

what I knew was coming. Then I was slammed to the ground, glasses and book flying. Before my head connected with the concrete, I heard one of them make a crack about my gut.

I had never before been knocked unconscious, so it was quite a surprise when I opened my eyes and discovered that I had been out cold for several minutes. A sharp throbbing in the back of my head sent my stomach into fits. My classmates had surrounded me, many of them laughing, others simply looking down at me in silence.

My gym coach appeared and asked if I was OK. I said I was, stumbled to my feet, and felt the back of my head for blood. Thankfully, there was none, just a hard lump the size of a walnut. Still, I fought back the tears. When the gym teacher took my arm, I pulled it away, though I wanted nothing more than for him to stay with me for the rest of the class, the rest of the day — the rest of the year.

"Who did it, Carrino?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know," I said. All rattin on bullies ever did was

make things worse. It was far easier to take whatever came my way, suck it up, and go on. This was something my mother could never understand as she watched me come home day after day with a growing array of bruises, gashes, and scrapes.

I grabbed my book and my backpack, both of which remained mercifully untouched, and made my way over to the chain-link fence. There, with my forehead pressed up against the metal latticework, I let loose the tears I had been holding back. I sobbed and choked and babbled incoherently.

At one point, someone approached me, but I sent the person away with a wave of my hand and a mournful plea to be left alone. Tasting metal and feeling the heat of embarrassment crawling up my neck, I begged to be ignored, to be invisible. I prayed to God to allow me, for once, to go unseen amid the throng.

I have grown up and moved on. I have wanted women and jobs and cars and possessions and all the usual things in life, but I have never wanted

SEVENTH GRADE MARKED MY FIRST year in public school. The student body of Thomas Jefferson Middle was predominantly black, and I was as white as a private-school, middle-class Italian kid could be. I also weighed close to three hundred pounds and was saddled with a pair of hideously large eyeglasses. I fairly dripped with fear that no amount of false bravado could conceal.

One afternoon, our gym-class activities were canceled, leaving me on my own on the basketball court for the entire period. Lacking in friends but always armed with a book, I dropped my backpack in the dirt near the chain-link fence, sat down on it, and began to read. It didn't take long for them to approach me.

They were taller than me, and faster, and meaner. In a flash, I was on my feet and trying to talk my way out of