

# Bully Boy

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*This is for the good kids*



# PART ONE



THE SCHOOL BUILDING OF BRICK AND GLASS STOOD WAITING as the morning arrived bright, blue and warm, and seemingly safe. Henry Wilton viewed this scene uneasily from the window of his bus as it rumbled to a stop, and anxiousness gripped him like it usually did on the first day of school. Henry shook his head, as he pondered another long school year. He felt alone in his own desperation. A kid bumped him. "C'mon, Wilty, let's go." As Henry stepped onto the sidewalk, the doors slammed shut on his heels and the bus roared away, as if, he thought, it wanted to get out of there and leave him to his fate.

"Yeah, let's go," he said to himself, and he stepped through the doors along with everyone else.

*Okay now, watch where they are,* he thought.

Henry scanned the bustling hallways, light gleaming off the newly polished floors. He made his way through the maze of students and all the spirited chatting and the clanging of blue and grey lockers that lined the walls as far as he could see. Hearing so many conversations, as various as backpack shapes and colors, he bristled at everyone so happy and energetic, which he could not be. From his locker, he perused the animated scene with the jaundiced eye of a fifteen-year-old.

"Chloe," Sharonda called out. "We gotta get to the aud. C'mon."

"I'm coming. I'm coming."

"What's in the auditorium?" Henry stopped to ask Sharonda.

“Soccer meeting,” she replied.

“Uh-huh. Have a good summer?”

She shrugged. “Kinda boring.” She pulled her large, black equipment bag onto her shoulder.

Chloe walked up to them.

“Yeah, same here,” Henry said. “Okay, soccer girls. Have fun.”

“Thanks, non-athlete,” Chloe said.

Henry smiled. “And happy to be one.”

The girls left him and Henry checked the hall again for kids he didn’t particularly want to see. He, and kids like him, the oppressed in his mind, weren’t usually bothered too much by enemies during the first week. He figured kids were generally in a good mood and kept to themselves.

But he followed protocol anyway and skillfully evaded and avoided those who pestered him, hustling up to a group of other kids to hide behind or slinking around a corner to disappear. That was his first rule: Always look down the hallway to see where they are. He hated doing it. Just to keep the peace, he had told himself, at least for now. He had heard about the mouse that learns early in life that everything is its enemy and scurries to hide. He swore over the summer that mouse would die.

In his classes, avoidance was pointless, so Henry obeyed his other rule to never enter a classroom without the teacher already there. He impatiently loitered in the corridor next to the door, staring into his phone.

By Friday, relieved that nothing nasty had happened, Henry wondered if all the years of ignoring and avoiding his enemies so they’d go away had paid off. Maybe this was the year, he thought. Wishful thinking came easy to him, always hoping things would “get better,” stringing him along mercilessly day after day.

Then he caught Billy eyeing him after leaving class. Instantly, he slowed down and futilely searched for escape.

“Shit,” he said, berating himself for being stupidly upbeat and relaxed, violating his first rule.

“Hey, Wilty,” Billy said, stepping in front of him.

Henry’s anxious heart quickened.

“How was summer?”

Henry sighed, not looking up into Billy’s eyes. “Good. Yours?”

“Not bad. We never hung out.”

Henry knew Billy cared nothing about him or his summer. He tried to get around, but Billy side-stepped to stop him.

“What’s the rush, buddy?” Billy said, looking Henry up and down. Billy stood lanky and lean, with stringy black hair and a thin, angular face. Bulging veins snaked through his sinewy arms. Henry, shorter, had a slimmer build that intimidated no one and no veins showing at all.

Henry blinked with impatience. *C’mon, idiot, do something.*

“I gotta go. Out of the way.”

Frank sauntered up to them.

“Wilton giving you a problem again?” he asked.

“I think he is.”

“C’mon, Billy. You were told last year not to do this.”

“Mmm...I don’t remember that.”

“Outta the way.”

Billy stepped forward and pressed his hands against the lockers, stiff arms on both sides of Henry, as a boy would do to a girl.

“Say please.”

Henry drew back from Billy’s sour breath.

“Say the magic word.”

