



BAD KID

DAVID CRABB

A MEMOIR

"I expected a memoir from David Crabb to be funny; what I wasn't prepared for is how touching it is. It's a story of finding oneself in adolescence for anyone who has ever felt like an outsider."

—TEDDY WAYNE, author of *The Love Song of Jonny Valentine* and *Kapitoil*

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HARPER PERENNIAL

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY • NEW DELHI • AUCKLAND

Dedication

For Teri, Leonard, Greg, Sylvia & Max
You know who you are. I'm glad I do too.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Bigmouth Strikes Again

I want to start by telling you that this is a work of nonfiction. I've written about these kids, club fights and parties the way I've remembered them, to the best of my ability. But I also need to apologize for something.

I'm sorry I did so many drugs. And when I say "drugs" I don't mean little puffs of weed in college dormitories or occasional bumps of coke off a key in a nightclub bathroom. I mean huge, mind-altering, gobs of XTC. I'm talking about sheets . . . no, reams of acid.

As a broke teenager I often had to work with a limited budget. I huffed gasoline, snorted poppers, inhaled Liquid Paper fumes, and ate heaps of over-the-counter speed sold to sleepy, long-haul truckers at gas stations. Sometimes I wonder if I didn't do less drugs than I think I did. Then I realize that not remembering probably means I did a lot, which is part of the reason that some of the names, identities, hair colors, concert t-shirts, and piercing-types in this book have been changed. I've also done this in order to protect the anonymity of the bad kids I've known, most of whom have grown up to raise families, have successful careers, and join PTA groups, which is probably as shocking to them as it is to me.

In some cases, composite characters have been created to further preserve privacy and decrease the number of black-clad kids in combat boots roaming the pages before you. I hope that if you crack the code and recognize yourself in this book, you feel that I've appropriately documented your bad behavior. I would hate to shame people for the *wrong* awful things. You shouldn't have to feel embarrassed for running around a cemetery naked in a pig mask on uppers when you were actually the one on mushrooms who ate a bar of soap during a seance.

Though the conversations in this book come from my keen recollection of them, I am not a robot. There is not a black box recorder installed in my belly. And if there were, the amount of LSD I've ingested between the ages of sixteen and eighteen would probably have fried it. These exchanges in nightclubs, locker rooms, and tiny Texas apartments are not written as word-for-word documentation. But I hope I've retold them in a way that evokes the sidesplitting, crush-inducing, heartbreaking essence of the wonderfully colorful people I have known.

Also, several time lines have been altered, mostly to protect privacy and maintain narrative flow. And also because I might not remember how we got from point A to point B, but I remember how we got from point C to point D and made a switch. Maybe we were friends in high school and you're thinking, "Hey! I didn't ride with you to Amarillo in the back of a taco truck with a drag queen. I drove you in my Miata to Waco on LSD! You got it mixed up."

I'm sorry for that, but I also want to congratulate you on your superior memory.

I also need to apologize to my poor, belabored parents.

I'm not sure how far you'll make it through this book before chucking it in the garbage and joining a support group. Well, ~~another~~ support group. But as the substance abuse, occult activity, and rampant sexual obsession detailed in these pages gets to be too much for you, it might help to tell yourself that I wrote this simply for the money.

In truth, I wrote *Bad Kid* because I'm a storyteller, and I want to touch people and make them feel understood. I hope this book can be entertaining as a personal narrative but also be universal enough to make readers feel connected to something larger than themselves, regardless of their background and upbringing.

But if you're a member of my family and find these tales psychologically distressing, just go with the "he did it for the money" angle. Remind yourselves that I have an absurd amount of student loan debt and although Sallie Mae might sound like an innocent farm girl with pigtails, she's actually a ruthless bitch in shoulder-pads who's been trying to ruin my life ever since I graduated. If it were up to her, I'd be rich and dead.

So as you read these harrowing tales, rejoice in knowing that I'll probably be able to buy my own plane ticket home for Christmas this year!

I'm sorry about the wigs. Or lack thereof.

This book is based on my solo show "Bad Kid." We got one negative review from an older, gay writer who was perturbed with the lack of videos, costume changes, and . . . wigs.

Yes. Seriously.

Wigs.

He was also upset that my experience of coming out was so "easy." I found the wig comment so hilarious that I initially glossed over this statement. But then I thought more about it.

As a thirty-nine-year-old man, shouldn't my experience of coming out be different than that of a fifty-five-to-sixty-year-old person? That's around a twenty-year gap. I can't imagine the struggles of gay men in the sixties who had no one to talk to, men who were forced into heterosexual marriages by their terrified mothers and fathers, men with children whose lives were torn apart as their fathers drank, disappeared, or came out of the closet and were forced from their lives.

The only experience I can truly know is my own. And that's what I've written about. I will not justify it or defend its worth based on some generational scale of comparative sadness. It was hard for me and the people I called friends. Just as it was hard for kids forty years ago. And by no means is it over.

It's hard for teenagers now. But I'm happy that many of them live in a world where they can be out, find LGBT resources in their schools, and see gay and lesbian role models in their media. I'm happy that they can fall in love with someone they care about right out in the open and consider a legally recognized marriage. Thinking about all of this in relation to my own teen experience takes my breath away. I can't believe I'm seeing this come to pass in my lifetime.

Of course, there are people who would argue vehemently against this rosy-colored view of things. I can't know what the life of a fifteen-year-old closeted lesbian in the heart of the Bible Belt is like because that's not part of my experience. And for her, at least for now, it's still a difficult struggle.

All I can know is my own story. And this is it.

Sans wigs.

The pickles.

