

ALT-2011



CHAPTER 1

I was on the way to pick up a few things for dinner—as she did so often, my running buddy Emory was coming over that night—when my son’s school rang to inform me that he was being sent home for “bullying,” so would I please pick him up. Darwin is a contained, deliberate boy, hardly inclined to push other children around, so I wondered if there might have been a misunderstanding. He’d always performed at the top of his class, and—until recently—he’d been the apple of his teachers’ eyes. Sure enough, when I came to retrieve him from the front office, my slight, precocious oldest was sitting quietly, though his mouth was set, and he was staring fiercely into the middle distance, excluding the two adults in the room from his line of sight. At eleven, he was about the age at which I awakened from an indoctrination that Darwin had been spared. Yet his customary containment had a combustible quality reminiscent of my own demeanor when seething silently through Family Worship Evening.

“I’m afraid your son ridiculed one of his classmates,” the assistant principal informed me. “He employed language we consider unacceptable in a supportive environment, and which I will not repeat.” The official thrust her formidable breasts upward, dramatizing a haughty bearing in little need of emphasis.

“Well, most kids try bad language on for size—”

“Playground obscenities would be one thing. *Slurs* are quite another. This is a suspension-level offense. Any similar violation in the future could merit expulsion.”

If not the very best in Voltaire, Pennsylvania, Gertrude Stein Primary is (or was) a decent public school not overly far from our house. Two grades below, Darwin’s sister Zanzibar went here, too, while our youngest, six-year-old Lucy, had just started school here that September. Ergo, Wade

and I couldn't afford to alienate the administration. Even if our son was drifting toward the doghouse, we just had to ease Darwin through sixth grade and out the door, so I promised I'd speak sternly to him and remind him that certain terms are "out of bounds."

The second-in-command didn't let me go without adding a warning. "I do hope he isn't picking up this kind of derogatory vocabulary because it's commonplace at home."

"I assure you we're very civilized."

"Any number of civilizations of times past held views we find abhorrent today. I think you know what I mean, Ms. Converse. This is a forward-looking institution."

Back in the car, Darwin remained silent. Because, thanks to my older two kids' anonymous test-tube father, his ethnic heritage is half Japanese, many people interpret his refined features and slight figure as signatures of a constitutional delicacy. But that slender frame is built on an armature of steel. Darwin is not delicate.

I let him stew on the drive back. Last fall, this leafy neighborhood had signs planted in nearly every yard, "*Morons welcome here!*"—the same sign that businesses in strip malls all taped hastily to their windows. But overt usage of such terms of opprobrium even in quotation marks rapidly morphed from declass   to crude to deadly, so the current crop of yard signs was more sedate: *We support cognitive neutrality*. The car up ahead sported one of those bumper stickers that had proliferated everywhere, *Honk if you hate brainiacs*. Because a plethora of other drivers also, it seemed, hated brainiacs, the trip home was loud.

Lest our woody, rambling five-bedroom give a misleading impression of my family's circumstances, Wade's and my fire-sale purchase of the comely and substantial property was made possible only by the foreclosures of 2008. In mid-October, it was too chilly to talk out Darwin's sins on the commodious back deck, so I sat my son at the kitchen table while I surveyed our larder for what ingredients we had on hand. I hoped this cross-examination would be short, because Lucy's school bus would arrive at our stop in less than two hours, and it seemed that I did still need to dash to the supermarket.

"It was about a T-shirt," Darwin said sourly at last.

"And?"

"Stevie was wearing one that said, 'If you're so smart, why aren't you smart?'"

I guffawed. "God, that's lame! It doesn't even make sense."

"That's what I said. Actually, all I said is it was stupid."

"The S-word."

"I didn't call Stevie stupid. I said his T-shirt was."

"Stupid Stevie" had a ring that in my day would have made it irresistible.

"Well . . ." I said. "When you wear a stupid shirt, that can't help but suggest that you're a little bit stupid yourself."

"I don't understand the rules anymore!" Darwin exploded. "Okay, so a person can't be stupid. You've explained why, over and over, and no, I still don't see how, like, as of, like, one day back around the beginning of fifth grade suddenly a fucking doofhead wasn't a fucking doofhead anymore." If I cursed occasionally on principle, I'd no place being prissy about my kids' language at home. "But, okay, I get it. I don't call anyone the S-word or a bunch of other words. But can a thing still be stupid, like a shirt? Can an idea be stupid? Can anything be stupid, or is everything intelligent now?"

I squinted. "I'm not sure. Calling everything intelligent might get you into trouble, too."

"This junk is all anyone cares about anymore! But it's not like we don't all know which kids are total pea-brains. The teachers are always calling on them, and no matter what they say it's always, 'Ooh, Jennifer, that's so wise!' And then when one of the thickos claims five times seven is sixty-two, our math teacher says, 'Excellent! That's *one* answer, and a very *good* answer. So would anyone else like to contribute a *different* answer?'"

I suppose none of this was funny, really; still, I couldn't help but laugh. I know I'm not objective, but mothers aren't meant to be, and my son charmed the pants off me.

"I swear, the teachers are actually afraid of the class dummies," Darwin continued. "The dimwits are never called out for talking during

lessons or not turning in their homework. I guess now not doing your homework is just a *different* and totally *wise* way of doing your homework. Meanwhile, the dummies are becoming a pain in the butt. They walk around with their noses in the air like they're so special, and they're always on the lookout for something you said that they can jump on and take the wrong way. Like, Aaron told this girl Wendy that her new phone case was 'super dope.' He was just trying to be nice and also to sound cool, but she punched him in the arm and reported him to the new MPC—"At my quizzical look, he spelled out, "Mental Parity Champion. I think all the schools have them. Anyway, Aaron was forced to apologize in front of the class, because Wendy and the MPC were both too clueless to know that 'dope' means 'great.'"

