

Chapter 2

Patrick O'Hara and the School Bully

Patrick O'Hara had a problem. He was being bullied by a boy in his grade at school who was bigger in size than he was, though he was also eleven years old.

Jimmy Smith was mean to almost everyone. He picked on the girls, pulling their pigtails, and he hit or shoved almost every boy who walked past him. A few boys, who were actually afraid of Jimmy, became part of his gang and became bullies too, though usually only when Jimmy was around and was leading the way.

Patrick's ancestors emigrated from Ireland. Their flaming red hair and numerous freckles had been passed on to everyone born into the O'Hara family ever since. The hair distinguished the O'Haras, but also made the kids the butt of jokes and unkind nicknames. Carrot-top, Red, Ketchup-head and Pumpkin-head were just a few of the names Patrick had been called all the way through school. This year, because of Jimmy, the name-calling was worse than ever.

To make matters worse, Patrick wore glasses. Because his family was poor, his mother could not afford fancy "cool" glasses, so Patrick's were of the basic black-rimmed kind and more or less rectangular, making him look very square and bookish. The image fit, thought Patrick sourly, since he really *was* kind of square and bookish.

In fact, as far as grades went, Patrick was the smartest kid in the class, which made Jimmy Smith hate him even more. Jimmy was not a good student, mostly because he didn't study. He was plenty smart in other ways and probably could be smart in class as well, if he would just pay attention and do his lessons.

Patrick liked to study and read books, but this year he hated school because Jimmy was always picking on him.

His mother knew there was something wrong and when she finally got the story out of Patrick, she was furious. She wanted to call the school's principal right away, but Patrick begged her not to. He knew if Jimmy was called before the principal, he would take it out on Patrick when no adult was around. He would just have to find another way to deal with it or endure the bullying until the school year was over.

One particularly bad day at school, Jimmy had called him every name he could think of in the hallway between classes and shoved Patrick hard on the ball court so he fell down and skinned his knee.

On his way home, Patrick happened to look out to the horizon, wishing he could just disappear like the clouds do when there is a breeze.

That is when he saw the familiar old Wisdom Tree on its hilltop. Patrick thought, I can't run away from school, but I can run away to the top of that hill just to get away from everyone for a while.

He climbed the odd hill with its flat top and ancient oak tree. Patrick had lived in the village all of his life. He had heard about the Wisdom Tree and the Red Swing, but his mother never let him climb the hill because she was very superstitious. She didn't believe the local legends about the Tree talking, but just in case, she forbade her son to go there.

Patrick had obeyed, until that day. He knew he would get into trouble with his mother but today had been so bad, he didn't think any human could help him, not his mother or his father or even the priest at his church.

So Patrick headed for the hill. The climb was steep and the grasses were tall and whipped against his blue jeans. Patrick, accustomed to running away from Jimmy, was in pretty good shape, so he easily made it to the top.

Immediately, he headed for the longest limb, so low to the ground that there was a bend in it like an elbow. He climbed onto the limb easily and headed for the trunk and a higher branch. He straddled that branch and then lay down on his stomach letting his arms and legs dangle off each side. The bark was warm and rough against his cheek. From this position, Patrick could gaze out over the surrounding countryside. It was actually fun to view the world this way—kind of cockeyed. It made Patrick smile for the first time in a long time.

"I'm glad you have come to visit, Patrick," said the Wisdom Tree in its customary low, soft and very slow voice.

"Yikes," Patrick uttered as he sat up suddenly, almost losing his balance.

"Who's there?" he demanded.

"It's just me, the Tree," said the Wisdom Tree. "I'm the one your mother is afraid of, which is why she has forbidden you to come here."

“Whoa, this is a little spooky. a...a...a...and kind of cool too.” Patrick said, allowing his curiosity to replace his initial fright. “How do you know she told me never to come here?”

“Never mind how I know,” said the Wisdom Tree. “Just accept that I do and let’s talk about Jimmy Smith and you.”

“You know about Jimmy Smith and how he picks on me?” asked Patrick, completely amazed by what the Tree was saying to him.

“Yes, I know that Jimmy’s a bully. So, Patrick, tell me, why do you think he acts that way?” asked the Wisdom Tree.

