What’s a hermaphrodite?” Harry asked.

“A hermaphrodite?” I repeated. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d heard that term.

“Yeah,” he said.

My eyes blinked in rapid fire as my mind rifled through words for the simplest possible answer. I checked the bottom of the indoor watering can for drips with my right hand, and then set it down on the black Parsons table in the dining room. Ten-year-old Harry was standing in the archway between the kitchen and dining room, opening the cap to a bottle of Strawberry-Kiwi Snapple with the front of his bright orange hooded sweatshirt.

“Well, I guess you could describe it as someone who’s half-man, half-woman.”

“Huh,” Harry replied, with a slight nod. Then he turned the corner to the stairway.
I couldn’t imagine where he’d heard the word “hermaphrodite.” It better not be Ken’s friend George again, I thought. Harry had come home from a recent weekend at his dad’s condo to tell me he’d learned some new words for “vagina” from George. I’d expected “pussy,” but when he said “penny slot” I’d been horrified. I’d never even heard that phrase. As soon as Harry was out of earshot I’d phoned Ken and yelled at him for allowing such a conversation to take place.

“We wait,” I called to Harry. “Where did you hear that?”

“At school,” he answered, bounding up the steps without looking back.

Now the “huh” was mine. I couldn’t guess what kid was using the word “hermaphrodite” or where they had heard it. Maybe they’d come across it in a book. I remembered the oversized Webster’s dictionary with the tan cloth cover that sat on a pedestal in my sixth-grade classroom. We took turns searching the tissue-paper-thin pages for swears like “bitch” or for words having anything to do with sex, like “masturbation.”

I returned to the vase on the dining room table and picked a broken daisy from the freshly watered bouquet. I held the flower to my nose and suddenly felt a wave of worry crest in my gut. Had someone at school called Harry a hermaphrodite? It was hard to fathom, but not unimaginable. With his hair almost shoulder-length, people often mistook Harry for a girl. But having a stranger think you’re a girl is different than a classmate taunting you with a word you don’t understand.

On my climb upstairs to change for dinner at my aunt’s, I reminded myself that Harry hadn’t told me someone called him a
hermaphrodite. And I wasn’t going to ask him either. Still, I had an unsettled sense that something wasn’t right. I stopped in front of the door with his life-sized self-portrait captioned “I love hamsters” and knocked softly.

“Harry? Can I come in?”

“Okay, Mom, but careful. The birds are out.”

I cracked open the door just wide enough to frame my face at the outer eyebrows. Mango, the all-yellow female parakeet, was perched on Harry’s right forefinger.

“Listen, Harry,” I said, as turquoise-feathered Polo flew from behind the door to the windowsill across the room. “Rosh Hashanah starts tonight, and Aunt Margie’s making an early dinner. We’re not going to services with everyone, but you might want to change out of that Scooby-Doo t-shirt anyway.”

“Okay, Mom.”

“Thanks, honey.” I hesitated before stepping back to close the door. “Everything good with you?”

“Yeah, why?”

“No reason.”

After dropping Harry off at school Monday morning, I met up with Barbara who lived two blocks away for our weekly morning walk. Our standard round-trip hour took us from Lake Park to the Milwaukee Art Museum along the secluded bike path that ran parallel to the lakefront. Barbara was one of my best friends. She’d been a social worker in the Milwaukee Public School system for thirteen years before her husband’s career took them to Connecticut. They’d been back a little over a year, and Barbara was still job searching.
“I need some advice about Harry,” I said as we kept pace past the lighthouse in the park. “I have a suspicion he’s getting teased at school.”

“Ohhh boy,” Barbara said, shaking her head. “Kids can be so mean. And this is the age for it.”

“It is?”

“Yes! It happens all the time. Their bodies are changing, they’re all trying to figure out who they are, and they can be terrible to each other.”

“Well, Harry hasn’t said anything to me specifically, but I want to know what to do if it happens.” I told her about the hermaphrodite question.

“Listen, if some kid wants to make your kid feel bad, it means they don’t feel good about themselves; they don’t feel secure. It’s their way of trying to have some power.”

“Sounds like some adults I know.”

