
WORMAGEDDON

UNTIL THAT YEAR, I dreaded April the most. The cruelest month when the gyre could not hold. A season of rain and humiliation. And worms.

But I'd thought that year would be different. I could feel it in the marrow of my eleven-year-old bones, because that year, I would free myself of the clods. This was what I called the clunky black Oxford shoes that had been the bane of my existence for most of my short life.

In kindergarten, they were no big deal. There was still a glorious *joi-de-vivre* in kindergarten. Need to take off your dress in the middle of class? Why not! Wanna eat the paste? Go for it, man! Mom makes you wear ugly black shoes? We don't care—you're beautiful, baby! But sometime early in first grade, that attitude changed. All of us discovered, in our own ways, the horrible truth: "I'm different and that's bad."

My difference was a minor one—my shoes were weird. But this kind of tiny deviation from the norm can have enormous consequences. I became a figure of fun and teasing for at least a few minutes of every day that I had to wear that

hyper-functional footwear, every time we were at recess or gathering for class.

I had one brief respite from the embarrassment of those shoes: the year my family moved from Canada to live in Britain. I was sent to a state school where the food was terrible, the teachers were mean, and most of my classmates were football hooligans-in-training. But did I care? No, because everybody was wearing clods, so I didn't stand out. My "American" accent was distinctive, but that was one of those rare differences that made people like you.

While abroad, I picked up their accent so upon my return I had another season of being the schoolyard novelty. The strangeness of my English accent meant the black Oxfords went practically unnoticed. Over the winter, my dialect reverted to that of everyone else, and my reprieve was over.

At that point in my life, winter was my favorite season. It was the great equalizer in terms of footwear. In the 1970s we hadn't heard of climate change, and it was a season of boots. A snowscape gloriously free of the clods.

In those days, my best friends were Jason and William. We called William Wild Bill. Jason was a quiet, athletic kid who did well in school, and generally didn't get noticed, either for good or ill. When Bill and I would get into scrapes, Jason tended to stay out of the fray, and neither of us could really blame him for it (though secretly I hoped he would fully join our triumvirate of trouble and take the odd bloody nose for me).

Wild Bill was an unrepentant maniac. His difference was obvious and visible—a large birthmark that covered his right ear and a big part of his neck. The invisible problem was that his dad was a drunk, a bully, and as we used to say back then, a "complete a-hole." Bill was smart, and strong, and a consis-

tent target of the bullies at school. That year we were both still too small to stand up to the eighth graders, but we were on the radar of the monsters and their apprentices in seventh grade. We got into our fair share of fights with the younger ruffians, and usually gave as good as we got. We were a team. Comrades and battle-brothers.

That winter Wild Bill invented a game to make the walk to school more fun, which he called “homework curling.” Instead of rocks, we used our homework, which for some reason we wrapped in discarded milk bags. (To carry your homework in anything but a milk bag was almost as uncool as wearing clods. There’s still no rational explanation for this, except: we were eleven.) The beaten-down snow and ice along the walkways were our impromptu rinks. There was no sweeping nonsense. The object was always distance, and, if possible, acrobatics.

Curling aside, the best part of winter was the boots. Everyone wore them. Well, everyone except for the eighth graders. They were the monsters of the playground, leviathans that wreaked havoc on lesser lives the way that Godzilla could ruin your shopping trip to downtown Tokyo. In winter they did not deign to notice the ice and snow and came to school wearing their brand name running shoes—Adidas. I vowed that someday I would have a pair of Adidas, and wear them in the winter too, dammit. This was sheer bravado. Mom would never let me out of the house wearing shoes in winter. I could get away with stuffing my hat in my parka pocket before I arrived in front of the schoolyard, but that was as far as I was likely to take it.

Throughout the winter of sixth grade, I lobbied hard to get rid of the Oxfords. Mom was impassive, but Dad was somewhat sympathetic to my plight. As a boy, he'd had bright red hair and had suffered under the Godzillas of his day too. The main resistance from my mother was that as a youngster I'd had a slight problem with my gait, and she wanted to make sure I had enough arch support to correct it. Well, my walking was five years corrected, and even with the reprieve of living in England it seemed like a lifetime of suffering. In late March, she finally agreed: If we could find running shoes that had good arch support, I could wear them to school.

The only shoes that fit the bill—that weren't clods—were stiff leather Adidas. I couldn't feign disappointment. I was one happy little dude.

