

## popularity

Somewhere inside me I knew that ten-year-old boys were not supposed to spend their recess circling oak trees in search of four-leaf clovers. Still, that's what I and my equally unpopular acquaintances, Allan Gold and Allan Shipman, were doing while the rest of our classmates played tag and kickball and pushed each other higher and higher on the swings.

Aside from having a little more than our share of baby fat, the two Allans and I had very little in common. In fact, we could barely stand one another. Still, during recess we were the only company we had, so we tried to make the best of it. Now and then one of us would bend forward, pick a clover, examine it, shake his head, and let it fall to the ground.

"Got one," Allan Gold said.

"Let's see," Allan Shipman said.

Allan showed Allan the clover.

"That's only three."

"No, that's four. Right here. See?"

"That's not a whole leaf," Allan Shipman said sourly. "There's one leaf, two leaves, three leaves."

"Four leaves!"

"That's not a whole leaf!"

We had been looking for four-leaf clovers every school day for six months. And each of us knew exactly what he would do if he ever found one: he would hold the lucky clover tight in his hand, close his eyes, and wish he was so popular that he would never have to spend time with the other two again.

"Got one!" Allan Shipman said.

Allan Gold swiped the clover from him. "One, two, three," he said, throwing it to the ground.

"There's four there! That was a four-leaf clover! Pick it up!"

"You pick it up!"

"You pick it up!"

"You!"

"You!"

While the two Allans faced off, I looked across the black tar and asphalt at a crowd of boys who were making more noise and seemed to be having more fun than anyone else on the playground. These were the popular boys, and in the center of this group stood their leader, Sean Owens.

Sean Owens was the best student in the fourth grade. He was also one of the humblest, handsomest, strongest, fastest, most clear-thinking ten-year-olds that God ever placed on the face of the earth. Sean Owens could run the fifty-yard dash in six seconds, hit

a baseball two hundred feet, and throw a football forty yards. The only thing Sean didn't have was a personality. He didn't need one. When you can hit a baseball two hundred feet, all you have to do is round the bases and wait for the world's adulation.

I gazed at Sean and the rest of the popular boys in bewildered admiration. It seemed like only yesterday that we had all played kickball, dodgeball, and basketball together; and then one morning I awoke to find that this happy democracy had devolved into a monarchy of kings and queens, dukes and duchesses, lords and ladies. It did not take a genius to know that, upon the continent of this playground, the two Allans and I were stableboys.

I had been resigned to my rank for many months, but now, looking at the two Allans (still arguing over the same three-leaf clover), then at the popular boys, I suddenly knew that I could not stand another day at the bottom—I wanted to be a part of the noise and the laughter; I wanted, I *needed*, to be popular.

Being ten years old, I did not question this ambition, but I did wonder how on earth I was going to realize it. Though I only stood twenty yards from the heart of the kingdom, I felt a thousand miles removed from the rank and prestige of its citizens. How could I bridge such a gap, knowing I might be stared at, or laughed at, or belittled to a speck so small that I could no longer be seen by the naked eye? And as I stood on that playground, torn between fear and ambition, those twenty yards began to recede from view, and I knew that I

must either step forward now, or retreat forever to a life of bitter companions and three-leaf clovers.

I took a deep breath and then, with great trepidation, crossed the twenty longest yards I had ever walked in my life and found myself standing a few feet from the outer circle of what I hoped was my destiny. I lowered my head a little, so as not to draw attention to myself, and watched and listened.

Mitch Brockman, a lean, long-faced comic, considered by many to be the funniest boy in the fourth grade, was in the middle of a story that had something to do with Tijuana and a wiener mobile. I wasn't sure what the story was about, but there was a lot of body English and innuendo, all of which the crowd seemed to find absolutely hilarious.

I noticed that every time Mitch said something funny, he eyed Sean Owens to see if he was laughing. He was. Silently. His mouth was open, but it was the laughter of the other boys that filled the silence. I realized then that Mitch was Sean's jester. As long as he could make Sean laugh, he was assured a prominent position in the group.

I wondered what *my* position in the group might be. I certainly wasn't a great athlete, student, or ladies' man, but I did have a sense of humor. Maybe I could be the *second*-funniest boy in the fourth grade. My thoughts went no further because the bell ending recess rang. But that night, just before I fell asleep, I saw myself standing in the center of the popular boys telling

the funniest stories anyone had ever heard. I saw Sean Owens doubled up with laughter. I saw myself triumphant.

I returned to the group every recess, for three days. I stood, unnoticed, just outside the outer circle, waiting for my moment, for the one joke or wisecrack that would make me popular. I knew that I would only get one chance to prove myself, and that if I failed, I would be sent back to the stables. And so, with the single-mindedness of a scientist, I listened to the jokes the other boys made, hoping to align my comic sensibilities with theirs. Now and then I found myself on the verge of saying something, but every time I opened my mouth to speak, Mitch would launch into another routine, and my moment passed, and I had to resign myself to yet another day in the dark.

I did not know then that popularity has a life span, and that Mitch's time was about to run out.

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It is a sad fact of life that the clothes a child wears and how he wears them often determine his rank in school society. I knew it, Sean Owens knew it, everyone in school knew it. So maybe it was carelessness, or temporary insanity, or a subconscious desire to step back into the stress-free shadows of anonymity that caused Mitch Brockman to wear a yellow shirt with a yellow pair of pants. He might have gotten away with it if I hadn't left for school that same morning unaware

that one folded cuff of my jeans was noticeably lower than the other. As it was, the two of us were on a collision course that only one of us would survive.

At recess on that fateful day, I took my customary place a foot from the popular boys (wondering if I would ever get a chance to prove myself) and listened to Mitch tell another variation of his story about the wiener mobile. I pretended to enjoy this story as much as the others, while my mind strayed to a dream world where I did not have to feel so out of place, and Mitch and Sean and I were the best of friends. And then, with a suddenness that jarred me back to reality, Mitch Brockman, a boy who had never noticed me, never seemed to know or care that I was alive, turned to me, pointed at my uneven pants, and said, "Someone needs a ruler."

This was, perhaps, the wittiest remark he had ever made, and I froze. With four words he had devastated all my aspirations, defined me as a fool, and all but condemned me to a life of shame and obscurity. I could see my future, my boyhood itself, crumbling to dust, and as I heard the laughter and felt the heat of the spotlight upon me, I pointed at Mitch's yellow pants and shirt and said, "Someone else needs a mirror. You look like a canary." Then, with the grace of a magician's assistant, I raised my left arm in a presentational gesture and said, "Boys, I give you Tweety Bird."

And it was all over. As the volume of the laughter doubled, Mitch seemed to vanish, and that day, on that playground, Sean Owens's laughter was heard for the

first time. In an instant, Mitch Brockman became Tweety Bird, and I, an absolute nonentity, became somebody. And then somebody special. Someone to seek out. Someone to follow. Sean Owens's first jester and best friend. The entire transformation was complete in a matter of months.

During this time Mitch became a less and less vocal part of the group, telling fewer and fewer stories, until finally, the following year, he was gone—to another school perhaps, or another state, or another country. I never knew. No one knew because no one noticed—no one had called him for months. But *my* phone rang. *My* weekends were filled with sleep-overs and baseball games and bowling parties and bicycle races and more new friends than I knew what to do with.

And I did not trust one of them, because I knew then that I was standing on sand and was only a yellow shirt and pair of pants away from the oak trees where the two Allans were still looking for four-leaf clovers.