I'm so very sorry for the pickles. It's too much to get into here. But believe me, when you hit the

part of the book, you'll certainly know you're there. Mom. Dad. If you even make it to this part of the book, please remember that whole money-thing I mentioned earlier.

See you at Christmas!

I'm sorry to my friends who are gone. I'm sorry if I wasn't there when you needed me. I'm sorry that we lost touch. I'm sorry if the world hurt you. I'm sorry if the people you loved abandoned you. I'm sorry if the drugs we took together in a spirit of youthful fun became something that damaged your life. I'm sorry for all the pain you never let me know about. But I'm not sorry about forgetting you. Because that will never happen.

I miss you every day.

And to all my dear friends who are still here, thanks for the amazing time. Hating the world would've been a lot less fun without you in it. Thanks for reminding me that shame is bad, fun is good, and that if we believe enough, every day can be like Halloween.

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PROLOGUE

Superheroes

“What in God’s name is that?” asked my grandma Oggy, tucking a used Kleenex into the cuff of her shirt. It was the summer before eighth grade and my dad had just taken us downtown for a birthday barbecue. At a red light in front of the Alamo she’d seen something shocking.

“Well, I’ll be,” said my dad, turning down his Merle Haggard cassette as he peered through the windshield.

I peeked around the driver’s seat and saw them in the crosswalk: three teenagers wearing layers of black clothes and heavy eyeliner. My grandmother fluffed up her snow-white perm with a hair-pick and leaned forward. “Look at the mop on that poor girl’s head!” she said, chomping on a piece of Juicy Fruit. “Looks like she stuck a fork in a light socket.”

There’s really nothing sadder than goth kids in a warm-weather climate. The day’s record-breaking heat made them look like smeared watercolors, a moist wad of painted pleather rolling in slow motion across the pavement. It was the *Abbey Road* cover that time ignored, the one Edvard Munch would have painted.

The girl leading the group wore a heavy velveteen gown marked with sweat circles around her neck and armpits. The hem of it dragged against the cement, collecting bits of garbage and cigarette butts as she morosely Swiffered her way across the street. Manic Panic hair dye dripped from her hairline, turning her forehead violet.

The little guy behind her had a Mohawk that collapsed over the front of his face, making him look like a depressed rooster. His floor-length cape blew out like a sail as it caught a gust of hot wind, lightly noosing him with its drawstring.

In the back of the group was a tall, ghost-white boy with bleached bangs, wearing a purple sateen jacket. He walked regally in blue eye shadow and wore a single shell earring. He was a neon dream with a matte finish and shiny peach lips.

My dad lowered his sunglasses, his eyes dancing with wonder. “Well, I’ll be,” he sighed. “They look like superheroes going to a funeral.”

“I guess the circus is in town,” drawled my grandma, peering at them suspiciously as she locked the car door. “Hide your children.”

I watched them from the back window as we pulled away, black and purple dots getting smaller and smaller against the bright, beige South Texas terrain. As they floated into a sea of cowboy hats and tamale vendors, I felt like I’d seen something exotic and rare, like a unicorn—an extremely sad, very sexy, fishnet-bound unicorn.

They were the most amazing creatures I’d ever seen.



A good boy

CHAPTER 1

That Joke Isn't Funny Anymore

Towards the end of middle school I had what you might call a very “Christian missionary” fashion sense; pressed khaki slacks, a starched blue button-down, and lightly moussed hair parted on the side. I looked like a tiny, chubby cheeked, lesbian employee of Blockbuster Video. This was how I dressed during the last few months of eighth grade, after “the incident.” Before “the incident” you would’ve seen me in a pastel Hypercolor shirt and Vision Street Wear high-tops. I’d be wearing neon-green knee-length shorts, and my long, Sun-In’d bangs would hang down to the top of my Panama Jack sunglasses.

That all changed one day near the end of eighth grade. I was spending my lunch the usual way French braiding my girlfriend Amber’s hair. I’d been Amber’s boyfriend for almost a month and *love* spending lunches with her and the other girls from our theater arts class. Amber had beautiful strawberry-blond hair and smelled like SweeTARTS. She loved Taylor Dayne almost as much as I did and made me mixtapes adorned with hearts and stars drawn in hot-pink, watermelon-scented markers. Best of all, when we’d slow-danced at the chaperoned spring dance, she hadn’t gotten handsy with me. Amber took it slow, and I appreciated that. What wasn’t to love?

“Perfect,” I said, tying a small pink ribbon to the end of Amber’s hair.

“How is it?” she asked, flopping the ginger braid over her shoulder as she turned to me.

“You look so pretty,” I gushed.

“You’re the one who braided it,” she beamed, popping a cherry jelly bean into my mouth.

“What about my hair?” I grinned.

“It looks so cool,” she answered, reaching up to touch my newly bleached bangs. “Like those guys who skate in the parking lot after school.”

“Thanks! My mom let me get it done in the mall last weekend. I think they’re—”

“Chris Wolfe,” she interrupted, grimacing at something over my head. “Don’t you even think about it.”

I turned to look at Chris, the tall, blond football player who gave me the same funny feeling I got watching Patrick Swayze in *Dirty Dancing*. But before I could lay my eyes on his tall, broad frame, my skull reverberated with a booming thud. Chris’s deep voice was the last thing I heard before I blacked out.

I woke up on the tiled cafeteria floor with a pounding headache. As my vision cleared, I could make out Amber and the choir teacher, Ms. Mason, a heavyset woman with a tight black perm wearing a chili-pepper necklace and matching earrings. The room was slowly tilting and I couldn’t get the sound of ringing out of my ears. I stood up with the help of my theater arts lunch-mates, a dozen teenage Florence Nightingales with glittering fingernails.