“Geez, how do I know what makes him act that way?” Patrick replied, a little irritated at such a dumb question. “He’s just mean, I guess, and no one stops him because he is so much bigger than the rest of us.”

Despite this strange interaction with the Tree, Patrick felt easy enough to lie back down on the tree limb with his cheek pressed against the warm and strangely comforting bark.

The Wisdom Tree could feel Patrick relaxing on one of its arms, so it continued.

“Patrick, when you feel happy, what do you do? Do you smile and laugh? Do you get on your bike and ride like the wind then suddenly let go of the handle bars and pedals and spread your arms and legs out?” asked the Tree.

“Yes,” said Patrick quietly as he lay sprawled out like a big cat taking a nap. “Yes, I do that and sometimes I even burst into a song. I act silly, I guess.”

Then the Wisdom Tree asked, “Have you ever seen Jimmy Smith act silly, laugh or even smile?”

“Well, he smiles a really crooked, mean smile when he scares someone, like me, but it isn’t really a happy smile. It’s more like the smile of a Halloween goblin,” Patrick answered.

Patrick sat up so he could demonstrate this by pulling down the corners of his mouth. “He never sings, not even when the whole class is singing a song. He refuses to sing, in fact.”

“Do you ever see him run or ride his bike for joy?” asked the Tree.

“No,” said Patrick. “He always seems angry and mad. Now that you ask, I don’t think I have even seen him happy, though he pretends to like it when he hits one of us.”

Patrick was now really thinking about Jimmy and seeing him in a new way. He really *was* an unhappy boy, Patrick realized.

“People, young and old, act badly when they feel badly, Patrick. Haven’t you noticed when you are sick, how cranky you get? You feel physically bad and you act badly as a result, don’t you?” asked the kindly Tree.

“Yes,” said Patrick, standing up and holding on to the smaller branch over his head. “It is true. When I don’t feel good, I don’t act *good* either. Lately, because I hate going to school, I have been really hard to get along with at home. My mom said that to me just last night.”

“So, if this is true for you, Patrick, do you suppose it is also true for Jimmy Smith?” asked the Tree.

Patrick was silent. He never considered that maybe Jimmy was unhappy and that was why he acted so badly. But what could he be unhappy about, Patrick wondered to himself. Jimmy was the biggest kid in school and everyone was afraid of him.

The Wisdom Tree, as usual, read Patrick’s mind and said, “It is hard to think that a kid who is bigger and stronger than everyone else, and has everyone afraid of him, could be unhappy, but he is, Patrick.”

“But why?” asked Patrick.

“Well, Patrick, we can’t know exactly why without asking Jimmy, but it is true that people act outwardly the way they are feeling inwardly, so what do you think could be making Jimmy unhappy?” asked the Tree.

Patrick thought for a few minutes and then suddenly his eyes opened wide, like they do when you suddenly see something you had not seen before.

“Maybe he feels unhappy because he *is* so much bigger than everyone else. He really sticks out in the classroom. Maybe he feels like some kind of monster, so he acts like one,” Patrick exclaimed in surprise that he had not seen this before.

“That is very perceptive of you, Patrick,” said the Tree. “You could be right. It does make sense.”

“What else do you think could be making Jimmy feel bad about himself?” asked the Tree.

“Well,” said Patrick, really getting into this talk with the Tree. “Everyone knows that he doesn’t have a mother. Jimmy’s parents were divorced when he was little and his father has been raising him and working their farm mostly by himself. When the school has a function and the moms make cookies or cupcakes, Jimmy never has any to bring because his dad doesn’t have time to cook stuff like that. Mr. Smith has to work hard to keep the animals fed and also work in his forge since he is the town blacksmith. Jimmy has to help him every day after school, so he can’t play in any sports either.”

Patrick was silent now. “Gosh,” he said more to himself than to the Tree, “I never thought about this before. It must be really hard not to have a mom and to always have to go home to work the farm or in the forge every day. He never gets to play.”

Patrick’s voice trailed off as he saw the reality of Jimmy Smith’s life for the first time. It was a sad life, Patrick thought. No wonder he is so mean.

“Maybe,” Patrick said with surprise in his voice, “Maybe Jimmy’s anger is really sadness turned inside out, like you turn a sock inside out?”

