

Chapter 23

*T*hey'd started high school last year, is what happened, and the transition hadn't been smooth. Miles had never been a star pupil – his interests and passions lay outside the classroom – but he'd never been a troublemaker before high school either. He'd been an active child with too much energy and little focus, but he'd never hurt anyone or teased anyone enough for me to get a phone call from the principal. Sometimes Miles came home and told me about the other kids – Carson, who used to bite people, and Hunter, who went through a kicking phase – but it was always other kids with the aggressive tendencies, and I was forever grateful it wasn't Miles at the center of these incidents.

I was wholly unprepared, therefore, when my son embarked upon his own disciplinary track in high school. It was a narrow lane I had to learn to navigate, between accepting criticism of my child, while also standing up for his interests. The first time the principal phoned me his voice was kindly, and he assured me within seconds that Miles was not hurt, and that he wasn't calling due to an accident. Then he cleared his throat and said he was, however, concerned.

“Concerned about what?”

“The bullying.”

“Whose bullying my son?”

“No.” The principal seemed as surprised as I was. “Your son is bullying other kids.”

“Miles?” I asked.

“Yes. There’s been some name calling and inappropriate epithets. I want to remind you that we have a zero-bullying policy in this school. I’m going to have to issue a warning.”

“To my son?”

“Yes. To—,” the principal paused to shuffle through some papers, “Miles Zame.”

“Ok. What does this mean?”

“It means we’re opening a file. Three warnings and a student gets suspension. More suspensions after that, and it can lead to expulsion. But we’re nowhere near that yet,” the principal said, fake laughing. “I’m just laying out the rules, so you understand them. I find it important to alert parents early. But we can all take a breath right now. Just have a talk with your son, ok?”

I tried to get more of the story out of the principal before he hung up. Who else was involved, what words exactly were used, what part my son played, but the principal refused, or seemed unable, to divulge the details. He had called merely to give us a warning.

After the call ended, I thought about it and had to agree that Miles’ language could be pretty salty. I had never cracked down on swear words very hard – they were just words, and who cared if you used them once in a while? I’d listened to a podcast once that even claimed that using swear words gave you strength. But perhaps Miles had taken my leniency and run too far with it. I supposed maybe it was time for a talk.

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A few months later the school called again. This time, there’d been a prank. A locker broken into, a dead mouse, a not very funny joke. It didn’t sound like Miles, but at the same time, I couldn’t be absolutely certain. I told the principal he needed to

tell me exactly what had happened, but it turned out he didn't know exactly what had happened, none of the adults did and the kids weren't talking. He merely had his suspicions.

As high school rolled forward, things continued to deteriorate down this clouded, bumpy path. There were more scuffles, pranks, and disruptions; Miles got a second warning. Every time I got a call from the school I was asked if there was something going on at home, if there had been a change they should know about. I bristled at this indirect blame and assured the principal or counselor or whoever had called that our family life was fine, that nothing had changed, that I was still there for Miles and we still ate dinner together every night, and no, the divorce wasn't recent, it had been years ago.

I started to question the instincts of the people in charge. Did the principal see my boy as a young, malleable fifteen-year-old, needing just a bit of guidance, or did he see him as a dangerous, threatening adolescent that ought to be taught his place? If I'd learned anything over the past fifteen years, it was that you could never tell what people were actually thinking, which ones were racist and which were actually compassionate. Sadly, I no longer believed that you could assume the best in people.

By the end of Miles' freshman year, the principal had dispensed with any kind of introductory kindness at all when he called, and skipped straight to the negative behavior he was concerned about.

"There was an incident in the cafeteria."

"What sort of incident?"

"A fight."

"Is Miles ok?"

"Yes, Miles is."

"And?"

"Miles started the fight. He hit a classmate."

"So you say."

"This is his third warning, Mrs. Zame. You need to come get him."

When I arrived at the school later that afternoon to collect my son, I found him and Desmond slumped on a couple of chairs in the waiting area outside the principal's office. Miles looked more bored than alarmed. Desmond looked resigned. My son smiled when he saw me and jumped up, eager to get out of the building. I asked Desmond if he needed a ride home, but he shook his head.

"Later Nigga," Desmond called out after the paperwork had been completed and we were headed out the door. I flinched.

"Later," Miles replied.

It was an overcast day, and a sharp wind snapped at our backs as Miles and I walked to the car. "I'm hungry," Miles said. "Can we go to McDonald's?"

I realized right then that I'd been too lenient with Miles, and for far too long. "Is that all you've got to say?"

"Um, yeah. You know they're overreacting, right?"

"Do I? You just got suspended. From. School. You're telling me you've got *no* responsibility here? None at all?"

"I didn't do anything, Mom, I swear. Nothing wrong, at least."

Miles' nonchalance tipped me over the edge. "Miles! Why can't you understand that school is important? That respecting your teachers and learning from your teachers is important? That keeping your head down and not getting into trouble is important!"

Miles looked at me with disbelief. "Keeping your head down is important? Like when you kept your head down when dad was cheating on us? Like that kind of important?"

The wind whistled behind my ears as the impact of Miles' words sunk in.

"Like keeping your head down when someone asks you if you have any real sons, like that kind of important? Keep your head down then too? You don't understand anything, Mom."