“Exactly!” said Barbara. “But it’s hard to explain that to a child who’s hurting, to get them to identify with that kid.”

I imagined Harry at recess hanging happily on the monkey bars, just wanting to play, and being attacked verbally with words that cut to his core. I shuddered. “So what do you do?”

“You can say you know it hurts and that he can talk about it. And he needs to know he doesn’t have to let whatever kid it is make him feel bad.”

I remembered the art project Harry had brought home from third grade. It was a large booklet he’d made of construction paper, called “Detecting Friends,” with subheads and numbered fill-in-the-blank lines. One of the pages had been titled “If you’re not sure
someone is a friend, walk away.” Harry had illustrated that reminder with four different-colored snakes.

“He knows to walk away,” I said. “But he's still going to feel bad.”

“That's why it helps if he can say something first that the other kid isn't expecting.”

“Like what?’

“If he gets teased for wearing a certain jacket, he could smile and say, ‘Oh, I like this jacket. I picked it out.’ And then walk away.”

“I like that,” I said, feeling some hope for positive consequences.

“It gives Harry some control.”

“It really does,” she replied. “He’s being hurt by words, but it also has to do with finding ways to feel your own power.”

“You’re the best, Barb,” I said, stopping to give her a hug.

Thinking of Harry feeling dejected, isolated, or hurt in any way was a trigger for tears. I wiped a thin bead of sweat from my hairline and took a swig from my water bottle instead. Barbara did the same, and we started off again. I felt better being armed with some tactics to help Harry. I hoped they were an insurance policy I’d never need.

Harry was quiet in the car on the way home from school that afternoon.

“Anything you want to talk about?” I asked.

“No,” he replied, fidgeting with the miniature toy stuffed gorilla that came attached to his Kipling backpack.

Something wasn’t right. Harry was usually more talkative.

At home, he dropped his backpack on the storage seat in the kitchen and walked past the fridge. I followed him into the living room where he sat on the radiator cover bench staring out the front window.
“Don’t you want a snack?” I asked.
“Not right now,” he replied.
I sat down beside him. “You seem kinda down, honey. Did something happen at school today?”
He turned his gaze toward me. His eyes had the same look they did the day we had to leave a dying Hammy at the vet’s office.
“Jason’s been calling me names on the playground,” he said softly.
I felt every hair on my arms stand up like magnetized metal shavings. “Jason?! I thought he was your friend.”
Harry had become friendly with Jason at school the year before. They’d formed the Nerd Squad foursquare team together at recess. He’d come over to help Harry screen-print t-shirts for the team in our basement. And he was at Harry’s birthday party at the pottery shop in March.
“Not anymore,” Harry said. “There are some mean boys in our class. He hangs out with them.”
“What did he call you?”
“Just some names. It doesn’t matter.”
“It does matter if your feelings are hurt. And I can tell that you’re hurting right now.”
Harry looked up, but didn’t say anything.
“Sweetheart,” I said, gently rubbing his arm. “You know you can tell me anything.”
Harry’s eyes searched mine. “He calls me a girl. In the hallways, he’ll walk past me and say, ‘Hey, what are you, a girl?’ I try to ignore him, but it’s hard.”
Fuck! I felt my heart rate accelerate as I brushed a hair away from Harry’s glasses. I imagined the other names Jason called him. Faggot. Fairy. The same hateful slurs Ken had been subjected to in
high school. But this was fifth grade! I wanted to pick up the phone and call Jason’s mother.

“The other mean boys call me names on the playground, too.”

I fought rage while Harry held back tears.

“Oh, honey, I’m sorry this is happening. No one deserves to be teased or picked on. Did you tell the playground supervisor?”

“No.”

“Well, I have a good mind to call the principal.”

“No!” Harry said, sitting up straight. “That would only make things worse.”

I understood his fear of potential backlash for “telling.” But I felt helpless doing nothing. I wished I had a magic wand that could solve everything instantly.

“Okay, I won’t say anything.” I promised. “But, you know, I think Jason has some serious problems. My guess is he doesn’t like himself very much. Kids who put other kids down do it because it’s the only way they know how to feel good about themselves.”

Harry scrunched his face.

“I know it’s messed up, but he’s probably not a very happy kid.”