“Oh my gawd!” they cried, immediately swept up in the drama of it all.

“Chris Wolfe bashed your head between two big encyclopedias!” Amber sobbed as we walked to the office with Ms. Mason. “I couldn’t stop him in time!” she continued, hugging her hot-pink Trapper Keeper, which bore the image of Pegasus leaping through a crystal heart. The theater arts girls surrounded Amber in a vanilla-scented cloud as she cried. The drama was suddenly all about her. “Chris called you . . . He called you a . . . a . . .”

Amber leaned in and whispered the name of the thing I’d been trying to convince myself I wasn’t. For most of eighth grade I’d been telling myself that the warm fuzzies I felt watching *Silver Spoon* were simply about Ricky Schroder’s awesome clothes. When Kirk Cameron made a funny joke on *Growing Pains* and my pants suddenly tightened in the crotch, I told myself that it wasn’t about kissing him. I just wanted to hug him really, *really* hard. But as I left Amber and walked into the school office, my doubts were stronger than ever.

After getting an aspirin from the nurse, I sat outside the school reception area, waiting to be picked up by my mom. Directly across from me sat Chris Wolfe. He stared at the floor, his body trembling so rapidly that the movement was almost indiscernible, like a flickering fluorescent tube light right before it burns out. He was also waiting to go home, but presumably not to be pampered by his mother with cocoa while watching a four-hour marathon of *Saved by the Bell* like I was.

“Leonard Crabb?” called the boy working office duty.

I’d forgotten my dad was in town. I assumed my mom had called him, unable to leave her job. My small, stocky father charged to the front desk, moving with the force and purpose of a linebacker. He was wearing tight Wrangler jeans, snakeskin cowboy boots, and a trucker hat. Passing by, he noticed me, and all that anger switched to sadness and concern. He didn’t say a word, but his eyes said it all.

Are you okay?

Does it hurt?

I love you son.

Now show me where that little fucker is.

I wanted to point across the room and say, *There he is, Dad. He’s the one. Go nuts.*

But he would have. And as pleasing as it would have been to watch him eviscerate Chris Wolfe, I preferred visiting with my father at Mexican restaurants, not prisons. As my father’s gaze slipped away from me, his face hardened. He leaned on the counter and slammed down his wallet, like a gunslinger saying, “Let’s go hand-to-hand, you son of a bitch.”

“Who would you like to see, sir?” asked the nervous student attendant.

In a slow, measured baritone, my father growled, “Whoever’s in charge.”

“Um. Yes, sir,” the boy’s voice cracked. “Um . . . I’ll get you the assistant principal.”

“You go ahead and *do that*.”

I was happy to have a protective dad, but I felt bad for the administrators who were about to deal with his wrath. I’d seen that face on other occasions: when a bad report card came in, when I forgot to weed-whack the yard, and many times during my regrettable two-month stint playing right field. It wasn’t pleasant.

I looked at the bully across from me and hoped he knew how lucky he was that my dad hadn’t realized who he was. But as I watched Chris apprehensively wringing his hands, I felt strangely sympathetic toward him. He was right in assuming I was “different,” which somehow made him seem less guilty. A part of me wanted to tell him it was okay, that he was just perceptive to my flaws and defects. If I could understand exactly how Chris perceived me, maybe I could change all my suspicious behaviors.

“Chris?” I said.

When Chris lifted his head, I saw that he wasn't scared at all. He was angry. I could hear the rhythmic jingling of change in his pocket as his Reebok sneaker maniacally tapped the linoleum tile. He popped the knuckles of one hand and slid it into a fist in the other. As he stared at me, his lip made the silent shape of that word I'd been emotionally dodging.

"Come on, David," called my dad as he came out of the office.

I looked over my shoulder as we left to see Chris still glaring at me, mouthing that word again and again. I wanted to punch him. I wanted to punch him really, *really* hard.

In the car on the way home my dad asked me twenty questions about my girlfriend, trying to raise my spirits after what had happened. I wasn't sure if he knew what Chris had called me. But I didn't want to know if he did. I didn't want to talk at all. I just wanted the summer to come so the two of us could go on our annual road trip in his Winnebago. For two weeks we'd drive through the country to different sites for my dad's work as a fiber-optic technician. In two months I'd be in new places surrounded by new people who had no idea who I was. I couldn't wait.

That Saturday morning I awoke to my mother knocking at my bedroom door. My mom, Teri, was a tiny, red-haired woman from Newfoundland, Canada. Her bizarre accent, Dolly Parton-like figure, and fire-orange hair made her stick out in San Antonio like a busy, busty leprechaun.

"Honey," she sweetly warned, covering her eyes as the door opened. "Are you decent?"

"Mom," I said, rubbing my eyes, "I was only sleeping. What could I be doing at 7:30 in the morning?"

"Well, sweetie," she sighed, sitting on the edge of the bed, "you're becoming a young man and you want to respect not only your privacy but also your changing body."

"Oh God, Mom. We're not having a 'talk' now, are we? It's so early."

"I just wanted to make sure you felt okay," she said, reaching out to feel the small lump Chris Wolfe had left on my temple. "Do you want to come into work with me today?"

"Which work?" I asked, wondering which of my single mom's three jobs she was going to the next day. "The maternity store, the arcade, or the rape crisis center?"

Saying yes would mean spending the day with pregnant women, abused women, or Frogger.

"Where do you think?" she smiled.