So, it was April. It was lovely. There was no hint of cruelty in the air, just the damp fecundity of worms as they came out of their earthen holes to experience the rain. The center could not hold them, and I'd always liked watching them stretch and move. They were fascinating, but I wasn't the kind of boy that needed to pick them up or, even worse, eat them. According to Jason, Wild Bill had been a prolific worm-nibbler in his early days before my family ever came to the neighborhood. Jason shared my live-and-let-live attitude toward the worms, but Wild Bill maintained a visceral (if not digestive) interest in the poor creatures. He stomped on the bigger ones and ignored the tiny, spaghetti-like worms as we walked to school in a light rain.

Despite the rain, I'd insisted that I debut the new shoes, and Mom finally acquiesced when I explained that I wasn't

going to get them wet. They were the best shoes I'd ever had—how could I get them wet? It was unthinkable. Don't worry, I'd said. They'll be okay.

I was true to my word. Jason, who was wearing rubber boots, stomped in the occasional puddle while Wild Bill enthusiastically committed squirmicide. I stayed on the straight-and-narrow, studiously avoiding any contamination of my brand-new Adidas. They were white with blue stripes. They were cool. I was wearing something cool. Jason noticed them but didn't say anything. Wild Bill may have noticed but if he did, he didn't let on.

We arrived too late to play in the yard, so we went straight to class for an exciting morning of repeating things. It was math, my worst subject, but I didn't care. While we recited the times tables, the skies opened up outside, and it rained hard. Cindy McLeish, who sat next to me, sighed heavily while we copied stuff in our notebooks.

"What's wrong?" I asked. It might have been the first time I'd asked a question like that, openly solicitous of another person's feelings. But I was in an effusive mood.

"At recess, there'll be worms," she whispered, almost inaudibly as she tried to escape the notice of Mrs. Walsh's superhuman hearing.

"You don't like worms?"

"No!" She stopped as Mrs. Walsh roused herself from the book she was peering at. A dangerous moment passed as Walsh scanned the classroom, looking for the source of the outburst. "No. I hate worms. They're disgusting," she whispered with feeling. "I especially hate it when the boys whip them at the girls."

Cindy had a bit of a lisp, almost undetectable now because she'd had two years of speech therapy to disguise

the blemish on her normalcy. She also had curly blonde hair and bright blue eyes that I'd never really noticed before. She was kind of pretty, I thought at that moment. And the way she said "wormths" was cute. These were odd and novel thoughts.

"I won't throw them at you."

She looked at me and smiled. "Really?"

"No. Especially if you don't like it."

"Thanks," she said quietly. "By the way, I like your shoes."

I beamed a smile at her instead of saying anything, which was good because Mrs. Walsh was watching us over the hawk-like beak of her nose. We were one word from detention. As I smiled at Cindy, I was acutely conscious of two things: Cindy was smiling back at me, and Wild Bill was watching this whole exchange with incredulity. He was staring at me, asking me, as if by telepathy, "What are you nuts? You're talking to a guuurl!" His accusation distracted me. If I'd been able to fully absorb that moment, it could have saved me years of frustration when it came to the opposite sex; I might have learned a valuable maxim: Women care about shoes. They notice them. It matters what you have on your feet. It's a lesson that took me another thirty years to absorb.

At recess, there were, indeed, worms. Lots of them.

In the annals of childhood, I doubt that there had ever been—or ever will be—such an orgy of worm-hurling.

Cindy and I got there late, as we were pulled aside by Mrs. Walsh, who had actually heard our whole conversation and wanted to let us know that she was not pleased. She wasn't going to make us stay inside at recess though. A warning was enough.

No warning could have prepared us for the horror of that recess. We walked outside in the fresh April air, my feet resplendent in their new Adidas, to a scene of rampant worm-whipping debauchery. The girls squealed in disgust as the boys chased them, their hands slippery with worm goo and the creatures themselves. Wild Bill was a central figure in this slimy saturnalia as he gleefully directed other boys to “really fat ones” and chased Amy Menderson around the yard with a handful of the poor creatures. Had the worms the capacity, they would have been, no doubt, troubled and confused by their sudden aeronautics.

Of course, now I realize that the act of whipping a worm at a girl could either be construed as the worst of outrages or the most flattering thing a boy could do. Amy Menderson was squealing, but I’m sure now it was only half in disgust.