"I have a funny feeling that usage is on the way out," I said. "Listen, you don't say words like 'thicko' and 'dummy' at school, do you?"

"Of course not. That would make me a *dummy* and a *thicko*, wouldn't it? But I don't understand why we can't stick up for what we think. *You* said there is, too, such a thing as being smarter than other people, and it's nothing to be ashamed of. I don't understand why we have to go along with this junk."

I confess that I took pleasure in the cozy collusion of our heretical household. Yet I worried that my determination to preserve a sanctum of sanity behind closed doors put the kids in a parlous position. "There's obviously something to be said for staying true to what we believe," I said. "But we have to be prudent. Pick our spots. This new way of thinking about people is bigger than we are. If we stick up for what we believe in the wrong way, or at the wrong time, we won't accomplish anything, aside from doing ourselves a great deal of damage." In due course, I'd have been better off delivering this speech to myself.

"You mean we just have to go along with everyone else because we're outnumbered, or because, if we don't, we'll be punished. What's the difference between your 'being prudent' and being a fucking coward?"

"There's no difference," I said heavily. "Now, get your coat."

CHAPTER 2

At the last minute, Emory called me on what I was no longer, apparently, supposed to describe as my “smartphone,” although I was baffled by how I was meant to refer to it instead. (I’d remarked earlier that week in our departmental offices, “What is it now, a mediocrityphone?” A colleague quipped tartly, “How about ‘phone’? Is that so hard, Pearson? Is employing a usage that’s actually more succinct still too great a sacrifice, the better to show a little respect, a little sensitivity? How about *phone*?”) Was our menu sufficiently elastic to include Roger, Emory asked, this new fellow she was seeing? I could hardly say no, though I was annoyed. After the vexing business of Darwin being sent home from school, I was in no mood to make a show of interest in some stranger. I’d sprung for barely enough costly tiger prawns for six, and another guest would be a stretch. Roger would change the nature of the occasion from my best friend casually dropping by to join us for supper again to a “dinner party.” Besides, we hadn’t seen each other since the fall term commenced, and I wanted Emory all to myself.

Sure enough, they arrived with a pricey bottle and flowers, whereas Emory commonly showed up with box wine that privileged alcoholic ambition over refinement. If I even bothered with olives, we’d usually pluck them from the deli container while standing in my dark-wood kitchen, and now I had to put them in an attractive bowl, with a separate dish for pits. Lest the kalamatas seem paltry, I’d also put out beet and parsnip chips, though the plain old salt-and-vinegar potato kind were better.

Leaving Wade to finish the prep, I issued our guests with reluctant formality into the living room. Emory’s gear—leggings with sleek black boots, a silk tunic in saffron accented with a red scarf perhaps purposefully reminiscent of her sixteenth birthday present to me—was simple but flash. Just as unsurprisingly, Roger was handsome. He was trim in that perfectly

cornered way, reliably the result of vigilant dietary stinting and fearfully fanatic adherence to fitness rituals. The styling of his clothes was sporty, but their fabrics were high-end. He didn't say much at first, but his reserve didn't come across as shyness so much as an arch holding back to observe, assess, and judge. Immaculate grooming cultivated an air of sovereignty, perhaps the mutual quality that had drawn these two to each other to begin with. Yet he didn't say anything overtly boastful or patronizing, so maybe I just had a bad attitude.

It can be best to say what's really on your mind in these settings, or chitchat can feel pointless and diversionary. Skipping the specifics, I explained that I was still a bit upset because Darwin had been suspended for employing a "slur," and he wasn't used to being treated like a troublemaker. "He doesn't understand what the rules are anymore," I said. "I can't blame him for feeling confused."

"Well, have you heard about Obama's expansion of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'?" Emory asked. I had, but I was hazy on the details. "I only bring it up because it's a social template that's bound to apply beyond the military. So tell Darwin that these are the rules from now on: Don't ask where anyone went to school. Don't tell anyone where you went to school, even if you went to Yale—well, especially if you went to Yale! And that includes secondary schools: Never drop casually in conversation that you graduated from Andover or Groton. Don't ever mention, or fish for, IQ, obviously, but also SAT and ACT scores or grade point averages. You're even meant to keep your trap shut about how well you did on newspaper quizzes on the major stories of the week. And forget asking or telling about a performance on *Jeopardy!*!"

Emory delivered this lowdown with an admirable deadpan, but her intention was clearly mocking. "You know, they canceled that show last week," I said.

"No kidding," Emory said.

"Gone, finito. It's *discriminatory*. And it's been on since 1964."

"Wow," Emory said. "So much for *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, then."

"I caught part of that program while I was shelling the shrimp for dinner, just out of curiosity," I said. "They're trying to stay alive, and stay

relevant, by asking unbelievably primitive questions. Like, ‘What—is—your—name?’”

“Phone a friend!” Emory exclaimed. “Oh, and I almost forgot: the army has also banned Rubik’s Cubes in the barracks.”

“Chess has to be next,” I groaned.

“No, it can’t be next,” Emory said, her deadpan still impeccable. “They already banned chess. It creates a divisive and prejudicial environment, and it’s antithetical to the spirit of unity in the corps.”

“Oh, God, pretty soon this could hit where it hurts,” I said. “Boggle and Scrabble are doomed.”

“As they should be,” Emory said primly. “They make any number of entirely equal people feel unjustly inadequate.”

We were leaving Roger out of the fun. After passing around the olives, I asked, unimaginatively, how they’d met.

“Roger was a guest on the show,” Emory said. “Though I’m not sure who was doing whom the favor. I had to warn him that no one, and I mean no one, listens to it.”