Henry stood uncontrollably petrified. *Just go ahead and do it this time.*

“Alright. Please.”

“There you go. Finally showing some respect. You gonna behave better now? You got us into trouble last year. Don’t do it again.”

Billy moved aside, allowing Henry to go along, and then pushed his leg out. Henry tripped and fell to his knees, his

backpack slinging against his head as his face puckered in pain.

“Oops,” Billy said, turning to walk off with Frank.

“Jerk,” Henry said rashly under his breath, standing up.

“What did you call me?”

“Nothing,” Henry said. He felt his heart skip a few beats.

Billy peered around him and placed his arm on Henry’s shoulder.

“You were told last year not to call kids names. I’ll let it slide one last time.” Billy rubbed the curve of Henry’s ear. “Since you’re not much of a man, you don’t want to get hurt.”

Frank, shorter and beefier than Billy and with a large, protruding stomach, calmly leaned against the lockers next to Henry with a faint smile.

A crowd had gathered, like on a sidewalk. A few of the kids smiled, while others walked away shaking their heads, as if they had seen this show before.

“C’mon, Wilton, do something,” someone said.

“What are you gonna do?” Billy said. “Here’s another chance for ya.”

“Teacher,” Frank said.

Billy pulled back and stood easy. “Keep your mouth shut, Wilton.”

“Alright, what’s going on?” Mr. Johnson demanded, pushing his stocky frame between the boys.

“Nothing,” Billy said.

Johnson, head football coach and history teacher, checked both kids for injuries.

“Alright, move out,” he told Billy.

“I didn’t do anything. I just had a word with him,” he said, lifting and rolling his shoulders and walking away with Frank.

Henry let out a nervous breath.

“What happened?” the teacher asked.

“He got in my way again,” Henry said, petulantly. “Then he tripped me.”

“I did not,” Billy called back. “He’s lying. He always lies.”

Everyone else walked away silently.

“I brought this up last year.”

“I’ll talk to him,” Mr. Johnson said. “Just try to avoid him.”

“I do. He comes after me. You can ask these kids.”

“Okay. I’ll look into this for you.”

Johnson slipped away, as though he had more pressing concerns, Henry thought.

Other kids walked by, not looking at Henry. At his locker, laden with embarrassment, he wanted to cry—or die—as he placed some books and his phone inside the dark space.

With a suddenness that shocked him, his face scraped across the steel edges of the open locker. He dropped back as Jeremy smiled at him, hurrying away. Henry quickly turned to see who else might attack him, dabbing at his face for blood that wasn’t there.

Two girls passed by. “Wilty,” one of them said with a little smile, “you okay?”

He gathered himself for a moment and finally got to class, checking his burning red cheeks again for blood as he sat down. He heard laughing behind him.

“Hi, Wilty,” one of them said with a curling smile.

“Wilty,” another added, cackling at the name.

Henry glared.

“Don’t look at me that way, Wilton.”

Henry turned back and huddled in his seat. He seethed with an anger he could not release.

At home that night, after dinner with his parents, and lying about how his day went, Henry lay on his bed with his hands behind his head. All summer he had planned what to do if one more kid messed with him. Now that it had happened, the choice of doing something or not was gone.

*You’ve done everything you were told to do. You’ve given everyone every chance in the world to do better. Be better.*

*But they won't. You know they won't. All the lies and meanness.*

"I will not live like this anymore," he said aloud.

Something had to change fast, he knew. But he had told himself that over and over for years, trying to convince himself. His mouth quivered as he again faced the awful truth: He was the only one who could put an end to the pain and shame of his weakness.

*You have to now, moron. You're hiding days are over.*

He sat up.

"How are you gonna do it?" he whispered. "You're too scared. You can't move. You can't think. You just stood there and let Billy do what he wanted." He shook his head. "You can't do that anymore, or you may as well give up and die."

His cat jumped up next to him, as was her habit. She sniffed at his face and pressed her paws into him as though testing how comfortable he would be. Her claws pierced the skin under his jeans, but he didn't mind. She finally settled for a space next to him. Henry moved onto his side and playfully pushed her and she swatted back.