For the first time Miles' look of disdain when he spoke to me didn't embarrass me, but infuriate me. "I don't understand? I don't understand? What exactly don't I understand?"

"It doesn't matter," Miles said, "if I'm good or not. It doesn't matter if I'm *respecting my teachers* or not, don't you get

that? You always think, just put your head down, it'll be ok, just keep going, it'll all be ok. But some things are not ok. The world is fucked up, Mom, *fucked up*."

I stared at Miles, the rage leaving my body and entering his.

"Remember when we first moved here? When we baked those stupid cookies and walked all over the neighborhood passing them out?"

I nodded, slowly.

"Nobody does that. You told me people do that, but nobody does that. Has anyone ever come to *our* house and passed out cookies when they moved to our neighborhood?"

I shook my head.

"Remember my stupid Michael Jackson birthday party? The kids laughed about that for months afterwards. For *months*. They even talk about it now sometimes, remembering how dumb an idea it was."

"But you love Michael Jackson. What's wrong with that?"

"And remember that dentist? You bought me a lollipop afterwards as if that was all it took. As if the hurt of everyone laughing at us in the waiting area could be brushed away with an apple flavored blow-pop. But things can't just be brushed away." Miles made a sweeping motion along his exposed arm. "None of this can just be brushed away."

Miles turned from me and headed towards the car. I sought the words to defend myself, but I wasn't sure what the defense was. I wasn't even certain what I'd done wrong. Wasn't I supposed to give my son the birthday parties he wanted? Wasn't I supposed to try and protect him from racists and bullies? No mother is perfect. I knew I wasn't, but what was I supposed to have done differently in those instances, and what did Miles expect from me now?"

"What do you want me to do?" I asked. "What was I supposed to have done then?"

"*Not* keep your head down, that's for sure."

"Fight doesn't always make right, Miles."

"Silence certainly doesn't either."

Miles turned and fully faced me now that he'd reached the car. As we looked at each other the distance between us grew wider than ever. Not the color distance, necessarily, but the generational distance. I had been taught to fight for what was right, certainly, but with knitted blankets and \$20 donations, not unwinnable rages against larger authority figures. My fight for justice involved a slow wearing away of the evil, like a steady drip of water on seemingly impenetrable marble. Miles clearly wanted to grab a sledgehammer.

Hunter was the one that started the fight," Miles said, "with the new kid, Owen. We tried to break it up. We were the *good* guys."

I walked towards the car. When I reached it, I paused before unlocking it. "I don't understand everything," I said, "you are right about that. But I do understand a lot. And I am always trying. The world is unfair Miles, you are right, but you still have to try your best. Picking fights all the time isn't your best, and it doesn't solve anything. I know that, at least. I have been living in this world longer than you, you know."

"We have not been living in the same world."

I sighed. "Let me ask you this. Why do you always have to get involved? Why can't you just let things go sometimes?"

Miles cupped his hands and blew on them to keep warm in the whipping wind. I suddenly wondered where his jacket was. "It isn't always up to me, Mom."

"Isn't it though?"

Miles stared at me. "No."

We stood there for a long moment, and then I unlocked the car and we went to McDonald's for lunch.

The way Cierra told the story to Bob, not only were Desmond and Miles the good guys, but it was Hunter and Josh that were the bad guys.

"They teased that poor kid, Owen, for weeks before it all got out of hand," Cierra said. "Those boys are trouble. They've never been anything but trouble. Do you know what they said to my son when we first moved here?" Cierra looked to Bob, then to

me, then to Bob again. “They told him they already had their Black friend in the neighborhood, and they didn’t need another.”

Desmond coughed. “They were trying to be funny.”

“Mmmhmm. I’ve seen those kids be cruel multiple times. Picking on anyone new, like Owen, or anyone overweight, like Michael, or anyone with a disability, like Landon. They’re just terrible. I’m willing to bet they’re behind this in some way.”

My mind flew back to what I thought of as The Pool Incident. The summer before I’d been reading a book in a lounge chair by the neighborhood pool when a voice behind me had said, *It’s cuz they’re Black*. As I put my book down and lifted my head I’d heard a second voice reply, *Yeah, I can see that. You did say they dumb as shit*. I’d stood up then, toppling my water bottle and knocking my suntan lotion from the chair, and turned and made unflinching eye contact with Hunter. He’d held my gaze without the least embarrassment, while looking down on me from his six feet of height.

I didn’t say anything, and with a smirk I’d let Hunter and his friends just walk away. Maybe Miles was right, I did keep my head down too much. But at the time I’d thought standing up itself was a statement, like I’d *said* something to those boys by my not remaining in my seat and keeping my head buried in my book.

“Cierra’s right,” I said to Bob. “Those kids are mean. They don’t care about anyone. They’re trouble.”

“That may be,” Bob acknowledged, “but the police don’t have them in custody.”

“Maybe they should,” Cierra interjected.

But Bob shook his head. “The issue right now is what happened at that party. Miles told me there were other kids up on the second floor with him. He told me it wasn’t him that attacked Sarah. That’s why I want to know more about this girl Sarah. Why would she accuse Miles of rape if it didn’t happen? Why would she say that?”