Emory was not given to self-deprecation to make herself more likable; she spoke from genuine frustration. From high school, she’d nursed a single-minded ambition to make it in television journalism (by contrast, my sole driving ambition from my teenage years was to be left alone), but for a decade she’d worked at WVPA, an NPR affiliate. For six of those years, she’d hosted a minor early-afternoon arts program that sponsored local up-and-comers and B-listers, and she felt stuck.

“How relaxing for you, then,” I told Roger. “If no one’s listening, you can say anything.”

“No, Pearson,” Emory said. “These days, you most certainly can’t say just anything.” I wondered if she was giving me a personal warning.

Roger, it seemed, was a playwright. I wanted to say, “Does anyone even go to plays anymore? Everyone I know hates them. It’s yesterday’s form, don’t you think? Who wouldn’t rather see a movie?” But I didn’t.

“It’s an interesting time to be working in the theater,” he said.

“Interesting?” I said. “I wouldn’t have thought that’s quite the word. Tricky, maybe. Or dangerous.”

"Great theater is always dangerous," he said smoothly. "But I meant it's exciting to work in the arts when the culture's tectonic plates are shifting. The last couple of years have seen an utter upending of a hierarchy that goes back millennia. Back to forever, really."

"Yes, I haven't been living in a cave," I said sweetly, nodding at the coffee table.

But then, I worried that Roger might misinterpret the tome on display as occupying pride of place, whereas this household's exhibition of *The Calumny of IQ: Why Discrimination Against "Dumb People" Is the Last Great Civil Rights Fight* was pointedly ironic. As I'd felt the need to get in on the political ground floor in 2010, ours was a first-edition hardback, so the cover still pictured a little boy on a stool staring shamefacedly at his lap while wearing what no one would now dare call a "dunce cap." Later editions eliminated the hat, the image too harsh a throwback to a barbaric past, while rendering the subtitle as *Discrimination Against "D— People."* As "calumny" soon joined a host of vocabulary deemed ostentatiously "brain-vain," the last paperback I'd glimpsed at a supermarket checkout had simplified the title to *The Crime of IQ*.

If I'd never finished Carswell Dreyfus-Boxford's game-changing, era-defining magnum opus, that just made me like most people. It was one of those commonplace doorstops that everyone bought and nobody read. At best, the ambitious got through the set-piece introduction of forty pages, full of heartrending anecdotes of capable young people whose self-esteem was crushed by an early diagnosis of subpar intelligence. Once you digested the thesis that all perceived variation in human intelligence merely came down to "processing issues," you could skip all the tedious twin studies, cohort graphs, and demonstrations of IQ scores being raised or lowered by fifteen to twenty points depending on whathaveyou. Initially, the "cerebral elite"—academics, doctors and lawyers, scientists—lampooned the notion that stupidity is a fiction as exceptionally stupid (whatever they say now). Yet as the drive for intellectual leveling gathered steam, it was the sharpest tacks among that elect who jumped on the fashionable bandwagon first.

"You know, it's easy to forget, but that book was widely ridiculed when it first came out. *You and I* made merciless fun of it," I reminded Emory,

hoping to stir her memory of a certain unruly, drunken late-night twosome at her apartment in the spring of the previous year. “Basically everyone agreed that the poor professor had published a howler. Then suddenly—you could probably pinpoint the pivot to a single day—Dreyfus-Boxford’s proposition wasn’t hilarious but irrefutably true: there’s no such thing as you-know-what.”

“Well, any day now I expect another blockbuster to make a splash by claiming there’s no such thing as a beautiful woman,” Emory said slyly to her date, extending her shapely legs to prop them on the coffee table. “Everyone is as beautiful as everyone else. And if you beg to differ, you’re suffering from a *processing issue*.”

If there was indeed such a thing as a beautiful woman, that would be Emory Ruth. Tall and slender with close-cut raven hair, she was old enough at thirty-nine that if she were going to get hippy, the broadening would have shown by then. By that night I’d lost numerical track of Emory’s boyfriends and broken engagements, which had long provided me a subscription streaming service akin to Hallmark Movies Now sans the \$5.99/month. Her surfeit of male attention was boringly down to looks. But none of these guys was ever good enough for her, and it was more than possible that none of them ever would be. I thought, *Somebody oughta tell Roger*.

“So how’s it going at VU?” Emory asked. “Are the babies behaving themselves?”

I’d been eager to talk to her about the tribulations of teaching English even at the erstwhile august Voltaire University, but now I felt constrained. If Roger was dating Emory, I was inclined to assume he was one of us, but he hadn’t tipped his hand and remained an unknown quantity.

“Well, this fall is the first open-admissions intake,” I said. “A few of the more conservative schools have held out, but the writing’s on the wall for standardized tests; everyone expects that by this time next year they’ll be just as illegal as IQ tests. Now that K-through-twelve has stopped giving them, colleges won’t be able to use grades, either. The conceit—I mean, the understanding—is that everyone’s the same level of . . . So the whole idea of letting in one applicant and not another is unacceptable.

I'm not sure if they pull names from a hat or it's first come, first serve. But there's really no point to having an admissions office anymore. A janitor could do the job: unlock the door."

"An economy, then," Emory said.

"When I didn't get into VU myself," I said, "I guess my feelings were hurt. At the same time, I knew in my heart of hearts that I wasn't really . . . good enough . . . qualified enough . . . But if I had been admitted, I'd have been over the moon. I wonder if we're denying young people a rite of passage that can be exhilarating. That letter in the mail. That burst of joy, that feeling of being chosen, of having made the grade, of being recognized and lifted up, that sudden giddy rush of being seen as special and finally believing that maybe you have a future." I said this last bit in an animated torrent, then caught myself. "I'm only saying that 'getting in' to Voltaire, to Cornell, to Harvard—it doesn't mean anything anymore. That seems like a loss. An emotional loss, if nothing else."

