



**Excerpt from *Please Stop Laughing at Us . . . One Survivor's
Extraordinary Quest to Prevent School Bullying***

Though a few students request one-on-ones with me after my first talk, I can't help thinking that I blew it, that this audience didn't respond the way previous ones have. A large group of kids were whispering to each other and passing notes throughout the entire presentation and didn't appear to be paying attention. Despite my repeated attempts to engage their interest, I couldn't get them to come around. As I'm beating myself up, wondering where I went wrong, a student approaches me and introduces herself as one of the "preps," the most popular clique at school. She says her name is Brittany and asks if she and her friends can talk with me privately. Surprised, I tell her that I'll be in the all-purpose room with the principal, who's really on the ball in this district, arranged for me to use in anticipation of one-on-ones. Moments later, Brittany walks in, accompanied by at least thirty other students, the same ones who I could have sworn weren't hearing a word I was saying. Impeccably dressed, they look like they just jumped off the pages of a J. Crew catalog.

"Your speech really hit home," one of them says.

"For me, too," several others respond in unison.

"I didn't think you guys were listening," I remark, stunned.

"You had us totally freaked."

"Why?" I ask.

"You know how you said you're damaged because of what happened to you?"

Brittany says.

I nod my head.

"There's this kid, Eric, and we've been treating him the way you were treated in school, and we feel bad about it," she says. Then, glancing around the room at her friends for support, she adds, "We want him to know how sorry we are."

I call Eileen, who's in the main office returning e-mails and ask her to find Eric. Moments later, I'm standing with him in the hallway outside the all-purpose room. Tall and gangly, with a hint of facial hair, he is painfully self-conscious, as if the body he inhabits doesn't fit right. I've never met anyone like him before. He exudes sadness and

sweetness, and I ache to protect him, but there's also a dissonance that makes being around him like listening to beautiful music being played on a piano that's out of tune. When I explain to Eric that some of his classmates want to apologize for bullying him, he looks at me with the guarded reserve of a precocious child and then starts listing what they've done to him since fifth grade. Each sentence rolls into the other, punctuated by an occasional flurry of tics, that he tries to control, but they seem to have a will of their own.

When we enter the room, we're greeted by a flutter of uneasy smiles. Eric swallows hard and looks back toward the door, as if he's calculating how long it will take him to reach it should he need to escape.

"Can I say something first?" he whispers.

"Go ahead," I encourage him.

He turns and faces his classmates.

"I would give anything for you to like me, but I don't blame you for thinking I'm weird," he says. "I have a disorder called Asperger's Syndrome and sometimes I can't help the way it makes me act. But it's not the only reason I'll never be normal." He bites down hard on his lower lip to prevent himself from crying.

Brittany and her friends are glancing at each other guiltily, their remorse palpable.

"I used to get on my dad's nerves a lot because of my Asperger's, and he and my mom would fight about it all the time. One day, while she was out shopping, he came into my room with this look on his face that I'd never seen before and said he just couldn't take me anymore. Then my dad went downstairs and killed himself."

There's a collective gasp, and then I hear a choir of voices murmuring, "Oh, my God," in hushed tones. No one seems to know what to say to Eric, who is equally uncomfortable. Suddenly, Brittany walks over to him. She gently wraps her arms around him, telling him how sorry she is for what he's had to go through, and how terrible she and everyone else feels that they made things worse by being so cruel to him all these years. Then she and her friends ask for his forgiveness and his friendship. I'll never forget the look on Eric's face in that moment. It was as if someone turned a light on inside him. He will become one of the kids who continue to stay in touch with me through letters and e-mails. His progress will inspire me on days when I need it most.