

Rehabilitation

“Hey, small fry!” Chuck Andrews shouted in the main hall of Belleville Middle School, and all the eighth-graders turned around, chuckling, to see how the short kid would react.

“Small fries are something you order at McDonald’s. Is that really the best you can do?” Curtis Klein then launched a repartee worthy of Cyrano de Bergerac: “How about ‘my miniature man, my diminutive dwarf, my miniscule midget, my little Lilliputian, my minikin manikin, my vertically challenged chap, my pint-sized pygmy pupil, my stature-stunted student, my half-height homunculus, or my tragically truncated troll?’ Did you cancel your subscription to *Reader’s Digest*? The section called ‘Word Power’ is written just for the lexicographically lacking.”

Curtis’s verbal pyrotechnics delighted the group of students as much as a fireworks display on the fourth of July. With Chuck deluged by this alluvion of alliteration, they were still laughing out loud when the bell rang for them to go to class. Chuck stood there tongue-tied for a moment before he followed them to the classroom.

The sting of his public humiliation still fresh, Chuck thought to take his revenge by sending to all the members of his class a text message that read: “Curtis likes his math book more than girls. He wants to marry it.”

As soon as they stole a glance at their phones, the other students had to suppress a snicker. A few seconds later they received another text, this one from Curtis, who had yet to meet the quadratic equation he couldn’t solve in his head: “Yes, Lady Mathematics is the richest woman in the world, and after our wedding her fortune will be mine.” Another—this time insuppressible—snicker indicated that they all sensed the truth of his words.

“I don’t know what’s so funny,” the teacher wheeled around from the board to say, “but I want it to stop now, or else there’ll be extra homework tonight.”

Bested again, Chuck grasped that he could not join battle with Curtis on the verbal front, where he was outgunned. He would have to fight the way men have been fighting since Homeric times: in hand-to-hand, or perhaps foot-to-foot, combat.

The next morning as Curtis was proceeding to class, Chuck deftly stuck a foot out in front of him and give him a little shove on the back. Curtis went sprawling across the floor, his books, notebooks, pens, pencils, and graphic calculator radiating outwards in centrifugal motion.

“You ought to watch where you’re going,” Chuck said.

“Yes,” Curtis retorted, “at least as much as you watch whom you’re tripping.”

As he walked off, Chuck made a point of accidentally stepping on Curtis’s calculator. The onlooking students did not grant him the approving laughter he was seeking, though. No, he had just crossed a line. Witty bantering was one thing; mean-spirited bullying was another—a difference entirely lost on Chuck, who could not fail to perceive the silent censure of his classmates.

Chuck decided that he would have to avoid open conflict and engage in guerrilla warfare. The next morning while Curtis stood at his locker getting his books, Chuck passed closely by and bumped him hard, then continued on without missing a step, like a hockey player shoulder-checking an opponent into the boards and skating off. Dazed by the blow, Curtis could not fire off his usual witty comeback. Although Chuck had maneuvered so subtly that most students didn't even notice the attack, two girls standing at the next locker did. "God, what's your problem?" the first said. "Jerk!" the second added. Before long, word of Chuck's unprovoked broadside had spread, and his once sure-footed social standing tottered on the brink of collapse.

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That evening Chuck's father, a beefy, brawny, burly construction worker, saw him moping about. He set down his beer and muted the wrestling match on television. "What's wrong with you?"

"This kid in school's making me look bad."

"Well, is he bigger than you?"

"No."

"Then beat the crap out of him. How many times do I have to tell you? Don't take nuthin' from nobody."

Chuck knew he could count on his father to give him good advice. Shortly before the bell rang for class the next morning, Chuck saw Curtis go into the bathroom. He glanced around to make sure no one was looking and followed him in.

"Hey, Curtsy, you know how we fix shrimps in my family?"

"No."

"Like this," Chuck said and punched him in the stomach as hard as he could.

Curtis doubled over in pain and fell to the floor. Grinning with self-satisfaction, Chuck strutted out of the bathroom, sorry only that no one else was feasting on his triumph but glad that he had tasted a first course of revenge without being seen. His father, at least, would congratulate him. Indeed, when he told his father what had happened, the latter patted him on the back and said, "That's my boy. He ain't no punk."