"But you said your feelings were hurt," Roger said. "From the sound of it, a sense of inferiority from that rejection still lingers, what, twenty years later? Wouldn't you estimate that far more young people have been devastated in the college admissions race than the few who've been 'exhilarated'? Isn't that an awfully big price to pay, collectively, for a few crack highs?"

I tried to take his measure. Roger's tone was tentative, if still on the politically acceptable side of neutral. Were he a Mental Parity true believer, he might be gentling his fervor from romantic savvy. After all, he'd have discovered after going out with Emory even once that she subjected the current catechism to wicked ridicule. Should they fall on opposite sides of this issue, it was only a matter of time before the clash destroyed the relationship—an advent that, assuming he was smitten, which Emory's swains always were, he'd have every motivation to put off. Alternatively? Maybe he chose to air views that fell safely within the Overton window (which had collapsed to a slit) out of caution. He was in an untested social setting where mouthing the shibboleths of cognitive equality might risk dreariness but at least would never get his head cut off.

"You do realize you're among friends," I said.

"Indeed," he said lightly, with an air of not understanding what I was getting at.

"I'm astonished by how fast this new way of thinking about human intelligence installed itself," I said. "And I'm not quite sure who installed it. The pace of ideological change has been dizzying."

"Funny," Roger said, "that's not my experience at all. I'm always shocked when I remind myself what a short time it's been, because to me it seems as if we've banned cognitive discrimination for years and years."

I was perplexed why Emory had yet to jump in—say, right here, maybe along the lines of "That's because when something horrendous is happening, time slows to a crawl." But she just sat there, submitting to her new boyfriend's many claim-laying touches as he sat encroachingly close to her on the couch—a stroke of a cheek here, a brush of a shoulder there, three fingers on her knee.

"As for my experience in the classroom this fall," I said, "if it were only the open admissions, that would be . . . difficult . . . challenging enough. But something else has changed." I was sick of walking on eggshells in my own home, especially after picking bits of shell from my feet on return from the university multiple days a week, so I raised the frankness quotient a tad. "The students, especially the freshmen, display an inexplicable pugnacity. They all wear those 'IQuit' badges, which are now as ubiquitous as smiley-face buttons when I was a kid. Because the badges are almost a requirement, they don't distinguish the zealots from more passive students just swimming with the tide. Still, the zealots have ways of making themselves known. They choose desks toward the front of the room. They sit there glaring, often with their arms crossed, positively daring me to try to teach them something they don't know—as if they're sure they know it already, or if they don't, it's not worth knowing. They're smug, and they're surly. Also very touchy and on the lookout. Darwin told me the . . . that certain students display this same cunning, predatory watchfulness even in his primary school. It's as if the purpose of going to college is to test the faculty and not the students."

"Are *you* giving grades anymore?" Emory asked.

"All courses are now pass-fail," I said. "But that won't last. Already, for an instructor to give any student a failing grade would be suicidal. It would look like *discrimination*. Gosh, remember when being 'discriminating' was a compliment? So they'll all pass. The thing is, I don't understand what college is for anymore. Are students supposed to master a body of knowledge, acquire new skills? They don't seem to think so. What are we doing, then? Am I just meant to entertain them? They don't do the reading; there are no consequences for not doing the reading; so by implication the reading doesn't matter. Half the time, they pay no attention to me whatsoever, talking among themselves as if they're in the food hall. I'm the first to admit that I went into teaching university English because it was a soft, relatively undemanding job that gave me plenty of free time. But now the job is getting hard. Really hard. I don't know what I'm doing, and I feel like an—" I stopped myself just in time.

Emory shot me a sharp look and curved the conversation. "Have you followed the foofaraw over this new novel—*My Brilliant Friend*?"

"Of course," I said. And that's when I decided to jump in with two feet. I would declare myself. I was the host here, and it was up to me to set the tone. "This so-called controversy is *dumb*."

The D-bomb landed like Little Boy. Nobody said anything.

"'Brilliant' doesn't only mean smart," I continued. "It also means fab, terrific, swell. I gather for a while there, the Brits chirped 'Brilliant!' every time you bumped them on the sidewalk."

"True," Emory said, again with a peculiar impartiality. "And it also means shiny or dazzling. But the weird thing about all the boycotts, the bookstores refusing to stock it, Amazon taking it off the site—it's all so unnecessary. The novel was written in Italian. They could have translated the title however they wanted. How culturally tin-eared can you get?"

"*My Swell Friend* doesn't have much of a ring," I said. "Much less *My Shiny Friend*."

Emory laughed, which was a relief. "In any case, that novel's going to sell, like, five copies."

"Uh-huh," I grunted. "And all to activists for their book burnings." I was getting irritable. After I'd shared how impossible my job was becom-

ing, no uptake. Wade must have finished the onions and zucchini long ago, too. Socially recessive, he used the kitchen to hide.

I'd fed Lucy earlier and put her to bed, but I never shooed off Darwin and Zanzibar to eat in the den with the TV. When my mother had an elder and his family to dinner, my brothers and I being exiled with the visiting kids to the "children's table" always felt humiliating. Thanks to our inclusivity, Darwin could already hold his own with adults.

Once we were all seated, then, I encouraged him to bring us all up to date on Fukushima, which he had followed as avidly as he had the Deepwater Horizon debacle the previous year. He was clearly headed for a career in science. Just as he'd kept up with every stage of BP's frantic efforts to close off the surging oil leak in the Gulf, he could now give a cogent, up-to-the-minute precis on the radiation levels at various distances from the disabled Japanese power plant and the amounts of cesium-137 still being released into the Pacific. Clued up enough to avoid monopolizing the dinner by letting his enthusiasm run away with him, he neatly concluded his presentation with a warning about Germany's horrified about-face on investment in nuclear power. (Thrillingly for his mother, he didn't actually say "about-face" but "*volte-face*"—a point of nostalgia, as foreign phrases would soon be spurned in common discourse for being brain-vain.) With a moderation unusual for the time, Darwin pointed out that major meltdowns at nuclear plants had been rare. Germany's overreaction was bound to leave the country heavily dependent on imported fossil fuels: "Pretty soon they'll have to get their natural gas from Russia. And Russia's a bully."

