

The minute I walked into the St. Stephen's School for Boys, I began to sweat. There was still no air conditioning. The temperature inside the school was higher than it was outside in Manhattan in the middle of June. I used to think that maybe one day I would be a rich man; then I would send a pile of money to the school, earmarked for air conditioning. I would be the big shot who cooled that place off. Mauricio Londoño: Air Conditioning King ... King Cool ... Mr. Freeze ... Prince Frosty ... L.L.Cool ... something. I used to dream about that kind of thing all the time.

I still wanted the money. I wanted to be ridiculously rich, but I wasn't sure anymore about giving a bunch of cash to St. Stephen's. Despite how hot I was right then, maybe everyone else needed to sweat it out? Endure the misery as I had and every guy before me. The St. Stephen's rite of sweltering passage.

But when I walked into the building, I knew it. I knew that no matter what I endured or accomplished, how much I sweated it out, how much money I had, or even if *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal* applauded some phenomenal accomplishment of mine, I would always be the pathetic ninth grader that I was on my first day at that place. It was as if my eighteen-year-old body was some empty shell housing that punk high school freshman. I would never stop being the scrawny boy who walked the halls of St. Stephen's scared, anxious, and stooped under the weight of an enormous backpack. It sucked to feel like that. And, worst of all, I was still waiting for the goddamn golden ticket—access to something—despite the trauma of freshman year and everything else. Yet, I had survived when five of my classmates hadn't. There were a bunch of casualties from that whole mess.

No matter what was going on in that place, it was always hot inside the school, an inferno. The heat *and* the noise were oppressive. A lot of people thought St. Stephen's was the hottest school in the city, but they didn't get that the adjective was about the temperature, not the billions of guys who went on to Ivy League colleges or anything like

that. St. Stephen's School for Boys was the hottest, loudest private school in Manhattan. That's what comes from stuffing eight hundred blue-blazered boys into one school, where fifteen floors filled with classrooms and libraries and lunchrooms and science labs stacked and buried desperate boys right on top of each other.

Even the kindergartners in that place were desperate. They all wanted to be the top dog with the most Pokemon cards. By ninth grade, the stakes changed, the terms of our attempts to prove ourselves and one-up each other were different, but underneath all that it was the same old story, the timeless male legend, the eternal saga of proving who had the biggest dick. We spent most of our energy trying to sort that out. Mostly we discovered who *was* the biggest dick. But what always lurked beneath the endless squabbles and daily drills was that desperation. I had no idea when I started there how much that school tie would come to feel like a noose, yet somehow my faith in the school, my desire to belong, never evaporated, not even after my first year when everything and then some unraveled.

I had graduated from St. Stephen's about a month earlier. Right before graduation I thought all the time about how it was almost over, how I didn't ever have to go back into that loud inferno again, how I was finished with that place and would head off to college and be done. I kept trying to figure out whether it had all been worth it. All the shit that happened my first year—it kind of lingered,

way in the back of my mind—sort of buzzing around back there like a trapped fly.

Then I won a big fancy award at graduation, and I got sucked back in. Like the keys to the castle were right there, jingling in front of my face, beckoning me back and promising me something incredible. What I wanted now, why I came back a couple weeks after graduation, was to find my name, which had been carved onto one of the five million plaques that lined the walls of the main foyer announcing all the names of the students who had distinguished themselves at the St. Stephen's School for Boys. I also had to see the evidence to believe that the whole thing wasn't just another one of my fantasies.

I had been immortalized with the headmaster's award—the “nice guy” award—the one they gave to the good kid who wasn't the best student or athlete or thespian or fencer or soccer player or mathematician or cellist or poker player or anything, but even so deserved to win *something*, deserved to have some bone thrown to him. I was the decent guy who did his homework. The guy who didn't cheat. The guy who was on time. The guy who was in dress code. The guy who didn't think he knew more than the teachers, or, if he did, he shut his fat trap and didn't let anyone else know. The guy who *mostly* didn't smoke or drink or hook up and no matter what kept showing up on time every day. The boring guy who nobody wanted to throttle but nobody cared about either. The guy who tried like hell to be good at something—anything. The guy who

survived without becoming an asshole. The guy who *wasn't* the biggest dick.

At least that's what people believed about me. And, for as long as St. Stephen's existed, eight hundred boys would walk down that hall and believe it, too. I had done more than survive. The plaque confirmed my triumph. I wanted to see it. I *needed* to see it.

Now I wasn't so eager to get the hell out of there and never come back, but it was as if the whole thing caught me—kind of like a fish on a hook—and reeled me back in, yet the hook was stuck in my mouth, and it wasn't clear whether this was catch and release or what. Maybe I'd spend the rest of my life with a hook stuck in my face.

I didn't rush to the plaque. I was measured and cool, or as cool as I could be with sweat running down the sides of my face and dampening my hair. I could feel my shirt sticking to my back, but I had learned at St. Stephen's how to appear calm and confident, sure and certain of myself, cool and composed, no matter how I felt. Never reveal anything. That was a huge St. Stephen's lesson: the deadpan. Even in the face of total disaster: no sign of trouble, not even the twitch of an eyebrow. My ex-friend Henry Steel was the master of this. Hide it all or risk having everybody know your secret shit, your vulnerabilities, weaknesses. Hide it all even if the efforts to do so gnaw through your body like some cancerous tumor.

But even at the moment when I was about to see myself immortalized, forever a part of St. Stephen's history

and glory and its ten million traditions and honors and all that and even though I had become somewhat skilled at the St. Stephen's deadpan myself, it felt as though something inside me was rotting. Something was decaying and threatening to poison me or—even worse—leak out right along with my confession that I wasn't sure about anything.

I had never felt this way before I went to St. Stephen's, and I never stopped feeling this way after that first year. But I kept getting up every morning and getting dressed and showing up on time. Hell, I was still desperate to be the St. Stephen's "gentleman" that everyone promised I would become, regardless of how much deception and decay lurked beneath the shiny marble façade of that school and within my own heart. Christ, we were both full of shit.

Then I saw it. Hanging in the middle of the wall, right in the main foyer of the fabulous, famous St. Stephen's School for Boys was my name on the plaque. But it wasn't *my* name. It was fucking Mauricio Londono. What a goddamn surprise. They had always gotten it wrong. I was Mauricio Londono at St. Stephen's. It was too much trouble to figure out how to make the ñ on the computer. Despite all the foreign languages taught, everything from Mandarin to German, French, Spanish, and Italian (along with a couple of dead languages), somehow the registrar couldn't make the ñ. He needed the boss I had last summer at a crappy copy editing internship. That guy was always

screaming about the difference between the em dash and the en dash, like it was some kind of life or death matter. No one was screaming at the registrar at St. Stephen's; no one was holding a gun to his head, telling him to figure out the ñ or hit the road. Hell, no one was even politely asking him to learn how to use *Word*.

Now here I was, almost four years after my first day of ninth grade at St. Stephen's, the year that changed everything, when it all began. Yet I was still fourteen-year-old Mauricio Londoño, sitting on one of the old wooden benches in the main foyer, waiting and hoping for my life to make sense, somehow still believing that the school mattered and that it could make me matter.