Barbara was right. It was hard trying to get Harry to think about the bully when he was feeling so wounded.

“Let’s play a game!” I said. “We’ll call it the Payback Game.”

Harry perked up. “What’s that?”

“It’s an imagination game, like in your improv class. Think about what you could do—without pushing him off the top of the monkey bars, that is—that would get back at him.”

Harry scratched his head. Then I saw the corners of his mouth turn up. “I could write Jason’s name in some Barney underwear and then leave it in the middle of the hallway.”
I smiled. Harry hated that singing purple dinosaur Barney. “The kid actors on Barney must do it for the money,” he’d said recently flipping through channels on the TV. “I can’t think of any other reason, unless it’s for free diapers.” I got a kick out of knowing Harry’s creativity also flourished in times that called for revenge.

“That is so funny, Harry! Can’t you just picture Jason’s face when he found out?”

We both laughed. And it felt good to see Harry back to happy.

The Smiths’ van pulled up in front of their house and Harry turned his attention to Allison, Cindy, and the twins piling out of the back seat.

“I think I’ll go over across the street for a while.”

“Sure, honey, but first I want to give you a hug.”

He put his arms around my neck. I held him to my heart and breathed in his coconut-scented hair conditioner, not wanting to let go. He pulled away as he stood up and then ran out the front door. Thank heaven for the Smiths, I thought, watching the twins jump on Harry. I wanted him to get his joy back at school, too.

Back in the kitchen, I started to cut up a clove of garlic with the portable phone tucked between my ear and my shoulder. I was relieved when Barbara answered and quickly filled her in on my conversation with Harry.

“I’m still tempted to call the principal and ask him to expel Jason and his little gang of hate,” I said.

“See how it goes this week,” she said. “If the situation doesn’t improve, think about calling his teacher. That’s how it usually works. Then the teacher brings in the principal if he or she thinks it’s necessary.”

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“Barbara, I have no faith whatsoever in Harry’s teacher to effectively manage anything.”

Ken and I had both been at Atwater’s teacher orientation a few weeks earlier. In the hallway afterwards I’d agreed when Ken said Mr. Lynn was not the brightest bulb on the tree.

“And, besides,” I added, “I want to honor Harry’s request not to call anyone, hard as that is.”

“I know,” she said. “But remember, Harry doesn’t just have to walk away. He can come back with something that’s not hurtful. He can say, ‘I like how I look.’”

“Thanks, Barb. I’ll keep you posted.”

Two days after our talk, Harry didn’t want to get up for school. He still wasn’t out of bed after several wake-up nudges from the door. So I opened the lid on the red and yellow maze of plastic tubes that was Chewy’s cage and scooped him out of a corner mound of fluff and cedar shavings. His nose sniffed my thumb as I climbed the ladder to Harry’s top bunk single-handedly. Then I put Chewy on top of Harry’s head. It was the surest way I knew to get him up in a good mood.

“I don’t want to go to school,” Harry groaned, reaching for his pet and rolling up on one elbow.

“Do you feel sick, honey?” I touched the back of my hand to his forehead.

He lay back, letting Chewy crawl across the top of his nightshirt.

“No, I just don’t feel like going.”

I felt the monster that was my anxiety rousing. This wasn’t like Harry. He was a slow riser, but once awake he was typically eager for the school day. His attendance was nearly perfect. I just knew
he was dreading the prospect of another day as the target of Jason and the other ten-year-old delinquents. I gripped the ladder with both hands. I wanted to let him stay home feeling safe, but I didn’t want to set a precedent for missing school “just because.”

“Harry, unless you have a fever or are throwing up, I really have to go into the office today.”

“Oookaaay,” he said. “I’ll be right down.”

I hadn’t anticipated Harry not wanting to go to school. I decided sending him to school was the right thing to do. If I didn’t there was the chance he’d want to stay home the next day, too. Then the guilt ghost sidled up, alongside my anxiety. It haunted me on the drive to work and followed me from the parking lot to my desk.