"There," I said to the table. "Now tell me there's no such thing as unusually high intelligence."

After which, everyone busied themselves with passing the bread and making sure they'd all gotten butter.

Zanzibar wouldn't embark on a similar recitation, and I wouldn't coax her into one, either. She was supremely self-possessed. She spoke when spoken to, and not in obeisance to a dated axiom. She responded to Roger's

guesty questions politely while looking him in the eye. She betrayed no exasperation that children get very tired of a grown-up's pro forma inquiries about their favorite subjects in school, when they can tell their interlocuter has no interest in the answers and isn't listening. For a nine-year-old, her table manners were faultless. She sat still, hands and napkin in her lap. She waited patiently for dishes to be passed, and quickly surveyed the other plates before helping herself to the scarce tiger prawns, not wanting to take more than her share.

Nevertheless, Zanzibar was on autopilot. Like many creative children, she lived in a parallel universe. Our friend Roger had no idea what she was thinking, and neither did I.

Hoping I wasn't putting Darwin on the spot, I filled in the details of his ejection from school that afternoon. "So what's the verdict?" I threw upon the waters. "We know about the kid wearing it. But can a T-shirt still be 'stupid' or not?"

"If you're so smart, why aren't you smart?" Emory said, shooting me a wary look. "It's closer to *opaque*. Maybe it means: good luck clinging to an antiquated label now that we no longer acknowledge the category."

"Pretty tortured," I said. "My chips are still on 'stupid.'" I wasn't sure, but I thought I saw Roger wince.

"Maybe, Darwin," Roger said, "it's best to avoid that kind of charged language as a general rule. That way, you're not only considerate, but probably more eloquent, too. Ugly names for—for what we now call 'alternative processing,' a term you may have heard your teachers use—well, they tend to be broad, lazy, and inexact. You could have called your friend's T-shirt slogan 'unclear,' or 'strange,' or, as Emory said, 'opaque'—meaning, hard to understand. Maybe you should push yourself to choose adjectives like that, which add more value, more content, than just being cruel. I'm sure you didn't intend to hurt your friend's feelings. But when you use words that can also be used as slurs, even if you're only referring to a T-shirt, you run the risk of misinterpretation."

All that worthiness was weighing down this occasion like low barometric pressure. If Roger was pandering to present-day sensitivities purely to protect himself, he was suspiciously convincing.

"A couple of years ago," Darwin said, "I could have called Stevie himself . . . that same word, and he might have punched me. Maybe the teacher would have told us to try harder to get along. But I'd never have been sent to the principal's office. No one would have called my mom to take me home. I want to know what changed. Why we never take tests anymore. I was good at them."

"Sometimes the grown-ups all get together," Roger said, "and decide we'll do things differently from now on. We come up with a way of thinking about things that's better."

"Or worse," I said. "You know, they study a little history, even in primary school."

"Listen, pal," Wade told Darwin, "our friend Roger here is making this way too complicated. Just don't use that word."

"Because it'll get me into trouble," Darwin said.

"Yup," Wade said. "And don't use a bunch of other words, either, and you know what they are. They're not worth it."

"So what's our son supposed to call something that's blatantly *styoopid*?" I exploded. "'That's so *alternative-processing*'?"

"He's not supposed to call it anything," Wade said. "Because there's no point in creating problems for yourself when you don't have to—*Pearson*." He used my name seldom. When he did so, it was to be pointed.

"I'm in our own house, among our own family," I said. "I'm under no obligation to watch my language."

"Zambia?" Roger shamelessly turned to our daughter to dial back the tension. She seemed to regard his mistake as amusing. "What do you make of all this? I bet you don't have to worry about being smartist in third grade." A bigger mistake. She was in fourth grade.

"I don't make anything of it," she said calmly. "I don't care. When you draw a picture, or play a song, or act in a play, it isn't smart or not smart. It's only good or not good. I try to do stuff that's good."

"An arts purist!" Roger exclaimed.

"Obviously," Emory said, "a whole range of vocabulary is now more radioactive than Fukushima. So I've been training myself to avoid it, even when I'm around colleagues I've worked with for years; in fact, even when

I'm alone. Just to groove my habits. So that when I'm in public I don't put my foot in it and accidentally ruin my career. I've been surprised by how often I used to say 'S-word' that, or 'Oh, that S-word I-word.' Roger's right. If nothing else, it was linguistically lazy."

Emory never used to say "the S-word" and "the I-word" in my presence, and I met her gaze with an expression of *Are you kidding me?* She looked back at me steadily: no apology. She had the whole Western world on her side.

"You should listen to Emory," Wade told me. "You're constantly taunting people, dancing back and forth across a line. I know you didn't draw the line, but tough luck. It's there. Don't step over it. This is totally about watching your back, because no one else is going to watch it for you, *capisce?* You run your mouth like it's still 2009 and accomplish absolutely nothing." For Wade, that was a long speech.

"Sticking up for myself isn't accomplishing nothing," I fired back. "Besides, you have no idea what it's like now. You work mostly on your own. All day, you hardly talk. And there's no such thing as a stupid tree."

It was bad form to have domestic squabbles in front of guests. Accordingly, Wade got up and cleared the plates. I followed him mutely to the kitchen with the serving dishes.

"If you keep up with your different-drummer thing," Wade muttered, "our kids will copy you, and they'll be persecuted, too. You're not a lone wolf, you're a mother. You have to protect them. Set an example that will keep them safe."

"It's my job to teach them more than how to be *safe*," I hissed.

"Can it," Wade said. "Not now, if ever."

