

A Jack Russell in Plaid

(an ode to David Sedaris)

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Dedication

To David Sedaris, a writer *par excellence*!

ON A BRIGHT FALL AFTERNOON in seventh grade, my teacher, Miss O'Donnell told me that I looked "like a mix of Jack Russell Terrier and polar bear." Calling me a Jack Russell terrier I could understand, because I have short, perky ears, and my allergies make my nose damp. However, the polar bear allusion, well . . . I was not so sure about that. Maybe she chose to refer to me as part polar bear because I am quite pale—that is, I am a color that some might call downright translucent. Whatever the case, my takeaway from that comment and my experiences that followed that day is this: people often see what they want to see or that is, they see what they *think* they see.

My parents were third-generation Greek, and although my dad was swarthy and muscular, I inherited my mother's weaker, paler genes. I rarely related to my family, especially my parents, and I often daydreamed that I was adopted, but most importantly -- I was adopted by the wrong family!

I was convinced that one day I would discover my real family: An ancient, rich Scottish clan who regularly wore kilts and sporrans. Despite their wealth, they sometimes were distracted, and one day, they had simply, accidentally misplaced me. I was absolutely sure they were still out searching for me and using Scottish hounds (of some sort) bounding about across hills and dales and poking into every kind of chipmunk hideout. So, since I was pretty sure they were looking on the wrong continent, it was up to me to go out one day and find them. Maybe when I was 18 or 21, or 42. However, if I failed to find my true, blue-blooded relatives, my hope was that I might stumble across a boyfriend with a similar background. Ah the mountains, ah, the red hair, ah, the—ouch, the thistles!

Now, regarding Miss O'Donnell's observation, it is not that I am opposed to being likened to hirsute members of the animal kingdom, it is merely that I enjoyed the illusion that the world saw me as a tad more dashing. However, to be fair, on that particular afternoon, I wasn't exactly a fashion maven. I was dressed in a pair of bright red and black tartan pants, but they were not made from a conservative, tiny patterned material, *oh nooooo*, they were the boldest squared tartan that I could find. I did not merely want to wear the weave of my hoped for blue-blooded ancestors, but to wear a plaid that could *bur-r-r-n* one's retinas (horribly bad Scottish pun intended).

I had chosen to wear these pants because of something I overheard the day before in the school hallway. That day, when I passed Harry Belcher (the school bully) and his phalanx of drooling hangers on, I heard Harry say to his pals, "Only golfers with small penises wear plaid. I'd never go near any of them punks! You'd get diseases and worse."

Where Harry came by this prescient insight, I do not know, but this peek into his prejudices gave me pause. Never having dabbled in the fine and deft art of using a long metal stick for beating a defenseless small white ball, and too, not even wishing to contemplate or address the heft and stretch of my secret places, I decided that it might behoove me to align myself wholeheartedly with Harry's image of a golfer. That way, (my feeble adolescent mind calculated) Harry, my ever battering and sometimes kicking nemesis, would know that I was full of diseases and too dangerous to touch. If my diabolically clever "fashion as strategy" plan worked, then when I waltzed by in my glad-plaid flag, he would quietly surrender and disturb me no more. The consequence of my ruse was that if he stopped going after me, then he might focus on a better-matched victim. At least, I hoped that my doppelganger punching bag (whomever this tragic figure might be) would have a few more resources and muscle tissue on his frame to defend himself against *Harry the Brute*.

After all, I was no heathen, and I was not indifferent toward the sufferings or the potential sufferings of others. Nor, would I ever deign to use anyone else as fodder for my defense. I simply had to survive another day. So, if wearing plaid, paisley, or any other garish pattern got me out from under Harry's radar, then, I knew that quieter days lay ahead. Since I decided that this tactic was going to be successful, I mitigated any sense of guilt because I figured that one day, I would assuage some of Harry's next victim's misery by eventually reuniting with my rich Scottish relatives, and then, I would use my inheritance to send Harry's victim a fruit of the month order for three years. Why three? I guess because good things come in threes.