Thirty minutes later we were at the mall, opening the giant metal gate of the Genie's Castle arcade with Teri's coworker Annie, a nineteen-year-old heavy-metal chick with a blond buzz cut and purple eye shadow. Annie was tall, thin, and covered in leather, like a young Brigitte Nielsen costumed for a *Blade Runner* sequel. In the half hour before the mall opened, as Annie chain-smoked and wiped down the machines, my mom gave me as many credits as I wanted on the music-video jukebox, which controlled the arcade's sound track. I pulled out the crumpled list of songs I'd heard on the radio the week before and proceeded to load up the machine with so many music videos that no one would be hearing their requests until well after lunchtime.

At 10 a.m. the mall rats started pouring in: heavy-metal kids and punk weirdos with dirty mullets and filthy denim vests. As they moped around in their Dokken shirts playing Centipede and Donkey Kong, I could sense their slow-building rage at my music-video selections—Taylor Dayne, Rick Astley, Lisa Lisa, and Cult Jam. This was my music, a brand of song completely free of guitar, piano, or any organic instrumentation whatsoever—dance pop by single-named artists like Madonna, Martika, and Pebbles. Songs with high-energy choruses and backup singers who commanded the listener to "sweat," "dance," and "FEEL IT!" These were the tracks played during mid-'80s movie montages in which a ragtag group of inner-city youths in fingerless gloves completely renovated

roller-skating rink while break-dancing.

In the arcade I felt alive, exuberant, and invincible. I could have stayed there for hours, shuffling my feet to the frenetic beat of Janet Jackson or Bananarama. I had endless lives and endless credits thanks to my mom, the queen of Genie's Castle. And I was its prince.

By noon I was two hours into a marathon game of Joust when a zit-covered fifteen-year-old in a Guns N' Roses cap walked up to me. I was in the zone, midreverie to Belinda Carlisle's "Heaven Is a Place on Earth," when he interrupted.

"So . . . you fuckin' LIKE this music?"

"Why?" I asked, wondering how he knew it was my request.

"Fucking look at you," he hissed, eyeing my clothes. I looked down at what I was wearing, wondering what was so wrong with it. My electric-blue cargo shorts were clean and unwrinkled. My sneakers were a bit dirty, but the laces were tied. And my hair was—not to brag—perfect. My light-bleached bangs fell, slightly obscuring the outside of my left eye, just as I'd requested during my last hair appointment at Fantastic Sams.

"We can all see you wiggling over here like a fairy," he smirked, gesturing to a group of three older boys watching us from across the arcade. "You know what you are?"

"Excuse me?" I asked, swallowing nervously at the thought of what was coming.

"You're a faggot."

I froze.

"You don't even like pussy," he whispered in my face, so close I could smell the Fritos on his breath. He puckered his lips into a wrinkled kissy mouth and made wet slurping sounds as Joust alerted me that my player had died. "Are you gonna say anything, faggot?"

I wanted to defend myself, because I wasn't a faggot. A faggot was a guy who lisped and giggled and walked everywhere with a limp wrist. A faggot was a grown man who acted like a lady and loved flowers and dancing. Faggots were on the news at night—older men with mustaches who lived in New York and San Francisco and were getting sick.

I wasn't a faggot. I was a fourteen-year-old boy who had never kissed anyone, let alone a man. Maybe I'd thought about it, but I didn't *do* anything about it. And if I didn't *do* gay things, how could I *be* a gay person?

I put my head down and slunk away as the kid yelled one last thing.

"Your hair makes you look like a fuckin' gaywad!"

His friends laughed as I stormed into the office and sat down next to Annie, who was complaining about her boyfriend while cleaning one of the dozen tiny hoop earrings in her left ear.

"Honey, what's wrong?" my mother asked.

"Nothing," I snipped, noticing Annie's snacks laid out on the office desk. "I just want some Goldfish."

I started to eat handfuls of the little orange crackers, as if the mass of them in my mouth would help soak up the tears in my eyes. It seemed to work. This was when I realized how hard it is to cry while you're eating.

"Mom, I wanna go home."

"Well, honey, I don't get off for a few hours. Don't you want to play more games?"

My mom reached into her saggy blue uniform vest and pulled out a handful of tokens. They looked so shiny and tempting in her hand. I could listen to so many Kylie Minogue songs with those tokens.

"I feel sick," I pouted, unwilling to share Kylie's "Locomotion" with the jerks out on the arcade floor. "I want to go home."

"I can drop him off," Annie offered. "I get outta here at one o'clock. Right, Teri?"

"Sure," ~~my mom shrugged, pushing back my bleach-blond bangs to kiss my forehead.~~ "I sure wish you'd tell me what's wrong."

An hour later I was on my way home in Annie's dirty brown Camaro. At a red light she lit a cigarette and retouched her maroon lips in the rearview mirror.

"So who was an asshole to you?" she yelled over the Ozzy Osbourne tune blasting from the tape deck.

"No one," I murmured.

"What?!" she screamed, turning down the stereo with her free hand.

"No one," I repeated, staring into the distance with my arms crossed.

"Well, *someone* pissed you off."

"Just some . . . jerk!" I yelled, punching the door.

"There ya go!" she said, flipping up her middle finger and grinning. "Fuck 'em!"

I hadn't yet grasped casual profanity, and the idea of it sent me into a fit of laughter.

"David! I'm serious," she snapped disapprovingly as the light turned green. "The next time someone says shit to you, tell 'em to fuck off. Okay? I want you to say it!"

"Say what?" I asked.

"Say, 'Fuck off!'"

"You want me to say . . . *that*?"

"Oh, lighten up. I'm not gonna tell your mom," she said, lighting a new cigarette off the one that was almost out. "Just fucking say it!"

