

David Khoury
from *The Fighting Style of Eugene Landberg*

I had never gone to a school with a dress code before, and the memory that stays with me from my first day—students filing into the chapel for morning prayers—is an image composed entirely of navy blue and white: boys in blazers, oxford shirts, and loosely knotted school ties; the girls, far fewer in number, all wore kilts and matching sweaters. In my recollection, every one of them was brunette, aloof, and at least a little bit beautiful. When the first few notes escaped from the organ pipes, all the kids in the chapel opened their mouths and sang without a hint of self-consciousness. It was “Lamb of God,” or something like that. I didn’t know any of the words, of course, but Javy Cortez, the boy sitting next to me, sang so loudly and sweetly that I had to restrain myself from joining in. Sunlight flooded a bank of stained glass windows. Colored banners hung from the wooden rafters, swaying in unison. For the first time in my life, I thought I would have liked to be a Christian instead of a Jew.

After chapel we retired to the lunchroom, where—though it’s possible my memory is inaccurate—I seemed to spend about thirty-five years that first day, wandering the aisles like a plane circling over an airport, tray in hand, soup bowl cooling, hoping that someone would invite me to join them. Finally, I sat down across from Greer Kazomeier, an undersized boy with hair that fell over the tops of his ears. Thirteen-year-olds range in appearance from largish children to small, hirsute men; Greer and I both fell squarely into the former category, and I put my tray down and said hello with only a normal amount of terror. He looked up from his chicken cutlet and said, “I don’t think I know your name.”

“Aaron Applebaum,” I told him. “It’s my first day.”

“I’m sorry to have to tell you, Aaron—that seat is taken already.”

David Khoury

I looked around. The entire table was empty. “What about one of these other ones?”

“All of them are taken, unfortunately. I mean, we’ve got a little group here.”

“Okay,” I said. The blood was rising in my cheeks, and I tried to force my mouth into a smile.

“Actually, you know what? Don’t worry about it. Go ahead and sit down.”

“You’re sure?” I said.

“Really. No problem.”

I slipped my backpack off my shoulders and set it on the floor.

“We’ll just find another spot,” he said. He stood up, put his glass on his tray, and carried it to the other end of the lunchroom. A pretty girl slid over to make room for him. The crowding problem he’d warned of failed to materialize, and for the rest of the lunch period, I had the table to myself.

Perhaps because I was born near the beginning of January, and was therefore always one of the oldest students in my class, I had started my social career in kindergarten at what felt like a distinct advantage. Throughout the early grades of elementary school, I was one of the first ones picked for the games we played at recess. On Valentine’s Day, I received valentines. But I could not help noticing that year by year, I had grown comparatively shorter, skinnier, and more awkward than my classmates. At Episcopal, I seemed to have bottomed out. No other boy produced less in the way of facial hair. No one else’s neck filled his shirt collar so insufficiently.

Often I found myself longing to be back inside that third grade version of me: handsome, insouciant, fleet of foot. My father’s sure hand at the back of my neck. How much simpler and smaller my life had seemed.

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I had been going to Episcopal for four and a half months when I first saw Eugene Landberg. The door to my history class opened, and the headmaster ushered in an overweight black kid. It was one of the first days back from winter break, and he was wearing a parka that was too short in the arms. He slung his book bag down from his shoulder and struggled out of his coat. He was a funny looking kid, I thought, with a high, smooth forehead, hair like a black loaf of bread, and wide-set eyes that had barely any whites to them. A large, purplish bruise darkened his right temple.

“Greetings, boys,” the headmaster said. “This is Eugene Landberg. He’s going to be joining us for the rest of the year. I have no doubt that we’ll all make him feel very welcome—yes?” Despite the mumbled chorus of affirmation, I had my doubts about the headmaster’s prediction. Eugene was new, he was black, and he didn’t look like he was going to be any good at sports, a distinction that buoyed the social standing of the school’s only other two black students. He didn’t talk at all in class that day, but it seemed like everyone angled their chairs for a better look at him. Every word the teacher said, he copied down in a Penway composition book. He was still scribbling when the bell sounded.

On the way out, a boy named Charlie Fopp stopped in front of Eugene’s desk. I lingered in the doorway with a few other kids who were waiting to see what would happen. Charlie was the captain of the wrestling team and one of the largest boys in the eighth grade. He wore braces, as many of my classmates did, and the orthodontics on his top and teeth were connected at the jaw by a pair of small, round rubber bands. When was done with one of them, instead of throwing it into a trash can, what he sometimes liked to do was hook it over the clasp of his pen cap and fire it at the back of my head. He sat directly behind me, that boy.

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When Eugene finally got up, Charlie asked him, “How’d you get that shiner?”

Eugene pulled on his parka, opening his mouth to reveal an impossibly gap-toothed smile. “Kung Fu tournament,” he said.