In fact, you know, back then, if I could have designed a perfect world (according to my penultimate and utopian pre-teen fantasy), all children would get along, help each other, and spring gleefully about flowered meadows in bare feet. Also, they would wear diaphanous clothing and share equal servings of lemonade, sweet tea, and moon pies. And no one, *no one*, would indirectly or directly feel compelled to scapegoat another toward a bully's focus.

That is what I told myself.

Nonetheless, I had high hopes that my vestment diversion tactic would work. That is, until the next day when reality flicked me hard on my Jack Russell ears.

WHEN I SHOWED UP IN MY NEW PLAID PANTS, I saw Harry squint and sneer at them. Then, he fixed me with a dark look, and he began to drum

his fist into his palm. I was tuned-in enough to realize that this was not an overture of goodwill, nor, was he displaying a troglodyte attempt at making a synchronous rhythm. After all, during grade school, Harry had failed remedial music two years in a row. So, I sincerely doubted that he was practicing for his debut as a percussionist in a street musician's band.

"You're dead, Nerd," Harry said in a not very effective *sotto voce*. Every kid in the yard knew, that for some reason, Harry had always expressed disdain for nerds. I had overheard him say, on more than one occasion (as he trammed one hapless nerd or another into the ground -- too often, me), "Nerds stink."

I also knew his usual ambush haunts.

ONE WAS THE DUMPSTER IN THE BACK of the school where a few brave and sneaky kids dared light up Marlboros and Newports. Harry never overextended himself when he chose how many kids to attack. He would count on his fingers until there were only two potential puffing victims (or less) next to the dumpster. When his odds had improved, he would leap from behind, spin them over his head, and toss them into the slimy recesses of the trash. With a satisfied grin, he would walk away. He left his victims with their feet stuck up in the air, kicking and thrashing above the metal rim.

However, the kids who smoked were considered cool—not nerds. So his attacks made no nerd-beating sense. I could only assume the reason he made these assaults on them was because he was simply inspired by the anti-smoking campaigns on TV. So, maybe, sometimes, those PSAs really do work. Such as, *Kids, this is your brain with drugs on a frying pan*; *Kids, this is what it is like to choke on cigarette smoke* -- and my favorite one, which I made-up: *Kids, this is what having unprotected sex is like . . . your little thingy explodes*.

Maybe Harry just took the tobacco PSAs to heart and wanted to protect his fellow classmates from the harm of deadly cigarettes?

Another place Harry liked to use as an ambush spot was the giant photinia bush at the school's entrance, near the bus stop. At the end of the day, he would hide inside the thick, scratchy branches and wait until all the kids had lined up for the bus. Then, he'd yank one or more kids into the bush so fast that not even the comic hero, The Vision could see what had happened to them. Each child received a mighty trouncing from Harry. When he was done, he'd spew them from the depths of the bush as if the plant had just given birth to a series of bloody and mangled children.

Harry, after all, was limited in scope when it came to mental resources. And too, he lacked the ability to change his methodologies. In other words, his patterns were so simplistic and predictable that they should have been posted on a find-your-way-out-of-the-maze game on the back of sugar laden cereal boxes. If one were to enter Harry's mind-maze, one would quickly find the exit.

In fact, one day, I was sitting behind Harry in class, and I was so bored that as I gazed at the back of his head, I thought about the vast, empty spaces between his ears. I figured that, if I were the size of a bug, and I crawled inside that damp enclosure, and I let out a low whistle in those cavernous expanses -- that I would be deafened by a blast of loud echoes.

Ah, Harry, so little there *there*.

SO, THE DAY OF HARRY'S FIST-PUMPING WARNING, I knew that the dumpster and the photinia bush were places I must positively avoid. Unfortunately, there was a problem. I needed to get on the afternoon bus because I had no other way to get to my house ten miles away. I'd already missed the bus twice that week, and, as a result, my mother was still hell bent furious with me for making her leave her afternoon post-luncheon cocktails -- TWICE -- to pick me up.

About three times a week, my mother attended a luncheon with her gal pals. Of course, it was not so much a luncheon that she attended as it was a bunch of ladies sitting around guzzling gin fizzes and gnawing on a handful of flaccid cheese straws. They only ate the cheese straws to fool themselves into thinking that they were doing something besides sitting around in an alcoholic haze while they complained about their hammerhead toes, split ends, and worthless, ungrateful squalling brats. It was their version of a high tea, or should I say a high-as-a-kite tea?

