Born Lucky

A DEDICATED FATHER, A GRATEFUL SON, AND MY JOURNEY WITH AUTISM

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Published by Harper Horizon, an imprint of HarperCollins Focus LLC, 501 Nelson Place, Nashville, TN 37214, USA.

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ISBN 978-1-4002-5475-0 (ePub)
ISBN 978-1-4002-5468-2 (HC)

HarperCollins Publishers, Macken House, 39/40 Mayor Street Upper,
Dublin 1, D01 C9W8, Ireland (https://www.harpercollins.com)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025909811

Art direction: Belinda Bass
Cover design: Richard Ljoenes
Interior design: Mallory Collins

Printed in the United States of America

$PrintCode

Chapter Seven

WALKING THROUGH HELL

There was never a singular moment I realized I was different, like some dramatic schoolyard incident or a heart-to-heart with my parents. My diagnosis happened gradually, like pieces of a puzzle I didn't know I was trying to solve.

Third grade was uncomfortable. I knew I was weird, but at that age, everyone was still figuring themselves out.

But by fourth grade, when I moved to Community School, the difference became stark. It wasn't subtle anymore. It was as if someone had flipped a switch and suddenly, everyone around me seemed to have silently agreed that I was on the outside looking in. The other kids had been together since kindergarten. They had their groups, their shared jokes, their social pecking order. I didn't fit into any of it. I was bright enough academically, but there's a big difference between being smart and being accepted.

The teachers started to notice it too. Each report card came with notes that stung more than the actual grades. Mom and Dad saved everything over the years, and looking back at those old report cards feels like flipping through chapters of a story I had lived but never fully understood at the time.

Two report cards from fourth grade at Community School stand out. Each had a list of items for "social development" and "work habits," with check marks indicating areas for improvement. In the "social development" section of the report, several boxes were marked *Needs Improvement*:

Demonstrates responsible behavior. *Needs Improvement.*
Thinks before speaking. *Needs Improvement.*
Contributes to the group. *Needs Improvement.*
Interacts with peers. *Needs Improvement.*
Assumes leadership. *Needs Improvement.*
Participates appropriately at lunch. *Needs Improvement.*

The pattern was clear. I wasn't behind in just one aspect of my development; social, emotional, and behavioral gaps appeared across the board. And the teachers spelled out my struggles further in the comments below those check marks.

Spring 1993: Lucky is still struggling to find ways to communicate with his peers in an accepting manner. We are encouraging him to approach situations with an open mind and appreciating that others have opinions that may differ from his.

May 1993: Lucky has had many adjustments to make this year. He has had difficulty interacting with the class. We believe Lucky would benefit from spending time with his classmates outside of the classroom.

The irony of that last line is hard to miss. None of my classmates wanted to spend time with me outside the classroom.

The tipping point came on October 28, 1993, at eleven years old. I remember being taken out of class to sit through what felt like endless exams at Community School. I didn't know it at the time, but they were

assessing everything—IQ, adaptability, learning patterns. The results, as my parents later learned, were jarring. A verbal score of 145. A performance score of 77. I remember hearing that an average learning disability could involve a 20-point spread. Mine was nearly 70 points apart. A post-test report summarized the results:

> All sections in the verbal area were well above average. All sub-tests in the performance area, except one, were well below average. Block design and object assembly were both very low, indicating a possible visual perception problem. Lucky was very relaxed and confident during our one-hour testing session. His confidence may have gotten in the way of his ability to transfer information to the performance area. Due to the large gap between verbal and performance scores, I recommend a complete evaluation be done.

To an eleven-year-old, all I knew was that tests like that were long and boring. But for my parents, it was another reminder. They didn't explain much to me, but there were phrases like *social blindness* and *pervasive developmental disorder*. The term *autism* wasn't thrown around as commonly as it is today, but that was the implication.

The experts never put a neat label on it—my parents didn't let them—so they settled for what they knew: I was different, and it was going to make life harder.

One Day Closer

By the time I reached fifth grade, the situation at Community School had only worsened. I had been pulled out of Rohan Woods School after third grade because of bullying, and my parents thought moving me to a school with more resources might help. It didn't.

The teachers, perhaps intimidated by the social status of certain

families, seemed unwilling to discipline the kids who made my life miserable. I was an easy target. Kids are mean, but here, the adults did little to stop it. They sort of just fed me to the wolves. I hated going to school every day. I begged Dad to let me stay home. I told him how awful it was, how relentless the teasing became, but I couldn't seem to articulate just how unbearable it felt. I trudged through the days, dreading every interaction. Two boys in particular were the worst; it's funny how you remember those names.

Everything came to a head one day in gym class. One of the boys shoved me, and I retaliated. We were fifth graders. It wasn't much, just another scuffle. But the next thing I knew, I was sent home, and the principal was talking about suspension. I told Dad everything: The other boy had pushed me first, and I had just reacted. But when the school called, their version of events was different. They claimed I had instigated the fight.