“Very good,” said the Wisdom Tree. “I think you have really got something there, Patrick. The truth is, ALL behavior can be understood. We just have to take the time to really think about what it could possibly mean. But remember, understanding is not the same as *excusing*. Jimmy should not be cruel to others. He has been punished several times by his father and the school, but the punishment did not work for long because no one thought about the reason for his behavior.”

Patrick sat down on his limb again and then lay forward resting his stomach on the Tree’s branch. This time he wrapped his arms around the limb giving it a sort of hug. He felt so much better about Jimmy Smith and, oddly, he didn’t feel afraid of Jimmy anymore, either. He wasn’t sure how he would get Jimmy to stop bullying him, but he felt sure he could do it.

Eventually, Patrick climbed down, went over to the Tree’s trunk and gave it a real hug this time, a really big hug.

“Thank you, Wisdom Tree,” Patrick said with relief in his voice.

“You are welcome, Carrot Top,” the Tree replied.

Patrick smiled a huge smile. For some reason, he no longer minded that nickname.

“Just remember: You cannot change another person, all you can do is change yourself and how you feel and think about them,” the Tree reminded Patrick. “Come again child, anytime, even when you are happy. The Red Swing and I will be waiting for you.”

Now, all of this happened on a Friday. Patrick didn't tell his mother he had visited the Wisdom Tree because he really wanted to visit the Tree again. If he told her right away, she would be very angry. He would tell her, just later.

But he did tell her that he had been thinking about Jimmy Smith. He shared with her his thoughts about how badly he thought Jimmy must feel about being so much bigger than all the other kids and how sad he must feel about not having a mom and never having cupcakes to bring to school functions. Patrick asked his mother if she could make extra cupcakes so Jimmy would have a box of cupcakes to take to school just like all the other kids.

Patrick's mother was surprised and proud of her son's compassion for the bully who had been making his life at school so miserable. She agreed she would bake extra cookies or cupcakes for Jimmy. As it happened, the mothers had been asked to supply cupcakes for the very next Monday. So, after church on Sunday, she made a double batch of Patrick's favorite chocolate cupcakes with extra rich creamy frosting. She packed half in one box and half in another box.

Patrick was carrying both boxes very carefully as he walked to school the next day. As he turned the corner toward the school, there was Jimmy Smith looking bigger and meaner than ever.

Oh dear, thought Patrick, now what am I going to do?

But then he remembered the Wisdom Tree and all he had learned talking to it. He felt himself stand taller and straighter. He remembered his new view of Jimmy. Even though Jimmy was coming at him with a menacing look on his face and his fists clinched, Patrick smiled a weak smile at him.

“Jimmy,” Patrick said a little nervously. “My mom made cupcakes for you to take to school today.”

With his hand shaking, Patrick held out the recycled shoebox that was tied with string and had a tag on it that said, *Jimmy Smith*.

Jimmy was so startled that he stopped in his tracks and just stared at the box. Then he quickly looked around to see if any of his gang was nearby. Fortunately, none were there, so he didn't have to act tough for them.

Haltingly he said, "Your mom made these for me?"

It was clear Jimmy couldn't believe his eyes.

"Yes, this whole box is just for you to take to school, just like all the other kids," Patrick said quietly. "My mom said she will make cupcakes or cookies for you every time parents are asked to send some to the school for special functions. She knows your dad doesn't have time to bake these kinds of things, so she wants to be your 'cupcake mom,' if that's okay with you."

Jimmy Smith, the big, tough bully was speechless. Patrick thought he saw Jimmy's eyes water up, but then Jimmy remembered he was supposed to be tough, so he said, "Well, okay, but that doesn't mean you are cool enough to be my friend. You are still a red-headed bookworm you know."

Patrick, smiled, "Yes, Jimmy, I am still a red-headed bookworm and proud of it. One of these days, I'm going to start growing and maybe be as tall as you, so you had better watch out."

That made Jimmy smile, the first real smile Patrick had ever seen on the face of this long-time enemy.

Wow, he thought to himself, that Wisdom Tree sure knows a thing or two. I will have to go see him again one of these days. Maybe I'll even take Jimmy with me, when I'm cool enough to be his friend.

That might take a while, but Patrick felt sure it was going to happen sooner or later.