My mother always wanted to have a leg up on the fume-filled festivities and would have a few drinks *before* she arrived at the kegger . . . er, luncheon. When my father was at home, he'd plead with her to let him drive, but she would have none of that.

"You asshole, Fred! I'm sick of your bullshit!"

If I happened to be home when these lovely exchanges took place, her Charm School elocution fell like icy flakes on my Jack Russell ears.

Also, it was not that she was opposed to driving drunk to come get me, because she often did so merely to prove the point that she could do any damn thing she pleased -- whenever she *damned well* wanted to.

So, no, I knew it was best that day not to miss the bus because the odds of her picking me up again were slim to an empty dog bowl. If I called her that day, I would have received her angelic lilting commentary: "Jesus Christ, you useless little punk, get a drivers license already, will ya?"

And then, she would slam down the receiver.

SO, THE DILEMMA I FACED that "first day of plaid" was seemingly insurmountable. When the end of day bell rang, I was at my desk and had not yet devised a solution. Instead, I had given into a flight of fancy that my future Scottish boyfriend, dressed as a superhero in clingy leotards, would swoop in and fly me away to his mansion in the Hamptons. His servants would bring us filet mignon and hollandaise drenched asparagus on trays of Elizabethan silver. Then, he would draw his thick, muscled arm about me and whisper in my ear—

"Arthur, Arthur!"

My reverie was broken by someone calling my name and shaking my shoulder. I looked up and saw Miss O'Donnell hovering over me. She looked confused and disgusted, as if I had just swallowed all of her chalk and vomited it up on her desk.

"I'm sorry, Miss O'Donnell. I must have been thinking about the math quiz too hard."

"Uh, huh," she said. "More like one of your woolgathering moments."

Then, Miss O'Donnell uttered her fateful description, "Boy, you look like a Jack Russell terrier mixed with a polar bear."

Whereupon, she turned on her thick ankles and walked to her desk to finish grading papers.

I blinked and looked around. All the other students had left the room. I half-stood to look out the window and saw the bus pulling away. Even if I had wanted to take the risk of running the gauntlet past Harry's bush-of-terror, it was too late.

Miss O'Donnell's head was bowed over her paperwork and without looking up, she said, "No more daydreaming, get going."

I noticed that my allergies were acting up, and my itchy nose began to drip, so, I dabbed at it with my handkerchief before I adjusted my glasses and said, "Yes'm."

I scooped up my books and headed for the door. I peered around the doorjamb into the hallway and saw that it was empty.

Just like Harry's head, I thought.

Behind me, Miss O'Donnell said, "Move along. If you missed the bus, go to the office—you know the drill."

I scooted into the hall and thought about hiding in the lavatory. I jiggled the handle, but the janitor had already locked the door after the last bell. There was a rumor that this lavatory-locking rule had started because a while back, some kids had stayed after the bell had rung, and the teachers had left. Then, they took some poor kid into the lavatory and gave him a swirly. The swirly kid happened to be the school board president's grandson, so ever since, that door was locked five minutes after the bell rang.

I thought about going out the front door to take a chance that Harry might have already given up on his bush-hiding tactic and gone home. But, I knew that, as stupid as Harry was, he was just as tenacious. Once he decided to beat someone up, he would follow through -- no matter how long it took. So, he was likely still there. I thought my best odds were to exit out the back.

Bad choice.

Even though I ran my fastest past the dumpster, Harry caught my arm, swung me around, and stood in front of me.

"You nerd. Prepare to meet your maker."

Harry's less than original threat made him sound as if he had watched one too many movies from the 1930s. I had to wonder if he even knew *whom* our maker was. Or did he think that we each had a separate maker? And if we were made in the image of our maker, perhaps he thought that my maker wore glasses, plaid pants, and had a flattop haircut? If that was the case, his maker had thick black greasy hair and two-day-old beard stubble. (OK, I lied. Harry still had peach fuzz, but heck, the stubble image fit the 1930s theme.) Also, his maker's breath smelled like old farts, and his skin was the color of congealed burger fat. (Harry did not really smell or look like that, but I always enjoy the sensation of embellishing things to make them more . . . fulsome.)