Dad wasn't one to take the school's word without question. He trusted me. And that trust wasn't built overnight. He had drilled honesty into me for years. This went back to when he made me write "I will always tell the truth" hundreds of times until I could practically see the words when I closed my eyes. I knew lying to Dad wasn't an option—and because of that, when I told him what had happened, he believed me.

The school warned Dad that I was on the verge of being suspended or even kicked out, so he was determined to get to the bottom of it. Dad called the gym teacher, and after a pause, the teacher lowered his voice and said, "I can't talk to you on the phone, but if you come around the back of the school—don't park in the main lot, come to the PE office through the back entrance—I'll talk to you."

When Dad showed up, the gym teacher confirmed my version of events. He admitted I hadn't started the fight and that the principal was covering for the bullies. "Your son is telling the truth," he said. "But I can't say that. I could lose my job. It'd be best if you took Lucky out."

The incident happened on a Tuesday, and I stayed home from school

on Wednesday while Dad sorted things out. Dad came home that afternoon, and I'll never forget the way he sat me down.

He looked me in the eye.

"You don't ever have to go back there again," he said.

I started sobbing, I was so happy. The memory still brings tears to my eyes thirty years later.

Every day at that school felt like a nightmare, like there was no way out. And when you're in fifth grade, each day feels like a month. The relief I felt when Dad said I didn't have to go back was overwhelming. I had spent so long holding my breath that I didn't realize how suffocating it had become until I could finally exhale. I couldn't believe it—I was free. Dad says he can still see and feel that moment, how incalculably happy I was, and how he knew then he had made the right decision. It was like I was released from the torture chamber.

The next few weeks after Dad pulled me out of Community School were a hodgepodge of schooling. I stayed home while my parents figured out what to do next. I had already been working with an English tutor; my math and reading were fine, but I couldn't spell or write. Writing had always lagged behind for me, and I remember someone coming to the house to help me string sentences together. Even now, I still can't spell. In college, I scored 2 out of 20 on a freshman spelling test, which was supposed to weed out journalism students. It's funny to think back on getting gentleman's C's in English when I write a thousand words every day for a living now, plus most of my show scripts.

Mom and Dad decided to bring in more tutors for math and social studies. For most kids, leaving school might have felt isolating, but for me, it felt like freedom. I loved talking with the tutors and sitting across from adults who treated me like an equal. I remember diving into social studies, talking endlessly about politics with a teacher who probably didn't expect a fifth grader to care about the presidents. For a mini adult, it was heaven. I would wait impatiently by the front door every morning for the tutor to arrive. I actually loved to learn about things I was interested in.

It was a complete turnaround from the intense fear of what each day at school would bring.

I was homeschooled for the rest of fifth grade and all of sixth. My parents enrolled me in one science class at the local public school during sixth grade. I'd ride my bike there in the mornings and come home by 9 a.m. I think part of it was for legal purposes—something about needing a certain number of classroom hours—but they also wanted me to have some interaction with kids my age, even if just for an hour.

I think each day I made it through was a victory for Dad. There's a country song called "One Day Closer to You" about inching toward something better—one day closer to getting through the hard stuff. I think that's how he saw it. Every day that passed wasn't just survival; it was progress. One day closer to the finish line, one day closer to me making it to college, where he believed things would finally be okay.

Back to the Real World

Dad had gone to John Burroughs, so when it came time for middle school, that's where I was headed. I wasn't going to be shielded from the world forever. Burroughs was where I'd have to reenter the real world.

On the first day of seventh grade, Dad gave me some advice. "Look," he said, "just don't talk to anyone." His dad had given him different advice on his first day—to find the biggest kid there, punch him in the stomach, and stand over him telling him not to mess with him again. When Dad got home from his first day of seventh grade and admitted he hadn't followed through, my grandfather was furious. Dad's explanation? *He* was the biggest kid there. Dad took the opposite approach with me. "Just be mysterious," he said. And, of course, that day I invited a kid over to play. I so desperately wanted to fit in that I couldn't resist. The kid stayed for an hour, maybe less, before making an excuse to leave.

Dad not only attended Burroughs but had been on the school board

and was close friends with the headmaster. They played cards every Sunday night. I think that connection gave Dad some peace of mind. He figured I'd have a hard time anywhere, but at least Burroughs was a place he could navigate, where he had the best chance to protect me.

A lot of the kids in seventh grade at Burroughs had gone to Community. St. Louis had—and still has—a massive private school culture, in part because of desegregation and busing. Public schools struggled, and families who could afford it fled to private schools. At one point, St. Louis had the highest percentage of private school enrollment in the country. Burroughs was part of that ecosystem.