I collected myself. Leaving Wade behind to clean the kitchen, to which he was relieved to withdraw, I came back out with dessert, served the kids, and released them. After I settled back in my chair, maybe it was lame to resort to current events, but they had to be good for something.

"Well, it looks like the Arab Spring has fizzled for keeps," I said.

"Pretty inevitable," Emory said. "Those protesters might have had a

chance at international support, but staging sit-ins to bring back university exams and graduation requirements? Big turnoff. Came across as retrograde. Given the passions of the moment, they made themselves look like cerebral supremacists.”

“Those countries are incredibly corrupt,” I said, determined to remain even-tempered. “With huge cohorts of underemployed, ambitious young people. Earning credentials in an education system that still had some standards was the only way people without connections had a chance at a life. Governments in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya—they embraced the Mental Parity fad raging across the West out of rank opportunism. That way they could plug their underqualified, dull-witted cronies into every position imaginable. The system was nepotistic to begin with, and now it’s worse—brazenly, self-righteously arbitrary.”

“Come on, Pearson,” Emory said. “You have to admit it was terrible PR. To on-trend Americans, they didn’t look like bold revolutionaries but like right-wing holdouts trying to drag their countries back to the brutal morality of the past. Those placards in Tahrir Square? *Restore Merit! Mubarak is a*— Well, let’s just say, ‘Mubarak’ is a word that combines ‘more’ with ‘on.’ I don’t know why they wrote the signs in English, because they hopelessly alienated their Western audience.”

“I’ll tell you the protest that’s effective,” Roger said. “That’s Occupy in downtown New York. Not only is the encampment in Zuccotti Park getting bigger and more entrenched, but the movement is already spreading to other cities, even going international. I’d love to own the merch rights to ‘We are the 99 percent!’ I don’t know about ‘If you’re so smart,’ but *that* T-shirt is going places.”

The protest that had started the month before was partially fired up by the financial crisis of 2008. But what really gave the movement legs was new research revealing that 58 percent of America’s wealth was owned by people with a “perceived” IQ of over 135—or only about 1 percent of the population.

“I don’t trust that statistic,” I said, taking another slug of wine, though any further disinhibition wasn’t likely in my interest. “In my experience,

smart people do plenty of dopey things, and that includes making lousy financial decisions like everyone else.”

Roger placed his ice cream spoon deliberately on the table, looking pained.

“Besides,” I continued. “That new book *The Cognitive Pay Gap*? Which also argues it’s ‘perceived’ intelligence that overwhelmingly explains income inequality? I think the author’s dismissal of discrimination by race, sex, and sexual orientation is outrageous. He’s fundamentally making a category error. Racial discrimination is not only real but genuinely unfair. Skin color bears no relation to ability. But the reason you don’t hire a dummy for an intellectually demanding job is that he *can’t do it*.”

“Excuse me.” Roger placed his palms flat on his thighs, eyes drilling down at the table. “I’ve been trying to keep my own counsel, because I’m aware that I’m in your home, and I don’t want to overstep. But I’m starting to feel complicit here, and I’m afraid I can’t sit quietly and listen to smear after smear without objecting. If only as a favor to me, Pearson, I wish you would rein in the hate speech.”

“What, is this because I said ‘dummy?’” I said. “I’m sorry, but ‘the D-word’ doesn’t do it for me as a euphemism, because, maybe because of that thudding, thick-sounding onomatopoeic ‘duh,’ there are too many words it might refer to: ‘dumbbell,’ ‘dunderhead,’ ‘dummkopf,’ ‘do-do’—”

“Enough!” Roger exclaimed. “Look, I inferred from early this evening that you harbor a subtle antagonism toward MP—”

“Not subtle,” I said. “Straight-up antagonism.”

“Which we can discuss, tolerantly and respectfully, but only if you put a lid on the terms of abuse.”

“Is this personal for you?” I asked. “Have you been showered by all those unpronounceable words that begin with ‘D?’”

“No, not really,” he said with noticeable embarrassment.

I was surprised. It was *de rigueur* to advertise the many occasions on which classmates or colleagues had pilloried you as a pinhead, as well as to claim that the trauma had permanently crippled your psyche and stunted your prospects. Ever having been called a nincompoop was a Get Out of Failure Free card.

“Like Emory,” Roger went on, “I benefited from the selective education that’s rightly become such an anathema, since I was in truth no more ‘gifted’ than anyone else. I think the onus is especially on those of us who’ve profited from this nasty stratification to fix the system.”

“Doesn’t that mean you stay in control?” I said. “‘*Fixing* the system’ means more than one thing. What’s staggered me about this movement is how it’s the intelligentsia that’s led the crusade. You’re on the cultural front lines as a playwright, so that would include you. What do you get out of it?”

“Maybe a better question is what harm does it do—to me or anyone else. In what way is your life marred by treating other people as if they’re just as on the ball as you are?”

“It pleases me to treat *some* people as if they’re *more* on the ball than I am,” I said. “And thank God for that. As for the harm this obsession is doing? Emory mentioned what’s happening in the military. But it’s not only that soldiers can’t play Mastermind anymore. The top brass is consumed with promoting the so-called *otherwise* and hauling up the cognitively subpar—is that all right? You’ll let me say ‘subpar’?—to positions of command. They put one of these newly promoted cretins—”

“Hey!” Roger barked.

“They put one of these fellows with *alternative processing*,” I revised, “in charge of the Osama assassination in May, and that’s why the murderous motherfucker got away!”

“Lots of other things went wrong—”

“Everything went wrong! Thanks to which, asshole lived to fight another day and blew up the Smithsonian’s Air and Space Museum!”

“With a long history of extolling the cerebral elite,” Emory said. “Good riddance.” She was using that same deadpan delivery again, but any intended irony was too subtle by half—which I might have taken her up on if I hadn’t been on a roll.