I gathered my courage as we flew down the highway, taking a long, thoughtful pause in preparation for my first attempt at swearing.

"FUCK OFF!" I howled at the top of my lungs.

"Jesus Christ," said Annie, flinching in the driver's seat. "You can bring the attitude without a volume. Fuck!"

"Oh. Sorry," I muttered.

"Don't apologize," she said, rolling her eyes. "I just MADE you say it, dummy."

"Sorry," I said again.

"If you apologize one more time you're walking home," she warned, holding out her lit Marlboro to me. "Wanna drag?"

"Um, okay," I mumbled, reaching for the cigarette.

"What are you, stupid?" she said, stamping out the butt in the ashtray. "I'm fuckin' with you. Your mother would kill me."

Five minutes later we pulled up to my apartment complex. I shut the car door with a feeling of accomplishment. My newfound comfort with screaming profanity would surely come in handy when fighting off the mall rats and Chris Wolfes of the world.

As I turned from the car, Annie called me back. I leaned into the passenger window as she applied a thick layer of mascara in the rearview mirror.

"David, you know that two dudes kissing is wrong, right?" she asked, staring at her reflection. "Like, you know that shit's gross and against God, don't you?"

"Um . . ." I paused, watching her mouth make a funny shape as she opened her eyes wider for the lash wand. After a long pause I finally replied, "Yes?" as if my answer was a question.

"Good," she said, winking her gooey, tar-covered eyelash at me. She smiled, her nicotine-stained teeth looking jaundiced in the bright Texas sun. "See ya next weekend, kid."

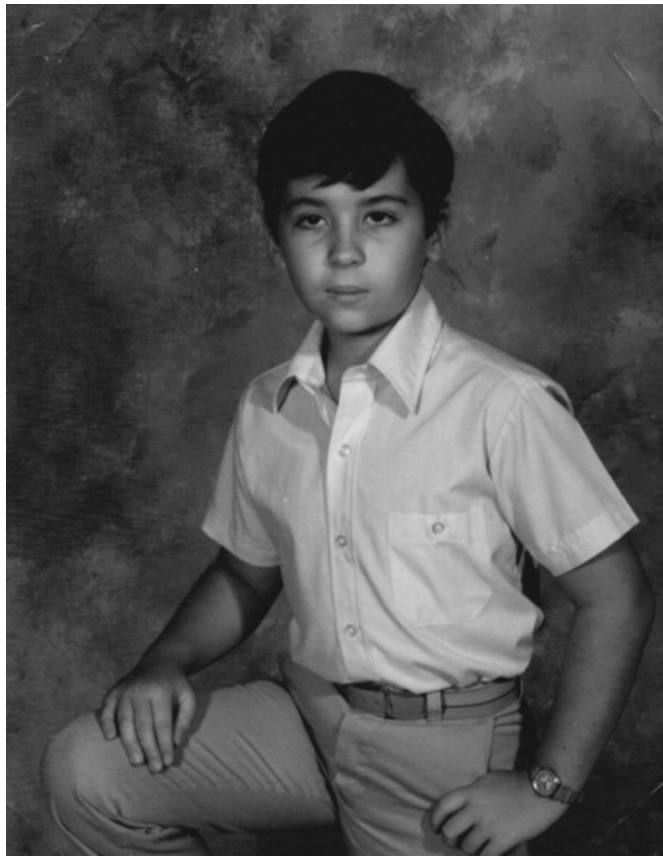
Annie pulled away, leaving me in a thick gray cloud of exhaust. As the big, wooden Spanish Oak Apartments sign swung in the breeze behind me, I'd never felt more confused. I shuffled into my apartment and fell back into my favorite Papasan chair. For just a moment, the familiarity of my living room tricked me into feeling okay. I was protected, surrounded by my mother's country-craze motif: a decoupage dresser, framed paintings of smiling, personified farm animals, and more bowls of potpourri than you could count.

Then I caught a glimpse of my hair in the mirror above the couch. I didn't look like the boys who skated in the parking lot behind school. And I didn't look like one of the cool inner-city youths who break-danced in the movies I loved.

I looked at myself and saw what everyone else was beginning to see: a faggot.

I ran into my mother's bathroom and pulled out a brown eyeliner pencil from her makeup case. Frantically, I pulled my bangs away from my forehead and began to drag the pencil up and down the blond strands of hair, trying to erase my ridiculous whim. In that panicked moment, I was blind to the absurdity of this temporary "fix." I pulled the fist of hair tighter as I scribbled harder, determined to darken them. I would put this away, just like I had put away so many things before: the Don McLean Summer records I'd loved when I was five; the Miss Piggy puppet I used to put a full face of makeup on when I was six; the "truth lasso" I'd run around with, pretending to be Wonder Woman, when I was seven; the collection of puffy unicorn stickers I'd had when I was eight; all the charcoal sketches of the Madonna I'd drawn when I was ten . . .

Slowly, as my platinum hairs became darker, I started to relax. Once the blond eventually disappeared, I felt better.



Pop Quiz:

- A. A young Mormon missionary
- B. Tiny lesbian health inspector
- C. Baby Captain Morgan

It's funny how the best attempts at hiding can make you stand out more than anything.

CHAPTER 2

Father Figure

Really, sweetie?" asked my mother, puzzled by the selection of drab clothes resting over my forearm. "These are the clothes you want for summer?"

"Yup," I replied, tossing a pile of tan slacks in front of the JCPenney cashier.

"Well," she said, fingering a stack of soft cotton white T-shirts, "everything is just a bit . . . dull. Don't you think?"

"Nope," I answered flatly.

"Do you think Amber will like these outfits?" she cooed with a knowing grin.

