How to Bleed Quietly in Public (test)

By Matthew Hand

They knew the rules in their bones. Not memorized—absorbed, like mildew in base boards. There was no guidebook, no whispered cheat code passed down by older boys. Just soft rules: inherited, rehearsed, quietly enforced.

The sidewalks of Terrytown did the teaching. Still slick from the storm the night before, hum ming with secrets passed through telephone wires and clouds of mosquitoes, they carried knowl edge that children hadn't found language for yet.

The town itself spoke in mildew and jas mine. Sprinklers hissed across crabgrass lawns. Televisions murmured behind cheap blinds. Somewhere, a grill exhaled sweet onion smoke into the thick air. Nothing was truly silent—it was just listening.

Terrytown didn't need to say much. Its si lences were fluent. And if you were the kind of boy who walked a little differently, who talked out of rhythm, who wore Toughskins from Sears and knew every lyric to Like a Virgin—you learned to hear what that silence was saying.

This is a guide for boys like that. Boys like him. Boys who hadn't yet learned that walking home could mean something else entirely. Who didn't know that, in certain neighborhoods, get ting hit wasn't a punishment. It was an introduc tion. If you're reading this, you're late. But don't worry—it's been waiting.

It started with a worksheet. Something for gettable—long division or the Bill of Rights. Mat thew didn't remember. He rarely finished assignments, too caught up in daydreams, drift ing between book plots and FM radio lyrics, or wondering if Alice would let him carry her books again.

So: detention. Thirty minutes of fluorescent quiet, interrupted only by the tapping of some one else's pencil and the low-frequency hum of his own anxiety.

By the time they let him out, the hallways were empty. No Alice. No Brooke, with his aller gic sneezes that sounded like curse words. No Gary Wayne. No Patrick. The herd had moved on. And with it, his insulation.

What remained were two boys he didn't know well, but knew well enough to tread lightly around: Alton and Keith.

Alton stood taller than most of them, with the kind of ease that suggested early confidence. A few dark hairs were beginning to shadow his upper lip. He laughed often and without con cern—at jokes or at people, it didn't matter. His jeans weren't from Sears. They looked chosen.

Keith—called ET—was named not for his strangeness, but for his neck. He never corrected anyone. Names stuck easily in Terrytown.

Matthew walked with them because they were walking his way. That was enough to make the decision. They didn't tell him to leave, so he didn't. Sometimes, especially for boys, proximity is permission.

The afternoon sun pressed down with a bloated kind of heat, the air thick with jasmine and sunbaked plastic. A red wasp circled above a rusted mailbox. Matthew focused on keeping his flinch tucked inside.

Conversation was light. He said something dumb—probably a TV reference nobody liked. Alton laughed. And for a brief, hopeful moment, Matthew believed he was safe. That being funny could be enough.

Matthew had made Alton laugh before. Not real laughter—not the kind that bent a person double—but enough. Enough that Alton didn't call him names, didn't shove him into lockers, didn't mimic the way he walked or spread ru mors that he liked boys, just because he knew the plot twists on Days of Our Lives. That was worth something. Laughter passed for currency back then, and Matthew thought he was paid up.

So when the older boys appeared—shirtless, their sneakers untied in that careless, threatening way—he didn't flinch. Not right away. One had a mouth made for sneering. Another wore a towel around his neck like a prizefighter who'd never fought. The third wore a smirk that said he never got in trouble because he made cruelty look like charisma.

They looked at Alton. Then at Matthew.

"Why you walking with that?"

No one asked who "that" was.

Alton didn't hesitate. "He's not my friend."

He dropped his backpack.

Matthew understood. Laughter wasn't safety.

It was bait.

There was no insult, no warning. Just the thud of a book bag on pavement, final and im personal. Then a fist to the cheek. Left side. Open hand? Fist? It didn't matter.

The next hit landed on his collarbone. Then his side—maybe a rib. The geography of it blurred, but the message didn't. He was being redefined. Rebranded. As something to distance from.

There was no anger in Alton's face—only the practiced, dispassionate clarity of a kid making a statement. Not about Matthew, exactly, but about himself. About the danger of proximity.

