviled eggs by the trash can. You know, eating the innards and throwing away the white. A big pop song came on and busted through the speakers. I don't remember the song, but I do remember it was something everyone knew and everyone wanted to dance to. I saw all the best buddies RUSH to the

dance floor and take over. I was nervous because I didn't want the other students to make fun of them. Kids can be so mean. Hell, just a couple of months ago I might have even laughed at a group of special ed kids freak-dancing on each other. But after spending time with them and becoming their friend I just wanted to see them have fun and be happy. And that's what they were doing. Mrs. Rose's whole class was in the middle of the dance floor fully having the time of their lives. Not caring what anyone was thinking about them. Not listening to the laughter coming from some of the "normal" kids, and not even paying attention to anyone around them.

As I watched I felt inspired. I wanted to be more like them. I wanted to not care what other people thought. I wanted to just be myself and ignore all the assholes that surrounded me. I decided to throw away my last deviled egg and make my way to the dance floor. I saw Cary, and she was jumping up and down like she was in the middle of a rave. She looked so free and so happy. I ran up to her and started jumping too. She screamed over the music.

CARY: YOU'RE DANCING!

ME: YA, I KNOW!

CARY: YOU SMELL LIKE EGGS!

I shut my mouth to keep the smell from coming out and kept dancing. She laughed and then grabbed my hands. We started jumping up and down and spinning in circles. Besides the fact that deviled-egg-colored vomit was starting to come up, it was the most fun I had had in a long time. I felt like I'd found my place.

For the rest of the year I spent each day hanging out with Cary and the rest of the buddies and I never had to eat lunch alone again. I also started wearing a crotch cup on cold days just in case Andre experienced a fit of rage. Luckily I had a micro-dick, so not much

damage could have been done anyways. I'm not sure where Andre is now, but I'm sure his life is better than mine in every way. That good-looking, tall, hung asshole.

. . .

Special ed kids: WINNERS. Me: 0.