One of the big traditions at Burroughs was Dryland, a kind of outdoor education trip for seventh graders. Half the class went at the beginning of the week, the other half at the end. They bused us down to a vast, one-hundred-acre area in the Ozarks, where we stayed in cabins and did nature hikes. One of the signature activities was called Solo. They'd take each of us out at night, sit us down alone in the woods, and leave us there for three hours. We were probably only twenty feet apart, but the idea was to make you feel isolated, to push you out of your comfort zone. I wasn't having it. I duct-taped a book and a flashlight to the inside of my leg and snuck them out with me. I thought the whole thing was profoundly stupid, and I had no intention of sitting alone in the dark. So I sat there and read for three hours. I guess even then, I had a knack for defying authority.

But despite moments of quiet rebellion, I was still an easy target. Earlier I mentioned rolling my socks down just above my shoes, a habit rooted in sensory issues, something common for kids on the spectrum. I couldn't stand the feeling of socks pulled up over my legs, so I rolled them. The problem was that it left this big, obvious roll on my ankles, and the other kids zeroed in on it.

It wasn't just the socks. Kids called me "retarded." I remember that word being used a lot. Later on, they even called me that to Liberty—"Your retarded brother," they'd say. Back then, the word wasn't as taboo

as it is now, but hearing it over and over, especially from classmates, left a mark. I could deal with a lot, but eventually, I got tired of it. They mocked me endlessly. I don't remember exactly what the breaking point was, but the teasing built over weeks and months.

One kid in particular kept pushing me, both figuratively and literally. I told Dad about it. I'd come home and list the things this kid had done. "He knocked my books out of my hand," or "He told people I smell," or "He pushed me again in the hallway." Finally, I asked, "Can I hit him yet?"

Dad gave me his version of fighting back. "Next time he does it, don't hit him," he said. "Take his arm, pull it behind his back, push his head down, and tell him if he ever says anything again, you'll hit him in the nose."

The next time the kid mouthed off, we were in shop class. I was a fat little fella, but I was pretty strong, especially after years of doing push-ups. I walked past him, grabbed his arm, yanked it behind his back, and slammed his head down on the drafting table. I leaned in close. "If you ever say anything to me again," I said, "I'll break your nose." That was the first time I was physical with another kid. The teacher grabbed me and frog-marched me straight to the principal's office.

Dad got called in for a meeting. The headmaster, Dad's friend, shook his head and asked, "Where did Lucky get the idea to do this?"

Dad said, "Well, because I told him to."

The headmaster couldn't believe it. "You told him to do this?!"

Dad shrugged. "What do you want him to do? You're not protecting him."

The problem was, after that fight, all the bullies knew I was handcuffed. I couldn't follow through on any threat. It was a strange contradiction. I had finally stood up for myself, but now I couldn't defend myself further. The teasing didn't stop—it got worse. Dad told me I couldn't hit anyone or I'd be thrown out of school.

Tom Brokaw once gave a speech about how middle school is the best preparation for life. "Real life is not college; real life is not high school," he

said. "Here is a secret that no one has told you: Real life is junior high."[1] I understand exactly what he meant. Later on in life, when I reported from the Middle East, I couldn't help but draw parallels between the sandbox politics of middle school and the delicate balancing acts of international relations. Weakness is provocative. Deterrence only holds for so long before someone tests the limits. Middle school, as strange as it sounds, is probably the closest many people will ever get to experiencing the dynamics of the Middle East. The constant testing of boundaries, the fragile alliances—it all played out in those hallways at Burroughs.

If getting bullied by other kids wasn't bad enough, even some of the teachers joined in. I thought I'd gotten used to the worst of it—then came eighth-grade art class. One day, the art teacher looked at me and said, "If my dog was as ugly as you, I'd shave its ass and make it walk backward." The whole class erupted in laughter. I cried the entire way home from school. That afternoon, Dad met me at the bottom of the driveway and asked me how school was.

"I got humiliated today."

The next day, Dad walked over to see the interim headmaster (his friend was on sabbatical). He didn't hesitate. "We'll suspend the art teacher if you want," he said. "You can't say that to a kid."

But Dad, true to his nature, said no. "If you punish him, the other teachers will take it out on Lucky," he said. "Let's make peace."

Dad's instinct has always been to de-escalate. I wanted the teacher fired. I recalled Dad's advice about bullies: Hit them in the nose and they won't mess with you again.

That moment highlights the biggest difference between Dad and me. I'm known for saying, "If I know there's a knife fight, I'm bringing an Abrams tank." Dad's approach? If there's a tank battle, he shows up trying to get everyone to shake hands on the battlefield. If it's a nuclear war, he'll bring a bomb—but only as a last resort.

I'm the opposite because when you've been humiliated like that—when you've felt small enough to disappear—you never forget the feeling.

You never forget the sound of laughter at your expense. So you make a decision. You decide that it will never happen again.

To this day, whether in business, journalism, or anywhere else, I'll bring a tank to a knife fight. I would never hit anyone, but I learned early on that in the real world, strength isn't just physical; it's perception. Sometimes you have to escalate to de-escalate. Projecting strength—metaphorical or not—matters. I'll never let anyone put me back in that eighth-grade art room again.