Keith—ET—stood nearby, arms crossed, watching like a boy might watch a moth in a bug zapper: fascinated, detached, slightly amused. The others—whatever their names were—circled around. Some barked. Some laughed. Some just stared. It wasn't a street corner anymore. It was a stage. And the show was called: Don't Be a Fag.

Matthew didn't swing back. Didn't run. His body folded in on itself like parchment under flame—shrinking, trying not to be read. It wasn't strategy. Wasn't protest. Just instinct. A cellular level prayer: If I don't give them more, maybe they won't take more.

He already knew who'd won. Spoiler: not him.

Across the street stood his mother. Hand raised to her brow, shielding her eyes from the sun like a woman scanning the horizon for land after a long, strange voyage. Except the ocean was a front lawn, and the wreckage was her son.

She didn't run. Didn't shout. Didn't move. Just stood there—still, confused. Like her eyes were buffering.

Then came Aunt Jane. Closer. Louder. Cajun-blooded. Voice blown out like a busted PA, one volume: confrontation.

"Hit back, Matthew!"

"BEAT HIS ASS, MATTHEW!"

She hovered like a drunk football coach yel ling at a backup quarterback. Matthew was the quarterback. Also the ball. Also the field.

But it wasn't the punches he remembered. It was the audience. The sound of his name—not in comfort, but in command. Jane's face. The sweat on her lip. Her stance—not worried about the boy, but about the optics of defeat.

And then came the thought. Not before the first punch. Not after the last. During. Quietly. Shamefully. Like it knew it didn't belong.

If I hit him back, he might not be my friend anymore.

Absurd. Pathetic. Unbearably human.

He wasn't calculating survival. He was nego tiating the price of belonging. And deciding, somehow, that silence was cheaper.

Because if he fought back, the script would change. He wouldn't be the soft boy. He'd be a co-star in the violence.

And maybe—just maybe—Alton would hate

him for that.

So he folded. Took the hits. Curled like a letter no one wanted to read.

No one talked about it. Not his mom, who stood on the curb like a confused bystander at a parade she didn't remember joining. Not Aunt Jane, who treated the whole thing like a rerun— uninspired, unimpressed. Not Alton, who prob ably doesn't remember it at all. Why would he? The performance ended. The audience clapped. Curtain down. On to the next episode.

And Matthew? He went home. Did his homework, probably. Ate dinner. Watched TV. Pretended his face didn't ache when it met the pillow. No lectures. No life lessons. No "What happened out there?" Just the usual Tuesday silence—thick as mayonnaise, settling over the house like bad wallpaper.

A few weeks later, his mom pulled him from school. Said it wasn't "challenging" him. That he wasn't being "nurtured." Which might've been true. But also: maybe you don't leave a kid in a place where the math doesn't add up anymore— where the price of friendship is bruises, and the reward is silence.

So he stayed home. And Terrytown rolled on. Unconcerned. Another ritual complete.

Because here, boys got hit. And if they didn't hit back, they learned to make themselves smaller. That was the tax for being soft in a place that rewarded hardness.

It wasn't a scandal. It wasn't a story. It was a fact. Another boy. Another bruise. Another thing you're not supposed to talk about.

So Matthew didn't. He absorbed it. Like Ter rytown taught him.

Here's what a boy like him would want you to know—in case it happens to you:

When the herd leaves you behind, don't run. Running makes it worse. Walk steady. Eyes down. Don't speak first.

If they ask why you're walking with someone like you—don't answer. They've already decided.

If you get hit, take quiet inventory. Face? Gut? Ego? Don't cry. Don't explain. Don't expect apology. This isn't that kind of place.

You'll go home and eat like nothing hap pened. You'll laugh when someone calls it "just boys being boys." And if you bleed quietly enough—if you fold small enough—they might let you stay.

Because when no one teaches you how to be loved, you start to think being tolerated is enough. And if tolerance requires pain, you'll learn to offer it freely.

You'll become useful. The one who absorbs it. Who makes others feel better by being the one who gets hit.

You won't call it trauma. You'll call it middle school.

And years later, when you try to explain, someone will shrug and say, "That's just how it was back then."

And Matthew will nod.

Because it was.

And also—because even now, he's still afraid that if he disagrees . . .

they might not be his friend anymore.

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