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Over the next couple of weeks the harassment continued. Chuck practiced and perfected the art of covert attack, ever more inconspicuously insulting, threatening, bumping, shoving, elbowing, hitting, and tripping, so that Curtis dropped his books in the hall or his lunch tray in the cafeteria. As much as his camouflaged aggression gratified him, however, it did not compensate for his steady loss of popularity with the other kids. The next time Chuck happened to find himself alone in the bathroom with Curtis, he had an inspiration.

"Hey, Curtsy, how much money you got in your wallet?"

"Just my allowance. Why?"

"How much is that?"

"Twenty-five dollars."

"Fork it over."

"Why?"

"It's for protection."

"Protection from whom?"

"From me!"

His hands trembling, Curtis took out his wallet and handed two tens and a five to Chuck, who then punched him in the stomach, leaving him doubled up on the floor again. That transaction became a weekly occurrence for the next couple of months.

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For Curtis the regularity of the persecution began to feel like Chinese water-drip torture. He found it difficult to concentrate, lost his appetite, and had trouble falling asleep but woke up with nightmares after he did. For the first time in his life he made a “B” on a math test. He even played sick once or twice so he could stay home. Yes, he could have told his parents or a principal what was wrong, but he feared further ostracization. He did not want to seem even weaker than he was by having his parents intervene on his behalf, nor did he want to face retaliation by Chuck if they did.

Gradually he formed a plan.

“Has Chuck been bothering you too?” Curtis asked Drew Austin, a small but slightly larger kid than himself, an audio-and-video technophile, and Curtis’s best friend—not that there was any competition for that job.

“Yeah, he has. But what can we do about it? He would beat the crap out of us if we tried anything.”

“Well, I have an idea. Listen.” As they walked together, Curtis whispered the details to Drew.

The next week at the regularly appointed bathroom shakedown, Curtis positioned himself just in front of the last stall and waited for Chuck to appear. When he did, Chuck said as usual, “Give me the money.”

“What if I don’t?”

Chuck whipped out his father’s switchblade, which he had brought from home. “Then I’ll cut your heart out,” he said with a grin.

Curtis handed over the money according to the prescribed ritual and took his punch in the stomach, doubling over and falling to the floor. When Chuck had left, Drew jumped down from

the toilet seat on which he had perched himself, as though hiding in the Trojan horse, opened the stall door, and came out.

“Did you get it?” Curtis asked, pulling himself up.

“Did I ever! Just look.”

Drew held up a smart phone. By raising it just above the stall door, he managed to capture the whole scene. The switchblade definitely worked in their favor.

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When the time for the next weekly exaction came, Curtis and Drew had both assumed their positions of the previous week. Chuck entered as always and demanded his money.

“You might want to look at something first,” Curtis said.

“What?”

“Drew, come out and show him.”

Drew stepped out of the stall and played the video for Chuck. “So what?” Chuck said.

“I’ll tell you what, my knife-brandishing, hebdomadal extortionist. We caught you on tape committing armed robbery, a felony offense, for which you can receive a determinate sentence of incarceration until the age of twenty-one in the state juvenile corrections facility. If you attempt to bully us again, we will send a copy of this video to the principal, the president of the school board, the municipal police, the county sheriff, and the district attorney.”

“Yeah, well, what if I just smash your phone?” Chuck relished the idea of wreaking further mischief.

“I’ve already transferred the footage to my home computer,” Drew shot back, “and enhanced both the audio and the video. Just one click of the mouse, and off it goes.”

Chuck did not understand everything Curtis had just told him, but he grasped enough to know that he had stabbed himself with his own knife. “Okay, okay, I’ll leave you guys alone,” he said and turned to leave.

“Not so fast,” Curtis said. “Not just us. Everyone. The bullying stops here. Understand?”

“Yeah, okay,” Chuck said with no sense of commitment.

“Then there’s the matter of the restitution of your ill-gotten gain.”

“The what?”

“You are going to pay me back all my money. You have one week. Same time, same place. See you then.”

“Fat chance.” Chuck laughed.

Drew held up his right index finger and flexed it several times. “My finger is just itching to click that mouse.”