When Harry leaned in to deliver his first punch, instead of ducking, I somehow felt emboldened. Maybe it was the power of the plaid material on my legs and my fantasy relationship with all things brawny and Scottish, but

whatever it was—for the first time in my life—I fought back and swung my backpack at him.

Somehow, it made its mark and landed square on his jaw. My move caught him by surprise, and he fell flat on his face. I started to run, but he grabbed my ankle and pulled me down to the ground. As he reeled me toward him, I knew for the first time what a catfish must feel like when a starved fisherman snags him on a hook. I saw that Harry's nose was bleeding, so with my free leg I kicked at his face. I got his nose again, and more blood gushed out. Harry let go and began to cry. He turned away, pulled off his shirt, and held it to his face.

That was a first, Harry *never* cried in front of anybody.

That is when I saw the marks. At first, I thought they were oddly large freckles, but as I stared at them, I realized that they were little brown marks of scarred skin sprinkled across his back. Some of them were perfect circles others were half-moon shapes.

I recognized the size of the spots. It was the same shape that my mother's cigarettes left in the carpet when she dropped them straight down when she fell asleep on the couch after one of her "luncheons." I was the one that liked to clean house, so I often tried to snip the burn marks out of the carpet. Harry's wounds looked exactly the same. Now I understood why he hated kids who smoked. If he couldn't beat up the person that caused his scars, then he picked the next easiest target.

As Harry sat before me completely exposed, I saw him in a new way. And for the first time . . . dare I say it? I felt sorry for Harry.

"Are you OK, Harry?"

"Fuck you!" Harry said behind his wadded up shirt.

"Should I see if the nurse is still here?"

Harry turned halfway around to look at me, and when our eyes met, I saw that there was another first, his eyes weren't glassy with ignorant rage.

"Naw, I'll be alright. Y'all go on—get out of here."

His voice sounded surprisingly soft. However, he saw me glance at his back and in the next breath, he made a harsh, guttural sound, and said, "If you fucking tell anyone about this, I'll blow your brains out and feed them to the fishes."

Whoever caused those brandings on Harry must have also been a fan of old movies. How else could Harry have been so full of antiquated, cinematic clichés?

AFTER THAT DAY, I was worried that because I had seen Harry's secret weaknesses, that it was only a matter of time before he would begin to resent me for knowing too much. And in Harry's twisted mind, it was likely that this would be enough of a reason for him to wreck more vengeance upon me.

My solution was to display a *subtle* reminder of my *power of knowing* by wearing my plaid pants every day for the rest of the year. That way, my garment would serve as a visual cue to Harry that not only was I capable of fighting back, but that I also *saw* him cry. And if it got out that a nerd had made him cry, even if not everyone believed it happened, how could he maintain an aura of fearsomeness? Especially in a small town, even a not so bright bully like Harry knew that once doubt is laid, it is often hard to keep it from growing. So, from that day forward, whenever I passed him in the hall, Harry pretended not to notice me.

Although I felt proud of myself for making this stand, I knew I needed to continue to stay at the ready, so I kept my Jack Russell ears perked up for the slightest sound of danger, and I never went out the back entrance again.

AFTER MY LESSON WITH HARRY, I never saw bullies quite the same way. As I grew up and got older, no matter how many times I came under attack by other challengers (who were probably more vicious and dangerous than Harry because they were more numerous and attacked me with insults, taunts, threats, and other bodily and financial harms); I knew that under every bully's brash exterior lay the skin of a very frightened and tortured child.

I, of course, have never forgiven their assaults, but because of my experiences with Harry, I now hear and see them better than ever before.

Woof.

A Note About the Author

R.j. hOyle has written a novellete ("The End of the Rainbow"), a number of short stories (in realist, science fiction, fantasy, and other genres), as well as, short nonfiction pieces. Also, hOyle blogs when the time and the spirit allows. Find more information at the links below.

More of R.j. hOyle's work can be found at:



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