How could I truly protect Harry from a next round of hurtful insults? I wondered if he was going to be okay at recess and lunch-time. I wanted the playground supervisor to be my hired PI. Maybe I should have insisted on phoning the principal or, at the very least, Jason’s mother. I liked her. We’d met when Jason and Harry were in Cub Scouts together in second grade. But I had to keep my word to Harry and not contact anyone. Instead, I opened the folder of prospective client companies I really did need to call. I adjusted my phone headset and dialed the number for my contact at Kraft Foods in Illinois.

I arrived at school that afternoon before the bell rang and parked in my usual pick-up spot on the Maryland Avenue side of Atwater Elementary. A mom with a preschooler was slipping her child into one of the baby seats on the swing set in front of the kindergarten building. I sighed with hope that Harry’s day had been as easy as reaching for the sky on the swings.
When I heard the school bell ring, I leaned onto the armrest between the seats to get a better view out the passenger window of kids leaving the school. I waved to Harry, then sat up and started the engine.

“Hi, Mom,” he said, opening the door. He dropped his backpack on the floor, climbed in, and fastened his seat belt.

“Hi, honey. How was your day?”

“Fine,” he said.

“No problems?”

“Nope.”

*Thank God!* “Oh, Harry, I’m so glad to hear that!”

He didn’t seem to hear me. He was waving at his classmates Grace and Kayla as they crossed the street at the stoplight in front of us. I turned right for our drive across town to see the orthodontist. Harry turned up the volume on the radio to sing along with Christina Aguilera’s “Come On Over Baby.” A few more days like this and I could stop worrying about whether or not Harry was safe at school.

I had a new-business meeting out of town the following day with a prospective client for the agency. I didn’t want to worry about getting back in time to pick up Harry, so I asked Allison’s mom if Harry could hitch a ride home with them. I told Harry where Laurie parked and said I’d leave the back door unlocked with the alarm on. All he had to do was press the code on the keypad.

I was already home when I heard Harry enter the kitchen. I looked at my watch. I thought it odd that Harry hadn’t wanted to stay at the Smiths’ for a while after school. Maybe Allison had
soccer practice. His backpack hit the window seat with a thud, and he brushed past me as a fast blur of orange without looking up or saying hello.

“Harry, wait!” I said, but he was already running up the stairs.

His bedroom door thundered shut. I bolted up after him, my heart pounding. This was not good. I knocked once and simultaneously opened the door. Harry stood at the double windows that faced the street. A multicolored yarn dreamcatcher he’d made at day camp dangled above him. His head was down.

“Harry, what is it?” I asked, walking over to him. He was holding the pin-art toy, making an impression of his other hand by pushing it into the framed pinheads.

“Look at me, honey.”

He turned. His lower lip quivered and a single tear rolled down his cheek.

Oh, my God. My happy-go-lucky kid, wearing a Peace Bug t-shirt and happy-face beaded necklace, was silently crying.

“What happened, Harry?” I asked, kneeling at his side. “Was it Jason?”

Harry didn’t answer.

“Please, Harry, tell me what’s gotten you so upset. I have to know.”

“He and the other boys were calling me names on the playground after lunch. I ignored them and walked away, but they didn’t stop.”

He sniffled. I grabbed a tissue from the box in his top bunk and returned to his side.

“And afterwards, in class, they . . . were . . .”
His voice trailed off.

“It’s okay, Harry,” I said. I took the pin-box toy out of his hand and gently pulled him closer. “Take your time. They were what?”

His eyebrows lifted and reached for each other. It was the same expression I’d seen in June after he’d reluctantly climbed into a scary midway ride with Ian at Summerfest. I hated myself for making him relive the day, but I had to know.

“They were . . . sticking me in the back . . . with sharp pencils. It hurt . . . a lot.”

“Oh, my God, Harry! Sticking you with pencils?! Let me see.”

Harry lifted up his shirt. I touched his back, looking for marks. When I was sure that nothing had pierced the skin, I turned him around and pulled him into a mother-bear hug. He burst into tears, and his small sobs tore at the corners of my heart. As I held him, petting his head, my eyes started to burn. This was beyond cruel teasing; this was assault.

I set my jaw and vowed to protect him the way I wished my mother had protected me.

I was suddenly back in my childhood home in Whitefish Bay, the same age as Harry, hunched in a ball under the blanket on my bed. I had trembled at the sound of my father’s shoes pounding up the stairs. I knew he was coming for me, just as my mother had promised me he would.