"She's not my girlfriend anymore," I huffed.

"Oh no, honey. Why didn't you tell your mother? What happened?"

"She broke up with me," I huffed, grabbing the bag of clothes.

"Oh, sweetie . . ." my mother gushed, her consoling lecture fading behind me as I stomped ahead of her through the mall.

"Time heals all wounds," she comforted me on the drive home. "It's Amber's loss, *not* yours."

But in truth, Amber hadn't dumped me. I'd dumped her. Well, not dumped so much as avoided. In the weeks following the Chris Wolfe incident, Amber had left a dozen strawberry-scented notes in my locker, each one asking where I'd been at lunch. I read her letters each day behind the gym, where I'd taken to eating my bologna sandwich alone by an enormous, humming air-conditioning unit.

"Are you mad at me, David?" she wrote in pastel bubbles, dotting the *I* in my name with a broken pink heart.

What I couldn't tell Amber was that I'd learned an important lesson from Chris Wolfe: stay out of the way. If no one noticed me, then no one could demean my sense of fashion, question my ball-kicking expertise, or bash my head in with encyclopedias. So in the hopes of achieving relative anonymity, I shoved my paint-splattered sneakers and Hypercolor T-shirts to the back of my closet. For the last few weeks of eighth grade I would lie low by wearing flat-front khakis and denim button-downs, no matter how boring my mother thought they were. Feeling safe required disappearing, and disappearing meant being alone.

In the mornings I'd jump the fence and walk to campus the back way, through the empty athletic field. After school I'd linger by my locker for ten extra minutes to avoid kids chatting in the courtyard. I quickly learned how to camouflage, unlike some of my bookish, bespectacled, overweight peers, kids who actually had the audacity to participate in after-school clubs and eat their lunches on in the open. Once I disappeared, I wasn't accosted the way they were. With all my careful planning and covert activity, I thought I was beating bullying. But really, bullying was beating me. It wasn't the confrontation that was isolating me, but the threat of it.

By the end of the school year I'd grown a second brain that constantly monitored my behavior.

checking every pronunciation for a lispy S, reminding me not to hum Paula Abdul too loudly, and taking note of my posture at all times to ensure I wasn't resting on my hip. When I wasn't monitoring myself, I was monitoring everyone else, especially boys—figuring out what mimicked social cues would keep me safe until 4 p.m., when I was home safe in my bedroom, vogueing.

On the last day of school we gathered to hear our principal's "have a nice summer" send-off. In the center of the auditorium I felt stifled, surrounded by five hundred people I'd been trying to avoid for two months. Three rows ahead sat Amber, who slowly turned her head until our eyes met. Across Amber's back stretched the long, muscular arm of her new boyfriend, Chris Wolfe. Amber stared at me with a disappointed, vacant expression. Her eyes seemed to say, *Look what you made me do*, as if the pecking order of middle school had forced her to take Chris's hand. I felt a little guilty about knowing I'd made her an eighth-grade widow of sorts. But mainly I felt betrayed. I was so angry at Amber that I even hated her hair, which hung limply in a messy braid that looked terrible.

Look at what you've done to yourself! I wanted to scream. *He'll never treat your hair as well as I did!*

Fifteen minutes later the bell rang, signaling the end of my tenure as a middle-school student. As I left the auditorium, I noticed Chris and his friends. He smirked at me as one of his buddies whispered in his ear. And then I heard that word again, slipping quietly from between Chris's lips. It was impossible to pretend that it was for anyone but me. I lowered my head and moved on, reminding myself that I was only a few days away from the isolated safety of my summer road trip with my dad. Soon I'd be far away from San Antonio. And the mall. And Chris Wolfe. Soon they would all be out of the picture. And no one would call me that name ever again.

"COCKSUCKER!" my dad screamed at the truck in his rearview mirror.

We were somewhere in northern Alabama, only one day into our two-week road trip. But my dad's temper had already reached a fever pitch.

"Look at this jerk on my ass," he sneered, gripping the steering wheel so tightly that I could see the veins in his fingers throb. Our thirty-two-foot Winnebago rocked back and forth as my father pumped the brakes, thrusting my neck repeatedly against the high-riding seatbelt. "How you like that you son of a bitch?"

Not at all, I wanted to answer.

The 18-wheeler behind us screeched around us and pulled ahead. As the driver swerved into our lane and began manically pumping his brakes, I noticed the truck's mud flaps, which bore the silhouettes of two giant-breasted women with their legs wrapped around rifles. Leonard laid on his horn and raised his middle finger. "Fuck you!"

Mind you, the window was rolled up the entire time. So my dad was really just screaming at me. And that was the problem with my father's fits of anger: they felt aimed at me even when I knew they weren't. As we jerked around the highway, a pile of books spilled from the dashboard.

"Dammit!" he yelled as they fell into my lap. "Now I'll lose my place!"

"It's okay, Dad," I said, saving the page marks in as many of them as I could. "Wow. How many are you reading now?"

"Too goddamn many!" he barked, his bellowing drawl and massive belt buckle at odds with the titles in my hands: Einstein's *The World As I See It*, *The Complete Essays of Mark Twain*, and Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. My dad was a voracious reader of philosophy, astronomy, and theology, equal parts classic and progressive, a mix I'd known was rare and singular ever since I was a little kid. My dad and I could chat for hours about solar systems, dog psychology, and the existence of

God, all while listening to Hank Williams and eating Taco Bell. Talking to the secret philosopher in my dad made me feel like it was okay to ask questions that didn't have finite answers. But in that moment, the secret philosopher was losing to the raving psycho. And as the 18-wheeler sped away from us, there was a finite answer: punch stuff.

