

Chapter 1: Fight or Flight?

How could my parents be so cruel? Sending me out into the “great outdoors.” What was so great about it anyway?

Let’s call this what it really is ... punishment.

I trudged down the sidewalk, occasionally kicking at a rock, and as I passed by a spindly tree, I reached over and absent-mindedly snapped off a low-hanging branch.

It wasn’t like me to behave this way, but I was in a sour mood.

I couldn’t wait to return home, but unfortunately, my fate was sealed. I would spend eternity out here. Or, as my father called it, “At least an hour!”

And for what? What had I done that was so wrong? Nothing. There had been no crime. No wrongdoing.

Mom said it was “Too nice to stay inside, Edward.”

Too nice. What did that even mean?

The fact that it was always nice indoors was exactly what I liked most about it. Too hot? I opened a window. Too cold? I turned up the thermostat. Bored? I watched a movie or read a book. Craved adventure? I played a video game.

It was perfect. Safe.

Outside was another story entirely. You never knew what could happen to you out there. You never knew who—or what—you might run into.

Fact: Random packs of wild kids roamed the outdoors freely. What if a group of them saw me? They might ask me to play a sport with them! The filthy animals were known to spontaneously break into pick-up games of basketball, soccer, or worse—football.

Ugh.

Football was absolutely barbaric.

Holding the branch like a sword, I whipped it back and forth in front of me. It made a satisfying whooshing sound as it sliced through the air. And it might prove useful as protection against animals, or—shudder—other kids.

“Hey!” an angry voice called out. “What do you think you’re doing?”

I turned around, stick-sword in hand, ready to defend my honor, prepared to do battle against whatever villain appeared.

Well, this particular villain happened to be a big, angry teen sporting army fatigues and a buzz cut. He looked even older than my brother Adam, who'd just turned sixteen.

And he wasn't alone.

Pulling at the end of a leash, barely being held at bay, was a giant droopy-eared dog with a wrinkled face and slobbery jowls. It shook its massive head, and trails of drool flew through the air. I thought about the dog and my stomach flipped. What if it bit me? What if it had rabies? Gross!

"I saw what you did to our new tree!" the angry teen said, bounding toward me with his rabid-looking dog. "Don't move!"

The dog barked, loud and sharp. Then, it began baying, a long, deep, horrible sound, like a cross between the howl of a demon and the honk of a Canada goose.

Immediately regretting my disregard for Mother Nature, I did what any honest, law-abiding twelve-year-old would do in this situation.

I ran.

I tossed the stick over my shoulder and ran as fast as my legs would carry me.

I hadn't survived sixth-grade gym class, being a middle kid, and having my best (and only) friend move away just to let my life end like this, beaten to death by an angsty teenager (or drowned in a sea of drool as his rabid dog gnawed the flesh off my face) over a broken tree branch.

I'd read about Darwin's Theory of Evolution and survival of the fittest, and it was sort of like a big nature competition. Imagine all the animals and plants are in a game, and the ones that are best at surviving are the winners. It wasn't necessarily about being the strongest or fastest, but more about fitting into the environment. It was like nature's way of picking the best team for the future.

But when it came to sports teams, I was always picked last. And even when I was asked to join a team, it was only because the gym teacher demanded it.

I was definitely not the strongest, fastest, or smartest. In fact, I was usually quite happy to simply stay out of the way. I was never going to be the Chosen One, that kid who dug down deep, found a hidden inner strength, and saved the world—or at least helped his team win the game.

I wanted to be a hero, but unfortunately, I never was. I was no fighter. I was more of an evader, an avoider, an escape artist.

Precisely the skill set I needed to survive my current predicament.

I looked back. They were gaining on me. Fast. The angry teen had wrapped the leash around his hand and the giant dog was pulling him along. They both looked completely unhinged. The veins in the teen's forehead were bulging and he seemed to be getting angrier with each step.

"Stop!" he yelled, brandishing his fist. "I mean it!"

I believed him.

Yes, I had torn a branch off his tree. But did that give him the right to tear me limb from limb, to let his beast feast on my flesh? The classic revenge phrase an eye for an eye was one thing. However, an arm for a branch seemed entirely unreasonable. Especially when it was my arm in question.

There was no point trying to reason with someone overcome with rage. Besides, I wasn't exactly known for being a people person. And not because I didn't like people. Typically, it was the other way around. And don't get me started on animals. I had been pushed, pecked, or pooped on by every animal I ever met. And dogs were the worst. They could smell fear—and I was pretty much always afraid, especially of them. I'd been bitten by a dog when I was three and had never really recovered from it. Granted, I shouldn't have tried to eat food from the dog's bowl, but still. Animals were not my thing.

If Dean were here, he'd probably be able to talk his way out of this predicament. Unfortunately, Dean was gone, so he couldn't help me get out of this one. No one was coming to help me. I was all alone.

Until ... I rounded the corner and saw Callum, my nine-year-old brother.

Callum, who loved animals, was sitting on a lawn petting a black cat. Black cats are rumored to be bad luck, but I was absolutely thrilled to see this one—it was the reason Callum had gotten off his bike and left it on the sidewalk.