“And what about Jared Loughner?” I said. “Everyone fell all over themselves to be sympathetic, because he’d so clearly suffered from *cognitive discrimination* his whole life—and rightly so, I might add. Not only did he kill six people, but he grievously wounded a congresswoman, and thanks

to all these new special rules, the new *decency*, we can't even say what happened to Gabrielle Giffords, can we? The woman can hardly string three words together anymore, but according to the prevailing doctrine she's mentally the same as everybody else and therefore the same as she's always been! Basically, Loughner didn't do her any lasting injury in the slightest!

"Or Anders Breivik, who's become such an international icon and cause célèbre, all because of that ludicrous manifesto of his, bemoaning the ridicule he's suffered for having—how should I say this, Roger?—*less than spectacular* intelligence. The poor puppy was even rejected by the Norwegian armed forces—which shows extremely good judgment on their part. So he only murdered those sixty-nine young people on that island out of understandable envy and private pain, because those kids had been designated as 'promising leaders of the future,' while no one ever made the mistake of calling *him* 'promising.' If he'd only been diagnosed as having dangerous narcissistic and antisocial personality disorders, they might have at least put him away in a loony bin for years, but no! He's bound to get off with a slap on the wrist because instead his court-appointed psychiatrist diagnosed him as tragically damaged by having been shunned from childhood, for good reason, as a *fucking idiot*."

"Okay, that's it," Roger said, standing and abandoning his melted Rocky Road. "Emory? I think we should leave. I can't sit still for, and implicitly condone, this barrage of bigoted bilge."

I'd have assumed that after her escort had made such a posturing ass of himself, they were finished as a couple, and Emory would stay behind. We'd open another bottle and make pitiless fun of his sanctimonious al-literation. Instead, I watched in incredulity as my best friend stood from the table, too. She turned her back. In rigid silence, they both fetched their coats.

CHAPTER 3

Since he abhorred confrontation, *of course* Wade told me to forget it, but I wasn't letting this go. I'd been insulted and embarrassed in my own home, and Emory had effectively sided with my accuser. That night, I had trouble sleeping. I called her the next day. I'm the first to admit I have something of a temper, so beforehand I took a breath, resolving to remain composed.

"I think we should talk," I said.

"Pearson. We are talking."

"I mean, I think we should get together."

"Okaaay . . . But didn't we just do that?"

"Last night doesn't count. The end of the evening left a bad taste in my mouth. I could use a debrief."

"Well, I've got a lot of reading to do . . . I'm interviewing some local debut memoirist who's written a six-hundred-page tome about having been 'abused' by parents who doted on her supposedly 'genius' brother. At least *Dolt* is a nervy title, though I bet they start stocking it in brown paper wrappers. Anyway, it's horribly written, and you know how that is: it takes twice as long to get through. So this next week's not good. How about the week after?"

Oddly, I wondered if Emory might have made up that memoir. Even if the *Dolt* interview were real, she had too much self-regard to lavish hours on a book she could flip through. See, as time passed, the unpleasant conclusion of that dinner was bound to stale. The later we met up, the more I'd seem unreasonable for dwelling on it.

"How about today," I countered. "I'll swing by the station when you get off at five."

I was struck in that moment by how unusual it felt to demand something of her, and I've thought about this since. Emory and her family having

rescued me at sixteen had faintly tinged my side of the relationship with the instincts of a supplicant. With Emory, I readily defaulted to apology, gratitude, and a resolve to be no trouble. So it wasn't like me to insist. Yet I had no problem being forceful in the department at VU. That may have been one of the earliest points at which I realized that something between us was a little off, and most likely always had been.

Thrown by the jarring dynamic, Emory couldn't think on her feet. "Well . . . I guess . . ."

"See you at five." I ended the call before she could concoct a conflicting commitment.

We convened in a coffee shop around the corner from WVPA, and after we ordered, I jumped right in.

"I need to better understand why you flounced from my house in a fit of moral showboating." I admit I had prepared the expression "moral showboating" in advance.

"Pearson, no one *flounced*."

"*Marched*, then. *Stormed out*. Whatever's the very opposite of kisses at the door and promises to repeat such a wonderful evening as soon as possible."

"It was getting late anyway."

"It was only quarter of ten. It's not unusual for you to weave reluctantly home at two or three a.m."

"Letting my date leave without me would have come across to Roger as hostile and pointed."

"You didn't think leaving with him was *hostile* and *pointed* in relation to me?"

"I figured you and I could talk about it later."

"Which you weren't exactly eager to arrange."

"You seem so weirdly pissed off that you can hardly blame me."

"*Weirdly* pissed off? No 'thanks for dinner, it was delicious,' no good-byes, cold silence, with that slam of the door behind you—"

"Nobody *slammed* the door."

"Emory? I was there. There's closing, and there's slamming. I know the difference. The point is, the whole performance was collusive. It conveyed that you agreed with him."

"Of course it did. That was my express intention."

"Why? Are you that into him? Because if you don't mind my saying so, he seems like a . . ." We were in public. "A complete pill. Or is it that you do agree with him?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course not."

"The entire evening," I said, "I can't remember you ever saying anything ideologically committal." With another couple in the next booth, I lowered my voice. "You didn't express outright support of MP, but you didn't poke fun at it, either. I try to tell you what a nightmare it's become at VU? No sympathy, no concern. And all night your language was squeaky clean."

"I told you. I have to get into scrupulous verbal habits, or I'm toast at WVPA."

"You were at my house, where you can say whatever you want. I'd think you'd be grateful to be able to let your hair down somewhere."

"Pearson, I don't know why you'd be so unaware of how serious this stuff has become, given the 'nightmare' at VU. But whatever you think of him, I can't afford to have the likes of Roger spreading rumors that in social settings I'm a coward who won't 'stand up to smartism.' It's bad enough that now he knows I'm friends with a political troglodyte."

