

TROUBLE

ANTHONY SPINNER

My mother was cooking crazy food again and the apartment smelled wild. My parents were throwing another party during the summer of '65. I was four years old and felt the atmosphere change before parties started. My mother put the weird food on round, metal trays while my father lined up big, clear liquor bottles like soldiers preparing for a war. Mom looked pretty, my dad looked handsome, and my pajamas were clean. I got to say hi to familiar faces and strange ones too. I even got to taste the foods I'd never seen before, like deviled eggs and what mom said were "pigs in a blanket." What a dumb name for food. My father was the most important man at the party because he served the drinks. The drinks made our

guests speak louder than normal. The best thing was that I got to stay up late. My mother and father were so busy with their friends they forgot about me.

After I was put to bed I could never sleep because I listened to the loud laughs which seemed to come all at once or sometimes not for a long time. Sometimes the same person laughed much more than the other people. It was easy to recognize the sound of my mother's or father's laugh. Sometimes I'd count to see who was having more fun. There was music too, that sometimes got very loud. After the music had been on for a long time I'd walk slowly to the bathroom to watch the dancers move crazily before closing the door.

During one party my mother opened the door of my dark room and took my sister, who was one, from her crib. After a long time she still was at the party. This didn't make sense. I walked to the bathroom and saw my sister in my mother's arms. My mother and another lady were laughing. In the bathroom I was very, very sad and wanted to cry. I was in bed and I was madder than ever been before. She was one and I was four. *I* should be at the party and she should be in her stupid crib.

I opened the bedroom window and started throwing out her toys. A crowd of teenagers gathered four floors below and started chanting "more, more, we want more." Every time I threw something they cheered. They really liked me, and then I ran out of toys.

"I don't have anything else, sorry." My father opened the door and turned on the light. Apparently someone rang the bell and told him who knows what?

"Excuse me, sir, Ken and Barbie just committed suicide

from one of your windows."

"What are you doing? Are you crazy? That xylophone could have shattered somebody's windshield. Get your sneakers on we're going outside and you're going to pick up everything." On the way out the smell of liquor and cigarette smoke hung in the air. The few remaining guests wouldn't look at me and the apartment was stone-quiet. I was too young to know I embarrassed my parents and ruined their night. For me, the evening was a profound experience. *Being bad felt good and it was fun.*

Five years later my parents told me we were moving. I didn't want to. I had lots of friends and experienced a sense of well being on a daily basis. I was walking myself to school and took great joy in buying Twinkies at the local supermarket. Selecting them off the shelf and counting out the exact amount of pennies made me think anything was possible.

The summer after third grade we left our apartment in Yonkers and moved into a house in Scarsdale. I remember

riding my bicycle for the first time through the clean, quiet neighborhood wondering if there were any other kids around.

I hardly saw anybody, except adults in cars and short, brown-skinned men clipping hedges. Frustrated, I'd go home and eat, figuring *someone* would be around later in the day. After a couple of days panic set in. For the first time in my life I felt alone. Yonkers was so easy all you had to do was leave the apartment. There were always people hanging out and things to do.

Once school started I found out people my age were at camp. Adjusting to the suburbs was a rocky proposition. Only fifteen miles away from Yonkers it could have been a different planet. They made fun of my accent. I said "winta" instead of winter and they'd never seen a boy with such long hair before. They also made fun of my clothes. When it came to art and fashion my mother was on the edge of the cutting edge. These suburban kids didn't know what to make of my two-tone pants. Blue from belt to knee, red from

knee to toe on the left leg, the right had the complete opposite color scheme. I looked like a pimp.

We had nude paintings on the walls. Every one of my new friends were shocked and had to make a comment. These were just the walls in my house but to them I was living inside a *Playboy* magazine pictorial.

"How come you have so many pictures of naked ladies all over your house?"

"I don't know, guess my mom likes them."

"They're dirty."

I can only imagine what they told their parents.

"Mom, Anthony's mother collects pictures of naked ladies."

The biggest adjustment was decoding how to socialize out of school. You had to call someone and make a "date." It seemed a bit formal for fourth graders. I couldn't imagine what these calls were like.

Hello.

Hi, Bradley, this is Lockwood.

Hi.

Would you like to have a date tomorrow? You could come

over after school till around
5:30.

I can't. I have yoga at 4:00.
How about Friday?

Sorry, I'm meeting with my
accountant.