Alone. Unguarded.

And ready to save me.

In one awkward motion, I grabbed the handlebars, lifted the bike off the ground, and continued running. Then, placing one foot on the pedal, I threw my body up and onto the seat and started pedaling like mad.

I had survived, but only just barely.

When I glanced back, I saw the angry teen talking with Callum, who was now petting the giant slobbery dog.

"Eddy!" Callum yelled. Then they both waved their arms at me to stop, but I didn't care. They would never catch me on foot.

The road started to incline, and though the hill wasn't steep, it was enough to slow me down. I stood up on the pedals, using my full weight, but struggled to push the miserable contraption forward. Inch by inch, the bike jerked its way up the hill until, finally, it could go no further.

The bike was just too small for my oversized frame. Not that I was fat, per se, but I was tall for my age, and definitely flabby around the midsection. Jean marketers called my size husky. My grandmother affectionately called me pleasantly plump. I hated both expressions.

I stepped off the bike. But when I glanced back down the road, I was horrified at what I saw. The teen had let go of the leash, and the slavering dog was racing toward me at breakneck speed.

The crest of the hill was just up ahead, so I made a run for it, pushing the bike along with me, the pedals smashing against my shins a few times. I ignored the pain, and wheezing and panting, made it to the top of the hill.

I glanced back at my pursuer. The bloodhound was still bounding up the hill, but it would never catch me now.

For once in my life, I'd actually won!

Taking a moment to celebrate, I stuck my tongue out at the animal, then hopped back on the bike and began coasting down the hill.

The bike accelerated quickly, but when I pushed the pedals backward and tried to brake, a horrible, ear-piercing sound filled the air. The unmistakable sound of metal on metal, of gears and chain grinding together. I looked down and watched in horror as the chain slipped off the metal teeth.

The rickety bike careened past tall trees, parked cars, and kids playing. Panic struck me and I filled the air with a long, ridiculously high-pitched scream—a sound so piercing it would make even the hardest horror fan squeamish. The world was passing by in a blur and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

Desperate to slow down, I dragged the sole of my sneaker across the ground. But it only bounced a few rocks and caused the bike to shimmy and shake uncontrollably.

The bike went faster.

And faster.

It took all my strength just to keep the bike upright. I had low pain tolerance at the best of times, but a crash at this speed, without a helmet, could kill me.

That would show Mom and Dad, that would make them think twice about forcing me out of the house.

What? No! What was I thinking?

I wasn't ready to die! There was too much to live for: videogames to beat, books to read, comic-cons to attend. I had never even met my favorite superheroes!

"I WANT TO LIVE!" I screamed.

But what could I do? I was still speeding down the hill toward certain death. Where could I crash and survive?

Suddenly, like a lightning bolt, the answer hit me. The water!

There was a small stream near the houses at the bottom of the hill. It wasn't deep, but it might help break my fall. I aimed the bike straight for it.

As the bike approached the water, I noticed a small mound of dirt at the lip of the stream. And when the bike hit it, it acted like a ramp and launched us both high into the air like a rocket.

I gritted my teeth, closed my eyes, and hung on for dear life. And as the bike splashed into the water, the front tire sank deep into the mud below.

It stopped instantly.

I did not.

Nope. The momentum flipped me right over the handlebars and back into the air.

For a split second. Time. Stopped.

Then the space-time continuum returned to normal, and I landed in the water with a gigantic SPLOOSH.

I sat in the shallow water, eyes clamped shut, stunned and completely soaking wet. I had no idea how long I sat there, but eventually I heard ... something.

Was that clapping?

I turned my head toward the sound and opened my eyes. Callum, along with about a half-dozen other kids and adults that had come over from nearby houses, stood at the edge of the water slow-clapping.

“Woo-hoo!” Callum screamed. “That was AWESOME!”

I stood up in the shallow water, my clothes soaking wet and my body aching all over.

“Are you okay?” someone from the crowd asked.

But before I could answer, a familiar bark sent chills down my spine. The angry teenager pushed his way to the front of the crowd, his hellhound by his side.

My mind raced, desperately searching for a way out of this mess. But there was no escape. It was over. I would end my life the same way I’d lived it, like my favorite heroes: bold, fearless, and with dignity.

“Please don’t kill me!” I blurted. “I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to do it. I wasn’t thinking. It wasn’t my fault. I have low blood sugar ...”

Okay, maybe not.

“Get over here, lard-ass!” barked the teenager. “We need to talk.”

I’d been called many things in my life related to my weight. Fluffy. Pudgy. Chubby. Rotund. Curvy. Plump. Well-rounded. Beefy. Chunky. Heavy Eddy. And a million other meaner names—the most popular, Ed-Weirdo, not about my weight at all.

But I had never in my life been called a lard-ass. I didn’t even know what lard was. Something used for cooking? Campfires? Car engines? Did dogs eat lard?

Who knew?

And what kind of teenager used a word like that?

I didn’t know, but I had a feeling I was about to find out.