



Adventures in Darkness: The Summer of an 11-Year-Old Blind Boy

Tom Sullivan

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In the middle of a late spring night in 1959, three eleven-year-old boys “escape” out a window of their second-story dorm room at Perkins School for the Blind. Then they steal a dinghy from the school’s boathouse on the Charles River and launch themselves downriver, all the way into fog-laden Boston Harbor. In those days the harbor was one of America’s busiest, and the boys are almost swamped by a freighter before they are saved by the Coast Guard. This is the first of the author’s “Adventures in Blindness,” a compelling series reminiscing the summer he broke out, broke free of his limitations and confines, and risked all in order to enter the world of the “normies”—public school kids with the gift of sight. “My desire for freedom was unquenchable,” Sullivan remembers. And that summer he was “the skydiver who yells ‘Geronimo’ and takes the leap of faith.”

Tommy’s ally in this determined quest to bash boundaries is his father, Thomas “Porky” Sullivan, an immigrant with a taste for Jameson’s Irish Whiskey, who established himself with the cops, politicians, and criminals in Boston as a bookmaker. In one episode, Porky teaches little Tommy to pitch a baseball by honing in on the catcher’s chatter and the slap of a fist striking a mitt. Then Porky bribes a Little League commissioner into letting his blind son pitch an inning.

The boy’s mother, on the other hand, having been advised by a leading eye specialist to “institutionalize” the child, believes that Tommy must “overcome his disability with a talent.” She pushes him toward an “educated and artistic” life, fencing him in and, unwittingly, threatening his spirit. But Tommy favors Jerry Lee Lewis and Fats Domino over classical piano, and he prefers public school over the “blindey” school.

More than anything that summer he wants a playmate, and his neighbor Billy shows up to fill the bill. But his place in the world is threatened by a tormentor named Eddy, and Tommy must find a way to stand up to the bully.

Sullivan is an actor, entertainer, and producer who has appeared in many TV shows and movies. He is also a much sought-after motivational speaker. His 1975 autobiography, *If You Could See What I Hear*, was a *New York Times* bestseller and a major motion picture. He has also written *Seeing Lessons: 14 Life Secrets I’ve Learned Along the Way*; *Special Parent Special Child*; *The Leading Lady: Dinah’s Story*; and several books for children. But it all started in 1959 with that escape down the Charles River, when he discovered that he “wanted to be a person that happened to be blind, rather than a blind person.”

JOE TAYLOR (February 8, 2007)

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