Tuesday?

I'm having a colonoscopy
How about Wednesday?

Hold on let me check my
book...you know things are
really crazy right now. Let's
shoot for after the holidays.

Okay see you at recess.

One night we came home
and there was a car parked in
front of our house. My mom
joked, "Looks like we have
company." When we opened the
front door we were greeted by
the sound of *breaking glass*.

"We've been robbed." Her
words didn't register until I saw
all the clothes spread crazily
on the floor of my parents'
bedroom. Two indifferent cops
came over and took some
information from my father. It
seemed like they were talking
forever.

"Are you going to catch
them?"

"Like I was just telling your
father, we're going to try but it's

unlikely. They come from other
towns. They're probably far away
by now. We may never catch
them."

"I'm not sleeping tonight."

I barely slept for a whole
year.

The noises from inside
and outside of our new house
made every night a symphony of
terror. They came unpredictably
from the belching boiler in the
basement. The plumbing system
played high and low notes of
different lengths. Startling
percussive sounds from opening
and closing doors of neighbors'
houses and cars made me tighter
than the strings on my father's
steel tennis racket. While our
zip code 10583 correlated with
Scarsdale, we didn't live in
"Scarsdale Proper." We lived
in the unincorporated town
of Greenburgh. It was typical
suburbia. The houses were
unremarkable and close to one
another. I'm from the wrong side
of the tracks of Scarsdale.

Some nights I'd be falling
asleep and all of a sudden hear
feet frantically running on the
roof directly over my head.
I was sure we were about to

get robbed again. Over time I figured out these feet belonged to squirrels. There were skunks in our new neighborhood too. Late at night they'd climb into and knock over garbage cans. The sound of their awkward, fat, shimmying bodies and ravaging paws unnerved me. They sounded *wild*. One night they knocked a couple of metal cans into the street and they rolled down the hill in a crescendo of chilling steel thunder.

One evening there was knocking on my window. I looked out and saw four glowing, green eyes and *literally jumped off the floor and felt the hair on my neck stand up*.

"Dad," he came upstairs half asleep, fully angry.

"What is it?"

"There are two people outside my window." He stared at me and eventually saw his son was about to become unhinged. He walked to the window and looked.

"There's nobody out there. Go to sleep."

"They're out there. I saw them."

"Just relax and try to sleep.

There's nobody out there. I'll see you tomorrow."

That was the first time in my life I prayed. I asked god to make the eyes go away as I lay frozen in bed.

They didn't.

"They're back. They just knocked a second ago I swear." He looked.

"There's nobody out there. I promise. Go to sleep." A couple of minutes later there was more knocking. This time I looked and I saw six glowing, green eyes.

"Dad"

This time he *ran* up the stairs. He swung at me but knocked over the lamp and everything went dark. My mother turned on the big light.

"You animal!" There was blood and glass on my sheets. He missed me and broke the hot light bulb. Seeing his finger was bleeding, he went downstairs to care for his wound. Mom changed my sheets and cleaned up the glass. Nobody said a word.

The eyes belonged to raccoons.

My parents took turns reading in the kitchen just

below the stairs where I could hear them. If I didn't hear a comforting cough, creak of a chair, or conversation I'd go downstairs and look.

"It's OK. Go back to bed." Most nights one of my parents went to bed after one in the morning. Every night they had to decide who was on "kitchen duty" after working long hours in their high pressure jobs in the city in a state of semi-sleep deprivation.

"Don't sit in the kitchen anymore." I knew he was going to say that. According to Dr. Millman, this was the answer to our all our problems. I'd get over my fears and sleep eight hours a night and mom and dad could have their lives back. That night my parents shut their door and ignored me and the repeated *thwaps* from the ping pong paddles and shoes.

"If you don't open your door, you're gonna lose a son." Standing outside clutching my six ounce can of Sacramento tomato juice (I needed it for the road), I felt the snow creeping into my slippers and up my ankles and calves through my

pajamas. The condensation on the living room windows made it clear where the warmth was. Hell, I didn't even like tomato juice.

I started getting in trouble in school. I couldn't sit still and talked way too much. I was scared the first time I was sent to the principal's office. This never happened in Yonkers. After the second or third time it was no big deal. I met with the school psychologist.

"You have some learning disabilities and you're in the 99th percentile in creative thinking."

"What's that mean?"