"It's...it's crazy. I just can't stop this...this fear. It just totally freezes me. What am I going to do, cat?" He sighed tiredly, then laid his face in his hands.

Henry spent the weekend sequestered in his room, pushing through homework and playing games on his computer. His father, John, pulled him out to help put summer furniture back into the shed, then had him mow the lawn. His sullen silence prompted Elaine, his mother, to ask him what was wrong. He replied with the usual "Nothing." He always kept silent about his school issues, believing he had to handle them himself. He couldn't expose his shameful weakness to her.

On Sunday evening, anxiety tightened in the pit of his stomach like it always had, every day since the fifth grade, when he first remembered being scared. He sat on the edge of the bed with arms folded across his stomach, rocking

himself. Later, he could not sleep. His heart thumped as he dreaded the week ahead and what he had to do. He wiped his eyes. His lower lip drooped and he shook his head slowly, his sign of futility.

*What're you gonna do? Think.*

When he thought about stopping these kids, fighting back, anxiousness welled up. Henry hated that awful feeling, a foreboding sensation of failure he could not stop.

“Either do it or die. But, in the end, that’s what you want. You want to die. You want peace.”

After lying quietly for a while, Henry pulled open the drawer of his bedside table and took out a small, spiral-bound notebook. He opened the cover and flipped through several pages until he came to a blank page and wrote in it everything that had occurred that day. He looked down into the drawer at other past notebooks. Since the seventh grade, he had written down all the incidents, all the abuse, that had happened to him in school. As he recorded them, a corner of his mouth turned up in a rueful smile. He knew he was right all along—that nothing the adults had told him to do to avoid the bullies worked.

He closed his eyes and imagined everyone reading them.

“Without this, you have no proof. Especially if you die.”

Henry dropped the notebook into the drawer and shut off the light. He turned over onto his side and huddled as if against the cold, and finally fell asleep.

On Monday, Henry walked into school. Other kids quickly passed by him and around him, as though he walked in slow motion. He hated the awful sensation of being out of step with his classmates, separate from them, insignificant, as though he walked among them invisible, in another dimension, yet there with them. Meandering through the crowded, noisy hallway, conversations flew around him but never included him.

In first block, the teacher’s desk stood vacant, so he reluctantly waited by the door.

*You can't do this anymore, guy.*

Mrs. Tomkins passed him with her typical wide gait, her long brown hair bouncing behind her.

“Alright, everyone, find your seats,” she said breathlessly, dropping papers and briefcase on her desk. “Let’s go.”

Henry sat down in one of the seven rows of arm desks. Windows lined a side wall, offering a view of the back of the school. Leafy trees swayed in a stiff, late summer breeze, depressing Henry over the waning season and the challenging school year ahead. He listened to morning announcements from the vice principal.

Later in science class, Mr. Bronner stepped out for a moment, leaving the class open to mischief. Henry perked up at the possible danger. He could leave the room until Bronner got back, which he had done several times before. But this time, he decided not to and quietly read.

“Wilton, give me a piece of paper,” Derrick said, sidling up to him.

“Leave me alone, Derrick.”

“Fuckin’ just give me one, will ya?” Derrick said as he looked back at his friends.

Henry sighed and shook his head, opened his notebook and handed him the paper. Derrick put it down on the desk, grabbed Henry’s pen, wrote “you suck” on it and put it in front of Henry. Then he walked back to his friends.

“Mature,” Henry said with habitual resignation.

A moment after Henry closed his notebook, a blow to the back of his head stunned him. He lolled forward onto a forearm as though his head had loosened on his neck. He took a long minute as the shock wore off. He heard nothing in the classroom.

*C'mon, get up. Get up.*

Dazed, Henry lifted himself up and he blinked quickly as his senses returned. The blunt thud got everyone’s attention. Derrick casually threw a book onto the desk next to him.

The kid sitting there, Jose, took the book and slid it into his backpack.

“Welcome back to school, Wilty,” Derrick said.

While some of the kids frowned and turned away, others sickened Henry with their grins.

“You okay, buddy? You don’t look too good.”