"Asshole!" he sneered, pounding the steering wheel.

"Hey Dad!" I chirped merrily, snapping into damage-control mode. "Let's see what's on the radio."

I casually turned on the stereo, trying to make a big show out of shrugging off the offending big rig driver. As my dad settled down, so did the speedometer. I cracked the window to let in fresh air and the song on the radio crept into the foreground. I leaned forward and turned up the volume as a rush of funky keyboards, whipping snare drums, and sexy male vocals oozed from the speakers.

What's your definition of dirty, baby?

What do you consider pornography?

"What is this crap?" growled my dad, quickly changing the channel. Rosanne Cash replaced the sexy little earworm, but not before it had lodged itself in my head.

The next day we stopped at a strip mall for supplies. While my dad went into Walmart for underwear and RV-safe toilet paper, I slipped into the music store. I approached a new-wave chick with big hoop earrings and flame-red hair in a Sam Goody apron.

"Welcome to Sam Goody. I'm Susan," she droned with a faraway, bored expression. "What can I help you with?"

"Well, uh . . . I'm looking for a song."

"Okaaaaay," she groaned, smacking her bright-blue bubblegum, "which one?"

"Well, I don't know what it's called. I just heard it on the radio."

"Sing it to me."

I paused. And then, with all the swanky verve I could muster, I sang:

What's your definition of dirty, baby?

What do you consider porn—

Before I could finish, she gripped my arm with pulverizing force. "Oh my God!" she beamed. "That's George Michael! I LOVE HIM!"

Breathlessly, she dragged me to the front of the shop. There it was: a giant display of George Michael's *Faith* album and assorted paraphernalia: twelve-inch singles, posters, T-shirts, and towering above it all, a slightly larger-than-life cardboard cutout of George Michael. His distressed denim jeans were torn to shreds, his leather jacket fit like a glove, and his frosted hair defied gravity, tousled on his head like strands of spun gold.

As Susan rang me up, she couldn't stop gushing about the album, describing song-by-song the experience of listening to the record. She bounced, screamed, and giggled, all the while clutching the CD in her hands.

"And you have to get this too!" she yelped, sliding a copy of Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine across the counter. "There's a tubular photo spread of him in here. He's so cool!"

As we talked, I realized that Susan was the kind of girl whose hair I could brush for hours. As she handed me the receipt, I noticed my dad watching us from the front of the store. I cringed as he flashed me a pearly grin and a big thumbs-up. As I walked out, Susan waved good-bye, genuine.

excited that she could bring George Michael into my world. Over his shoulder, my dad tipped his cap to her.

“She’s a real beauty,” he whispered, patting me on the back. “You love them redheads, huh? A chip off the old block.”

In the car I slipped the CD into my Discman, put on my headphones, and skipped to track 3—“Want Your Sex.”

SEX is natural—SEX is good

Not everybody does it

But everybody should

I had never heard the word *sex* so many times in four minutes. But that was only the beginning. Over the next forty-five minutes, *Faith* revealed itself to be an album filled with thrusting grunts, come-hither wails, and a dozen calls to intimacy; its protagonists were teachers, preachers, and uptown boys who were all desperately horny, each one pleading to be “warm and naked at my side.”

I listened to *Faith* five times in a row while flipping through *Interview*, the cosmopolitan culture magazine based in New York City. It was full of artists and filmmakers I’d never heard of. There were fashion spreads in which, ironically, the models wore hardly anything at all. The best section was at the back—the party pages, which were full of glamorous people posing with cocktails like sex mannequins. I read about Calvin Klein’s daughter’s jungle-themed sweet sixteen on the observation deck of the Empire State Building. David Bowie and Iman were there, laughing with pink champagne. Grace Jones deejayed, wearing yellow contact lenses and a barbed-wire dress. A group of cigarette-smoking women with gaunt faces and blunt bangs were captioned as “gallerists.” I wasn’t sure who they were. But surely they were important; they were in the party pages!

I scanned the magazine, carefully angling a photo-essay of LA street hustlers modeling thong away from my dad as he excitedly described a chapter of Carl Sagan’s *Cosmos*.

“See, scientists had thought that black holes were just empty space, but it’s quite the opposite . . .”

I couldn’t pay attention. Outside the window was a wasteland of strip malls and hill country. But in my lap was a secret world—ninety glossy pages full of artists, junkies, fashionistas, club kids, and . . . gay people. Looking at *Interview* while humming “Father Figure” to myself for the umpteenth time, I began to feel the crotch of my pants tighten.

“What Sagan’s theory of black holes does is, it reframes the way science . . .”

My dad was droning on about something I really wanted to be interested in, and normally would have been. But as I looked at a muscle-bound European model in wet jeans lying on a bare mattress, it became impossible to hold my focus. There was a supernova in my pants.

“Even light can’t escape a black hole because of the gravitational pull of—”

“Um, Dad?” I squeaked, “I gotta go to the bathroom.”

“Are you all right, DJ?”

“Yeah,” I said over my shoulder, rushing to the bathroom with *Interview* magazine over my crotch. In the minutes that followed, I discovered that spanking the monkey in a three-by-four-foot lavatory while traveling seventy miles an hour was no small feat. But for the next forty-eight hours, in spite of this challenging environment, I was a trouper. I spent so much time in the loo over those next two days that my father eventually presented me with a bottle of Pepto-Bismol.

“Life on the road can be sedentary, son,” he said with great wisdom. “Sometimes you don’t know if you’re coming or going. This should help.”