"It means in creative thinking you're a genius. I think you should see a psychiatrist."

Every Wednesday afternoon my mother picked me up in front of school at 3:15 and drove me to Dr. Schact's house/office. She was a short, old lady with a thick German accent. She had short black hair except for the areas above her ears. They were white and shaped like wings. Her head looked like the helmet of the Philadelphia Eagles.

For a kid who couldn't stop talking I rarely said a word during these rides. I'd get nauseous and throw up in Schact's bathroom several times. *All I wanted to do was play after school football with the normal kids.* My mother knew I hated going but she still made me go. Schact gave me the Rorschach test. I couldn't understand why she wanted to know what I thought those stupid black spots looked like and how they were connected to getting in trouble.

"There are no wrong answers." I didn't believe her because she kept showing me the same spots over and over. We also played word association. I fantasized answering her inappropriately.

"OK Ansony here ve go... sunshine."

"Hitler."

"No Ansony...sunshine, ze sun in ze sky."

"Got it."

"OK ve go again... telephone."

"Chile con carne."

The worst part was she put me on Ritalin. I had to discreetly swallow these little yellow pills in

front of everybody in the lunch room with my small carton of Dellwood milk.

"If anybody asks just say they are vitamins." The thinking was the Ritalin would counteract the hyperactivity and calm me down.

The thinking was wrong.

One day in English class the word "damsel" danced across the page. I thought damsel was a funny word.

David Deschamps was a tall, overweight kid who looked like he was forty. He had jowls and drooping basset hound eyes, by far the most un-damsel like kid in class. I don't remember there being anything special about his personality. He was just a normal kid. For no apparent reason I started calling him damsel. At first he just smiled and laughed. But I kept doing it until he started getting angry. That's when the fun started.

"Daaamselll.....daamsell."

Fortunately I was faster than him. We both knew if he caught me he'd beat the crap out of me. I'd let him get real close and whirl away at the

last second. This game went on for months. His face would get red and tense and then all of a sudden he'd spring toward me like a raging buffalo. After a few minutes he was an exhausted buffalo and I was a laughing lunatic. Sometimes I'd get the sense that something was wrong with me. Why did I like this so much? I thought maybe I was gay even though I had a crush on Claudia Lubell and was making out with Monet Fischel. *Something was definitely off and it bothered me.* Why are you tearing around campus again? You never plan it and it keeps on happening? It was physically exhausting and he almost caught me a couple of times.

One day the principal, Mr. Undercoffler, saw us fly past his huge, open window.

"Heeeeeeeey, you two, get in here. What the hell is going on?" Panting and perspiring, a frightened Deschamps told the principal.

"He's been tormenting me for months." I'd never heard the word tormenting but knew exactly what it meant.

Undercoffler growled. "How?"

I completely lost it when Deschamps told him. "He's been calling me damsel."

Insane, uncontrollable laughter.

"Shut up, Spinner. What did you say, Deschamps?"

Staring at the floor Deschamps told him again. After a three-way uncomfortable silence he got angry at Deschamps. I couldn't believe it and felt myself siding with Deschamps. He probably had better things to do than listen to a fat, sweaty boy who's upset because someone has been calling him damsel.

Once more I'm in one of the trouble chairs while they talked behind the principal's closed door. *Will I have to stay late and clean classrooms? Suspension? Is mom going to have to leave work early again to come get me? What are they doing in there?*

"Spinner, get in here." The phone rang and I ended up standing in front of his desk and scanned the office even though it was familiar territory.

I liked his plants and looking out the big window. I was afraid to look at him because his face was pink-red from being angry all the time and his blue eyes weren't straight. I was probably thinking about homework I wasn't going to do, or girls, or sports when he covered the receiver.

"Spinner, cut the shit and go to class."

I couldn't have told you I was scared and angry. I was too young to recognize these emotions, same with therapy, I was 10. What did they expect? As if one day I'm going to look at Schact at say, "You know, Dr Schact, I'm feeling very vulnerable and I'm grieving the loss of my old environment and having a hard time assimilating to the culture of my new one. I'm disconnected, disassociated." I couldn't have told you trouble was my way of relieving the pain of a suddenly foreboding, incomprehensible world. When I was acting up, things made sense. I was in control. Nobody's breaking into my house and no one is forcing me to move. It was my show and I loved it.

Being bad was fun and it made me feel better...much better.