My mother’s nostrils flared. “You’re the one who trampled the Polinskis’ flower beds? What on earth is wrong with you?”

“But, Mom, it wasn’t me!” My knees bounced with each word. “I only said I did it because Tommy Polinski was ripping the heads
off grasshoppers and throwing them at me! I knew that would make him stop.”

“I know when you’re lying, Julie. Go to your room and wait until your father gets home. You’re really going to get it this time.”

The door to my bedroom swung open and banged the wall. I tucked my head and tightened the covers around my eyes. When I heard the clink of my father’s belt buckle followed by the fast slide of leather through the loops, I stopped breathing. He pulled off the shield of my bedspread and began whipping me on the back.

“Destroying things? Lying?”

“No, no, I didn’t do it! I love you, Daddy! I love you! I love you!”

I flailed around the bed, trying to escape the next lash. I saw my mother leaning against the doorway with her arms crossed, watching.

“Okay, Don. That’s enough,” my mother said finally, as if calling off an attack dog.

No one was going to stab my son in the back and get away with it. My scalp prickled and I felt my ears grow hot. After a minute, Harry calmed down. With a red, tear-streaked face, he asked for another Kleenex and blew his nose. I could no longer stand by. Something had to be done. I chose my next words carefully.

“Harry, this is no longer teasing. It’s harassment.”

I knew he’d learned that word in periodic classroom sessions with Mrs. Needham, the school guidance counselor. He took a deep breath that signaled he understood the seriousness of the situation.

“I want you to know that I must call the principal.”
He nodded.

“I need to know the names of the other boys and what they called you on the playground.”

I wrote down the names of the guilty on a small piece of notepaper from the pad on Harry’s desk, but he hesitated telling me what words they’d used to torment him.

“Harry, please, this is important.”

“Needle dick.”

For God’s sake.

“What else?”

“Hermaphrodite.”

“Anything else?”

“Faggot.”

Those fucking little brats!

“Thank you for telling me, Harry,” I said, resting a hand on his shoulder. “And let me tell you something. I promise you those boys are never going to bother you again.”

I closed his bedroom door behind me. My head was throbbing. I’d made a big promise in there. I looked at my watch. It was four o’clock; the Atwater office was still open. I’d never spoken with Dr. Stewart. He was hired from the public Montessori school when Harry was in second grade. I had no idea how he was going to react or respond.

I paced the perimeter of our entire first floor. Would he try to blame Harry? Saying he’d brought this on himself somehow? Would he say I should have called the boys’ parents instead of the school? I picked up the portable phone in the kitchen and paged through the Atwater Directory for the principal’s direct line. I
dialed the number and took a seat at the breakfast bar. Dr. Stewart’s secretary said he was available and transferred me right through to him.

“Hello, Dr. Stewart. This is Julie Tarney. My son Harry is in Mr. Lynn’s class. Something happened in the classroom today that has me extremely concerned.”

I told him everything that had happened that week. “Name calling on the playground is one thing,” I said. “But being stabbed multiple times in the back with sharp pencils is assault. In my mind it borders on a hate crime.”

There was a long, uncomfortable silence. While I waited for him to speak, I felt my eyes water. I wondered if Matthew Shepard’s mother had ever needed to call the principal at her son’s middle school.

“I don’t want you to worry, Ms. Tarney,” the principal said finally. “It’s our job to protect your son. I’ll take care of it. And I’ll get back to you.”

I inhaled five short emotional breaths through my nose.

“Thank you, Dr. Stewart. You have no idea how relieved I am to hear you say that.”