“Thanks, Dad,” I said, allowing my father to believe I was plagued with intestinal distress. It seemed far less upsetting than the truth: that his son was masturbating ten times a day a few feet away while listening to George Michael and staring at Marky Mark in boxer briefs.

Four days and thirty orgasms later, my father worriedly mentioned taking me to a local emergency room for my “gastro issues.” It was time to accept that I was losing control. So I made a concerted effort to curb my chicken-choking by focusing on my summer reading assignment. George Orwell’s *1984* is a difficult read for anyone, especially a pubescent, gay fourteen-year-old passing through truck-stop parking lots where shirtless truckers give themselves sponge baths. But abstaining from reading *Interview* and switching out *Faith* for Paula Abdul’s far less provocative *Forever Your Girl* seemed to be working. I was going to show my penis who was boss.

But my dominance was short-lived. A week into our trip, I noticed the edge of a magazine under a stack of toilet-paper rolls beneath the bathroom sink. I pulled out the August 1987 issue of *Penthouse* magazine and was flabbergasted. This issue was different from the others I’d seen before at neighborhood boys’ houses. As opposed to a centerfold of a lone woman, this issue contained a spread of a woman and a man getting nasty on the beach. She wore big ’80s sunglasses and a big ’80s hat, and had big ’80s areolas. They were the size of salad plates. The caption referred to her as Candy. Her male companion was swarthy and strapping. Lush locks of black hair hung into his dark, dusky eyes. The only thing covering any part of his muscular, caramel-skinned body was a tiny white G-string that was almost damp enough to see through.

Apparently the editors at *Penthouse* didn’t think he deserved a name. But I did.

So I called him . . . Rolando.

I quickly became obsessed with every page of the photo spread, each image burning itself onto my brain like a molten-hot brand.

On page thirty-two Candy was awkwardly bent over a wheelbarrow. Rolando was taking her from behind, gripping her hips with his strong hands; his face was obscured by wet bangs that hung over his eyes. I looked at this image so many times that I started to question its minutiae.

Why there was a wheelbarrow on the beach? Was some beach worker transferring sand around with it? How could someone even operate a wheelbarrow in the sand?

On page thirty-four Candy was spread-eagled on a beach towel as Rolando mounted her missionary-style. Both of this dark stranger’s firm, flexed butt cheeks bore the delicate, sand-colored handprint of his lover in perfect symmetry, a Rorschach butterfly of ass-hands.

Page thirty-seven was my favorite. Candy squatted in front of Rolando in platform heels, her butt rump taking up most of the lower part of the page. Just above her head you could see Rolando’s sweat-drenched torso, rock-hard abs, defined chest, and square jaw; and then, right above his perfectly shaped lips, the page ended.

Who was this man of mystery?

With no discernible face, he could be anyone: George Michael in reflective aviators and a crucifix earring, telling me “I want your sex” in the back of a London taxi; Ricky Schroder with gelled hair and tapered jeans, saying “I love you” as we rode a mini choo-choo train around his mansion; or Chris Wolfe with his sandy blond hair and Roman nose cornering me in the locker room, telling me he knew exactly how to make up for the encyclopedia incident. Rolando was my dream lover, everyone and no one.

With only a few days left in our two-week road trip, I knew I had to maximize my enjoyment of Rolando, my beautiful Latin (but possibly Italian or maybe even Greek) lover. And unless I wanted my father taking me to the ER for a colonoscopy, I needed to be crafty about it. So while my dad le

the RV to work on phone lines, I stayed behind and filled my days with chronic masturbation. It was so epic that my fingers pruned. My forearm ached. My penis felt and looked like it had been resting under a heat lamp, red and throbbing like E.T.'s magic finger lighting up to heal Elliott's wound.

Oooooouch.

My dad and I spent the last day of our trip driving for ten straight hours. He was tired and hungry. I was sex-starved and angry. We were both sore, for different reasons. Four spins into George Michael's *Faith*, he poked my arm.

"So, DJ . . . What's the girl situation like?"

It was a question I didn't want to hear and had been hoping to avoid.

"Um, well . . ." I carefully composed my answer, fumbling with my headphones as I paused the Discman. "Um . . . The girl situation is . . . pretty good. There are a lot of girls at my school. And they all . . . really, really like me."

My dad's grin widened. I imagined his eyes beaming with pride behind his sunglasses. "Girls really like me," I exclaimed, getting a little cocky. My dad let out a little chuckle, and I knew it was working. "Yeah! All of them do," I blurted, feeling really proud of myself now. "Actually, all my friends *are* girls!"

I looked at my father's face and knew I'd said too much. His smile went slack as he aggressively readjusted his sunglasses. He cleared his throat and checked the rearview mirror for unwanted rear-enders, a preoccupation that was starting to seem increasingly symbolic. My father spotted a violation and began pumping his breaks. Profanity was screamed. Horns were honked. Birds were flipped. And then silence.

Sitting there beside him at a red light in some tiny town outside Dallas, I could sense my dad's disappointment with my answer. I thought of Amber's sad, sweet-smelling letters and Chris Wolfe's spiteful glare. I remembered my mother's face a few weeks earlier, looking confused and saddened by my stack of khakis and basic white tees. I thought of her repeatedly asking me, "Why are you so quiet lately?" and I wondered what it felt like to see her son fade away from her the way I was. Was it like watching light collapse inside the gravitational pull of a fissure in space?

Maybe, in spite of their credentials and bestselling books, Sagan and Hawking had no idea what they were talking about. Maybe black holes *were* just empty space.

"The girl situation is good," I muttered to my father as he choked the steering wheel in his fist. "It's . . . good."



That day my mom took me and my zits to the mall: A Family Photo.

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