Derrick stood a few inches taller than Henry. He had short, brown hair and dark eyes. Henry now faced up to another test, but felt like passing out instead. He attempted toughness, flushed with a mix of fear and rage.

“Don’t... don’t hit me again,” Henry forced out.

“Ooooo. Listen to this,” Derrick replied. “Grow a pair over the summer?”

“He doesn’t have a pair of anything,” Pam chuckled, prompting a few laughs.

Bronner walked back in. “Okay, let’s get started. What’s going on here? Problem?”

Henry, relieved the teacher had come back in, sat down first and said nothing.

Class went on slowly for Henry. He rubbed the back of his head that now throbbed, trying hard not to cry, while Derrick sat at ease. At the end of class, the kids started filing out of the room.

*C’mon, this is it. You can’t let this go.*

Henry showed Bronner the paper.

“This is what Derrick wrote,” Henry said, his voice hoarse, fearful of his own boldness. “He hit me in the head with a book. They all saw it.”

Bronner read it and frowned.

“Derrick, come over here.”

Derrick sauntered over.

“Did you hit him?” he asked.

Derrick growled. “No.”

Bronner sighed impatiently. “No more of this, you understand?” he demanded of both kids.

“Hey, this isn’t my doing,” Henry replied with a rising voice. His body slightly shook. “Forget the paper. He attacked me. And...and I want something done about it.”

Henry noticed surprise on Bronner’s face at his sudden demand. Derrick’s as well.

“Alright, I’ll talk to these kids in private. I’ll let you know.”

“Oh, you know Wilton always lies,” Derrick said. “I would never do something like that anyway.”

Henry sighed. Derrick walked out.

“Why would I make this up?” Henry said.

“I didn’t see it, so I can’t comment,” Bronner said. “If you think it’s necessary, you can report it to the Office,” Bronner said. “When I go down there today, I’ll report your accusation.”

Bronner handed the paper back to Henry.

“Please tell Derrick never to come near me again.”

He stared at Bronner.

“Alright, I’ll tell him,” Bronner replied, but not very convincingly, Henry felt.

Henry stomped out.

In the hallway, Donny called out to Henry.

“Hey, Wilty, you suck.” Laughter.

Mrs. Hernandez stood at her door. She glanced at Donny and then at Henry as he walked by.

She stepped forward. “Boys, no more of that talk,” she called out.

In his next class, Henry rubbed the back of his head, wondering why his eyes didn’t pop out when he was struck. His insides quivered like jelly, and he hated that the class would see his red-hot face.

“Hey, Wilton.”

“How’s your head?”

“It hurts,” Henry murmured.

“What happened now?” asked Robin, who sat near Henry in the next aisle.

“Derrick wound up and slammed him with a book,” Tom said.

“What do you expect from the home run king?” another kid added.

Everyone chuckled. Robin shook her head pathetically. “Wilton, your head does look like a baseball.”

“Going to take it to the Office?” Jose asked.

“Why don’t both of you tell Bronner you saw it?” Henry asked.

“Hey, it’s your problem, not ours,” Jose said.

“You know the Office will slap him on the wrist and let him go,” Tom added.

Henry bit the inside of his lip until he tasted blood, and he tolerated a slight headache for the rest of the day.

That evening, he sat on his bed reading history with his arms folded tightly to his chest, analyzing the day. He believed he could be proud of standing up to Derrick and demanding that the teacher do something, more than he would have done just a year ago. The moment frightened him and he withstood it, a big step forward. But, in the end, it wasn’t enough. His attacker won.

*They always win.*

Henry obsessively relived what had happened after a bad day, why it had happened, and what he could have done better. Only then, in the comfort and confinement of his room, did new scenarios flash through his mind, and he always got angry at his inability to think of them at the time. The fear paralyzed him, turning his conscious mind to stone. He groaned at all the missed chances of the past.

“You should have watched Derrick, for Christ sake. You know what he is. You can’t keep your back to him.”

Rage surged inside and he slapped the textbook off his lap, the pages rattling in flight.

“C’mon, idiot,” he whispered fiercely, “you have to start thinking.” His fingers curled in frustration. “You’re never going to stop them if you can’t think. Or you’re going to be a meek forever.”