“Oh, man,” Chuck whined. He had already spent most of the money, and knew he couldn’t get it from his father, who would beat the crap out of him for being a punk.

The following week at the scheduled time, though, Chuck paid Curtis in full with money earned by the sweat of someone’s brow, though not necessarily his.

“There’s your money. That’s it. We’re done.”

“Hardly. We’re just getting started. For next week you’re going to read a book on bullying and write a book report on it. There are several in the school library.”

“What? Are you kidding? No way! I don’t even read books for class.” Chuck hauled back to punch Curtis in the gut the way he used to.

“The book or the video,” Drew said, moving his open palms up and down to simulate the scales of a balance. “You choose.”

As though Lee had just surrendered his sword, or rather his switchblade, to Grant at an Appomattox bathroom, Chuck sighed and said only half audibly, “Okay.”

The following week Chuck came with his book report. “Here it is,” he grumbled, submitting two handwritten pages to Curtis. He knew better by now than to walk away.

“Did you learn something about yourself by reading that book?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” He muttered his words, looking down at the ground and shifting his weight from one foot to the other. When was this torture going to be over? He couldn’t wait to get out of there.

“Good. For next week you are going to write a two-hundred-fifty-word essay on why you bully and how your bullying affects your victims.”

Chuck moaned but didn’t even bother to protest. Like a soldier in the Light Brigade, “his was not to make reply, his was not the reason why, his was but to do or die.” He hated the self-confrontation Curtis was forcing upon him, but at least no one else knew about.

When he handed in the essay the following week, Curtis gave it a cursory reading, then concluded: “Your grammar is atrocious, your spelling is even worse, but it will serve the purpose. Now you’re going to shoot a video of yourself reading the essay out loud and post it on YouTube. You have one week, at which time you will report back to me here.”

“For everyone to see? Like hell.” Curtis hauled back again to punch Curtis, proving just how hard old habits die.

“Just one click of the mouse. Just one little click.” Drew had taken out the ballpoint pen from his shirt pocket and clicked it each time he said the word “click.”

Chuck had never found himself matched with an opponent he could not vanquish by physical strength. Like a defeated Samnite soldier taken into Roman slavery, Chuck lowered his

arm and obeyed his new master. At the appointed meeting the following week, Curtis, who had watched the video and sent the link to all his classmates, told him, “Well done, or at least well enough. Now you’re going to apologize in person to all of your victims, and do one good deed a week for each of them to make amends for your bullying. Keep a log of your good deeds—what you did, when you did it, and for whom—and turn it into me at our regular meetings. I’ll be verifying your records.”

Later that week, a girl he liked to tease was taking her science project home at the end of the day. Chuck rushed to open the door for her.

She smiled at him. “Why, thank you, Chuck. That was mighty nice of you.”

A little embarrassed, Chuck smiled back. He had never noticed how cute she was.

As the weeks rolled by and Chuck, at first reluctantly, went about his task, he noticed the other students’ attitudes towards him were starting to change. They smiled when they saw him, they said hello to him in the halls, they sat with him in the lunchroom.

Chuck liked these changes and no longer went once a week like General Custer to face Sitting Bull at the bathroom of Little Big Horn.

“What do you want me to do now?” Chuck took the initiative to ask at the next meeting.

“I hereby dub you the bulwark against bullies, the paladin of their prey, and the vindicator of all the victims in the school.” Curtis tapped him on each shoulder with an imaginary sword, a gesture that mystified Chuck.

“Huh?”

“From now on whenever anyone is bullied, it will be your job to stand up for them and stop the bullying.”

“Oh, okay. I can do that.” Chuck smiled, confident of his size and strength.

By threatening to beat the crap out of anyone who bullied someone else, within a few short weeks Chuck had eliminated bullying at Belleville Middle School.

Glossary of Names

Chuck: nickname for “Charles” = man, warrior (Germanic)

Andrews: man (Greek). The bully Chuck Andrews is a “warrior man.”

Curtis: courteous (Old French)

Klein: small (German). He is courteous and small, the exact opposite of a bully.

Drew: diminutive of Andrew, meaning “man” (Greek)

Austin: venerable (ultimately from Latin). He is a venerable little man.