"This st— This *mere* playwright is that powerful?"

"On the internet, everyone is powerful."

"Being afraid of him makes a pretty lousy basis for a relationship."

"I'm afraid of everybody."

"That doesn't sound like you."

"I may not always have been fearful, but I have always been pragmatic. Right now, being wary of absolutely everybody is pragmatic."

"But Emory, if you and I go along with this stuff, and everyone else goes along with this stuff—"

"Then we get this stuff," she said softly. "But we have this stuff. We've lost the argument."

"I don't recall ever conducting the argument."

"You know what I think behind closed doors. After all, it's not only university teaching that's been affected. Because they're supposed to be from Pennsylvania, the caliber of interviewees on *The Talent Show* was already . . ." Emory drummed her fingers during the now traditional scramble for vocabulary that hadn't yet been exiled to the naughty step. "*Underwhelming*. But now they're . . . *more underwhelming*. Still! Unless there is *absolutely no one else around* besides you and your family"—she cut her eyes toward the adjacent booth—"you'll see me toe the line. I stopped making a certain kind of joke at the station a long time ago. Do I miss those jokes? Sure. Does it pain me to police my speech all the time? Yes. But I don't plan on being crucified on social media and losing my job just from trying to protect the precious right to impugn someone else's intelligence."

"There's more at stake than that."

"What's at stake for me is my own future. My reputation and my career. And if you know what's good for you, you'll get with the program, too, even at home. Wade is right. You can't be too careful. One of our most senior reporters was fired last month for decrying some copy as—" Emory so lowered her voice that from across the tiny table she was unintelligible.

"What?"

Emory leaned over and cupped a hand around my ear. "Illiterate."

"You mean you can't even say—?"

"No, you cannot. And don't."

I talked into my coffee. "Then how do you refer to people who can't read or write? *Alternative processing* doesn't cut it. That's *not processing*."

"Pearson? Wake up. You don't refer to them. You don't refer to them at all."

"Pretty soon we'll all have to just stop talking."

"That would be safer in your case. You're starting to worry me. You fulminate using all this rash vernacular without stopping to think. I know you don't like being bossed around. But you're courting disaster. You can't change the way things are by acting as if they're still the way you wish they were."

“That’s convoluted.”

“I think you understand just fine. You and I are obviously in agreement on the basics. The whole MP shtick is a little . . .” She rummaged again among the last adjectives still standing, finally settling on, “Nutty. Maybe it’s a passing fad, and it’ll all blow over. But in the meantime, we have to make it to the other side of this thing in one piece. That means if we’re around anyone else, even a guy I’m going out with, you watch your language. It also means that if you pull that kind of stunt again, showing off at table how you refuse to be tyrannized by all these newfangled taboos, I’ll do exactly the same thing. I’ll *flounce* out the door with my plus-one while doing the most convincing imitation of *moral showboating* I can muster.”

While paying the bill, I considered wryly that, in Emory’s reading of the present social situation—a reading, as she would have it, vastly more accurate than mine—and in her appreciation for the dangers we both faced by privately considering “cognitive equality” preposterous poppycock—an appreciation, as she would have it, so much more acute than mine—one might divine an element of *smartism*.

“At first I thought Roger was doing what you’re doing,” I said as we left the café. “Keeping up appearances just to be on the safe side. But he seems like a real convert. Why can’t you see guys who’re more simpatico? Other skeptics?”

“Who would that be, Pearson? There aren’t any.”

In wild contrast to the buttoned-up, mind-your-p’s-and-q’s spirit in which that dinner with Roger began, Emory and I spent a memorably raucous, conspiratorial evening in her apartment back in 2010. Feeling a need to keep abreast of cultural milestones, however bizarre, a few days before this boisterous late-night twosome, I’d bought that hardback of *The Calumny of IQ*, which had been out for only a few weeks. Thus I brought the entertainment, while Emory provided the cheese board. Between slivers of aged Gouda, I read aloud choice underlined snippets from the introduction. Especially into our third bottle of pinot, Carswell Dreyfus-Boxford’s absurd

assertions put us in stitches. At length, Emory and I traded impressions of the *intellectually disabled*.

In our weak defense, we were way worse than merely tipsy. The still-nameless Mental Parity movement remained in its gestational phase. No one else was present whose feelings we might have hurt. That said, I sometimes wonder if the real test of one's decency is how one acts unobserved. For starting with the slack-mouthed cliché "I'm gonna be a *bwain soy-jun!*," our performances would have appeared unkind to any witness well before Carswell Dreyfus-Boxford fired the starting gun of "the last great civil rights fight." Why, I know exactly how unkind we were, because during this goof-around stretch of the evening I filmed our nasty imitations on my phone. That's how I can recall that our irreverent get-together was in March—03/28/2010, to be exact: I have the time stamp.

I'd retained the incriminating file, which over the following year and a half had become a treasured talisman. The recording provided evidence admissible in court that Emory's initial ridicule of cognitive equality wasn't all in my head. Accordingly, on the night following our confrontation in the café over her "moral showboating," once the kids were all in bed, I battened myself into our en suite bath, perched on the toilet lid, plugged in my earphones, and hit *play*.

"Da whole idea of da *dum-dum* is doo-doo! Da dum-dum's gone da way of da dodo!" Emory smashes a rice cracker against her forehead and swirls the crumbs in her hair. "I'm just as smawt as da pwesident! I'm gonna *be* pwesident! Cawswell Doofus-Doofus told me so!"

"I'm a physics pwafessaw!" I chime in. "I'm wesponsible fow da Intew-nationanew Space Station! I'm just wike Ow Gow! I invented the Intewnet!"

Not timorous, line-toeing, and compliant but subversive, mischievous, and defiant—that was my real best friend.