I set down the phone and immediately clasped both hands tightly over my mouth. I squeezed my eyes shut and bent over at the waist. I wailed loud muffled sounds into my palm. This was the kind of relief Harry didn’t need to hear. I opened the cupboard above the kitchen desk and reached for the box of Kleenex next to the phone books. Then I called Ken. He would be picking up Harry after work for dinner and homework at his house. I wanted him to know what was going on. He cried out when I told him about the pencils. I assured him the perpetrators would be dealt with.
The next morning was Ken’s Friday to take Harry to school. We had an evenly set morning drop-off schedule and alternated Fridays unless Ken was out of town on business. I only went to the agency Tuesdays through Thursdays, so I occupied my morning with some consulting work for a freelance client I’d taken on. But the hours dragged. It was difficult to keep myself from worrying about the day Harry was having at school. I didn’t know if the boys’ parents had been called or if Jason and friends were being called into the principal’s office that morning. I wanted to trust Dr. Stewart was handling everything in a way that kept Harry out of harm’s way. But I still had an underlying fear he might be shoved or kicked in retribution for my call.

After a late lunch I took a drive to the hair salon and spa where Nora worked, one of the younger friends I’d made in the last year. I asked her to distract me with a makeup lesson. I did really need one, and she’d offered more than once. I was still applying what little I did in 1982, when my brother’s girlfriend gave me some tips before my wedding. When it was time to pick up Harry, I parked in the drycleaner’s lot across the street and walked around to the side door I knew Harry would exit looking for my car.

“So how was your day?” I asked, as we walked side-by-side back to the front of the school.

“Fine,” he said in an upbeat tone.

“And how were those boys today?”

“They weren’t there. They got suspended.”

I was stunned. Why didn’t I know that? Dr. Stewart must have called all the parents right after talking to me. I guessed he was too busy dealing some swift Atwater justice. Suspensions! I felt a lilt in my step. This had turned out better than I’d even imagined.
“High five, buddy!” I said, holding up my hand. Harry slapped my palm as we both grinned accomplishment. We stopped at the curb on traffic-heavy Capitol Drive and waited for a signal from the crossing guard.

“If it weren’t for her,” Harry said, “you’d have to be Moses to cross this street.”

I laughed out loud. “Good one, Harry,” I said, with an ease I hadn’t felt for two solid weeks.

A letter arrived from the school on Saturday. It was from Dr. Stewart apologizing for the treatment Harry had endured at Atwater. He also informed me that all four boys had been suspended from school for three days. I re-read the letter and then hugged it to my chest. The school had my kid’s back. The system had worked.

Three weeks later, the mailman delivered an envelope addressed to Harry in a child’s handwriting. In the upper left corner was a return address label for Jason’s father. I couldn’t imagine why Jason was writing to Harry. I leaned the envelope up against one of the black candleholders in the middle of the glass table. Harry opened the letter after school, and I watched as his eyes moved across the single sheet of lined theme paper.

“Puh,” he said, a puff of air escaping his lips. He flicked the letter onto the table and headed for the kitchen.

“What is it?” I asked.

“You can read it,” Harry said without turning around. I quickly skimmed the page. “It’s an apology letter,” I called.

“He doesn’t mean it,” Harry said, returning with a snack. “But I thought all this was settled weeks ago when he and the other boys were suspended. Why is he writing to you now?”
“Because it happened again a couple of days ago.”
I was stunned. “It did?! With all the same kids?”
“No, just Jason,” Harry said.
He seemed completely unfazed.
“What happened?” I asked, pulling out a chair at the table. I thought the words might sink in better if I were sitting down.
“I told Ms. Prentis, the teacher who sits with Jason every day. After that, he got suspended again.”
“There’s a teacher who sits next to Jason in class every day?”
“Yup, every day.”
“Huh,” I replied.
I wanted to step in and help. But scanning Harry’s face, he seemed okay. And I realized he’d already helped himself.
“Well, I’m proud of you, Harry,” I said, “for handling this on your own.”
“Thanks, Mom,” he said, lifting his chin with the air of a confident kid.
I told Barbara what had happened when we met for dinner on Harry’s Thursday night with Ken.
“This is why actions by parents and teachers are so important,” Barbara said over our Asian chicken salads and glasses of white wine at The Knick restaurant downtown. “Kids watch what we do.”
“You mean because I called the principal?”
“Because you took action and then something happened,” she said. “So Harry wasn’t afraid to then do it on his own.”
Not only was I proud of Harry, but I felt like I’d earned another mom badge. Harry had learned to stand up for himself and be heard.
I smiled and clinked my glass on Barb’s. “To action,” I said.
Harry’s idea of athletic apparel