

Origins

... a short story, sort of ...

“*Get off!*” It was all I could think to say as, one after the other, the three boys piled onto my back and grabbed at my legs, trying to bring me down.

“*Let’s make the elephant fall!*” That was the last I heard, as the weight of the three boys pulled me down into the snow bank, my head and shoulders buried in snow.

I was pretty strong, and big for my age. But being eleven and overweight wasn’t much fun, and my ‘friends’, such as they were, seemed to take every opportunity that presented itself to make fun of me and physically torment me.

“Bury him!” They were having a good time, at my expense.

After stuffing a great deal of snow under my collar and inside my coat, they ran off laughing, leaving me to get up, shake myself off, and continue towards home.

Despite their occasional cruelty, the three were friends, at least most of the time. We shared seats next to each other in Mr. Fisher’s grade seven class, walked home from school together, hung out together on weekends, played baseball together in the summer, and generally had a good time.

But like most grade seven boys, they liked to pick on anyone who was different, when they were in the mood. It usually happened at least once a week ... generally just roughhousing and physical intimidation, but always with a point. The point was to never let me forget that I was different. I was fat.

I’d have to say that I wasn’t really obese, just plump in places where eleven year old boys usually aren’t. But there was no hiding the fact that I was overweight, and as a result, I got picked on a lot.

I got on well enough with the three boys individually, probably because I was a head taller than each of them, and strong. But when the three of them were together, they sometimes felt the need to make fun of me. It didn’t bother me too much. Usually.

You might wonder why I would call these three ‘friends’, and continue to hang around with them. But in a small town like mine, for a boy of eleven, there was a limited selection of others to do things with. Besides, these three and I shared many interests, we’d known each other forever, and most of the time, they treated me as a friend. We had a lot of good times together.

But every once in a while I would wonder how much of a friend I really was. In PhysEd class the other day, we’d been having races in the gym. I was paired against Tommy, one of my three ‘friends’, who could run pretty fast.

But despite my size and weight, I could run pretty fast too. I beat him in that race. And as we were leaning against the gym wall catching our breath, he said to me “*You run pretty fast for somebody who’s fat!*”

There was no escaping it. I was always 'the fat kid'.

Boys' clothing in those days was not designed for overweight kids. The pants, for 'husky boys', were pleated and bulky, not like the slimming corduroys the other boys wore. And everyone wore button down plaid shirts that tucked into your pants ... seemingly designed to emphasize my chubbiness.

PhysEd class was not much fun. Not only did we have to change into gym uniforms, but the teacher insisted we all shower afterwards. The showers then were communal ... one big room with a ceiling full of shower heads. No way at all for me to hide my chubby body.

The teacher had no sympathy for me at all. I'd like to say that he was concerned about me, and maybe wanted to help me exercise away my extra pounds. But it wasn't true. He was a football coach, and I suspect he didn't really care about any of us ... I think he saw a Jr. High PhysEd class as a burden he had to bear. And he certainly had no sympathy for me. Once when we were doing gymnastics, I was attempting to climb over a wooden vault, and as he came up behind me, he said, in a voice loud enough for the whole class to hear, "*Maybe we should get a crane in here to lift you over!*"

I may have exaggerated when I implied that the three boys I hung around with were my only friends. There were others I would get together with once in a while, usually on Saturday afternoons when we played baseball.

The baseball we played then was true baseball, with the small professional hardballs and solid maple bats. The town had one large diamond designed for fastball, and we all became quite good at pitching overhand and hitting home runs. I was especially good at shortstop. I may have been heavy, but I could move pretty fast when I had to, and I had quick reflexes.

There were two boys there that I got to know quite well over the next few years. They lived on the far side of town, so except for baseball and school, we didn't see each other very often. One of them became my best friend.

His name was Ihor, pronounced 'Ee-hore'. He was Ukrainian. I spent a lot of time at his house during my grade nine year, probably because we both liked to get good marks, and his mother was a great cook!

She confided in me once that Ihor's name was actually supposed to have been spelled 'Igor', which had the same pronunciation, but she knew that everyone would make fun of him by calling him 'Ee-gore', like the horror movie hunchback. So she spelled it 'Ihor' instead. She was a smart lady.

I think the reason that Ihor and I had become friends was that he'd been picked on all his life too. There weren't many Ukrainians in our small town, or at least ones with unusual names. So I guess it made him a little more willing to be friends without being judgmental. I know that he never once made fun of me for being overweight. Not once.

But there were still those who did. Now that we were all a little older, the boys who liked to pick on others became more physical in their taunting. I was ambushed more than once on my way home from school, and there were bruises. But I gave as good as I got.

My grade ten year began in a new school in a large city down the highway. I was still a little heavy, and ashamed of it, but the anonymity provided by large classes helped make it easier. And there were new friends to be made, friends who, for one reason or another, didn't care that I was overweight.

Tony was a Christian. I didn't know this at first, and I wouldn't have cared much one way or the other. I'd been to Sunday school and church with my parents once a week ever since I could remember, but it hadn't done much for me. In fact, while I didn't know it at the time, I would soon renounce any belief at all in God, and turn to science.

But Tony wasn't ashamed about his Christianity, and would talk about it often. His belief in God seemed unshakeable. I admired him for his steadfastness, because I knew that he was avoided by a lot of kids because of that belief.

"You know, you really should pray once in a while ... it would be good for you!" Tony was always saying things like that. I was OK with it. We'd have long discussions every once in a while; he'd try to convince me that God was real, and I'd think up counter-arguments. It was my first attempt to come to grips with a 'rational' approach to understanding life, one I would become expert at in the rabid atheism of my first year in college.

It would be many, many years before I would come to realize how wrong I'd been. And even then I would need help.

By the time I'd found myself in college, because of a few summer jobs that involved a lot of walking, I'd shed the extra weight that had plagued me all through my school years. I looked 'normal'. No-one made fun of me for being overweight, because I wasn't.

But I'd discovered something else about myself. The years of being bullied and laughed at for being overweight had had an effect on me ... they'd made me shy and uncommunicative. I didn't talk much, except with close friends, and I avoided those social situations where I didn't know a lot of people. Being shy would carry its own stigma, as I would find out in later years.

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This is not so much a short story as a reasonably accurate portrayal of a few incidents in my own life. Everything written here happened more or less exactly as I described it.

My childhood was quite a happy one, despite the sometime cruelty of my friends. I learned to ignore it.

I suppose being picked on so much could have made me into a bitter or negative person. I've had 'short' friends who were picked on so much for being short that they turned out that way.

But in my case, being picked on made me into a kinder person, I think. Certainly I've never in my life intentionally made fun of someone for their physical traits.

And yes, I did spend most of my life up until recently as a rabid atheist. Which I guess points out pretty strongly how good a person the friend who eventually led me to God really is!