Cindy took one look at the chaos and froze in the doorway. I stood with her and tried to talk with her about horses—I vaguely remembered that she liked them, but in that moment of horror she wasn’t much of a conversationalist. For the most part she just observed the goings-on with the anxious watchfulness of a meerkat. Her eyes were just as big.

Near the end of recess, Wild Bill had finally tossed his penultimate worm, and he called me over.

“What’s up?” I asked.

He had one left in his hand. He showed it to me. “For you.”

“Yeah?” I laughed. I was nervous. He had that look in his eye, the one that he got right before he committed some kind of atrocity.

“Yeah. To throw at Cindy.”

He was testing me, and I guess I failed in his eyes because I said, “No! She doesn’t like it.”

“Oh, she doesn’t like it,” Wild Bill teased. “Well, we better do whatever Cindy says.” He proceeded to launch into a rousing rendition of Mark and Cindy “sittin’ in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g,” loud enough for Cindy to hear, which was brutally embarrassing. When I didn’t move to grab the worm, he said, “Fine. I’ll do it myself.”

“No, Bill, don’t.”

“What, you gonna’ stop me?”

I did not want to fight Bill, especially because we were best friends. You don’t fight a best friend over a girl. Or a worm. I looked back at Cindy, who was following the whole conversation, her eyes getting even wider, if that was possible.

Something compelled me to say, “I’ll stop you if I have to.”

He opened his palm and looked thoughtful. The worm looked pathetic, and on the edge of its wriggly demise. He’d had it in his hand for a while, so it wasn’t moving very much. It was starting to dry out. Bill curled his fingers over it, and before I knew what was happening, he threw it on my shoe. My brand new, pristine Adidas.

And then he stomped on it.

There was pain, but more than that, outrage. It was a betrayal of the most inconceivable sort. And the next thing I knew, Wild Bill and I were in a fight that later became known as Wormageddon. I threw the first punch and hit Bill square in the nose, bloodying it. Normally, that would have been the end of a schoolyard fight, but this was more than typical roughhousing.

“Fight, fight, fight!” the gathering crowd shouted.

Bill grabbed his nose and looked at the blood. His face went dark, and he threw a wild haymaker at me. If he’d

connected, I'm sure he would have knocked me cold. But his aim was off, and he lost his balance. I pushed him over, still enraged by his betrayal, and was on top of him, punching. He outweighed me, but I had fury on my side. Even so, he got in some good licks, one shot hitting me hard in the eye, which later turned into an impressive shiner. He kneed me in the groin, attempting to lever me off him. He started screaming—a high-pitched screech that was terrifying in its animal baseness. My dismay and the pain from my groin made me hit him even harder. Then he heaved me over, and he was on top of me, overcome with his own rage, pummeling me as I had been thrashing him a moment before. The whole scene was a blur. The kids shouting, fists smacking wetly into my face, into his. There was blood and the sick earthy smell of those damned worms on his hands.

Eventually, Mr. Kovacs arrived to break it up, but it took him and Mrs. Wallace to pull us apart. We were bloodied and even angrier than at the start of the fight.

I looked down, and my Adidas were a ruin, stained with rain, mud, blood, and a trace of the worm gore that had started the whole thing. I would have cried if I hadn't been so furious.

“How could you?” I spat at Wild Bill.

His face was still dark, his birthmark almost glowing with his anger as Mr. Kovacs pulled him away.

“She's a girl,” he said. “How could you?”

As they marched us away, Cindy smiled at me. “Thank you,” she mouthed, not daring utter the words aloud with everyone listening. By the end of the week, we were “going out,” which at that age meant we held hands and were teased mercilessly. (We didn't care. They were just jealous.)

But it came at a cost. You've no doubt heard that when

two boys fight, the cause of the animosity is forgotten almost as soon as the battle is over, but that's only true of a regular fight. This was an internecine betrayal of brother-against-brother; I had sided with a girl, and he had trashed my shoes. I knew he understood what he had done, and I could not forgive him. It was silly. The shoes could be cleaned, and I should have let it go. But I couldn't.

Jason sided with me, and in time we developed other friends. Our circle widened. Wild Bill got a bit wilder. He got taller and stronger. He had lackies, but no friends, and I thought he seemed lonely. By eighth grade, he was the undisputed king bully and everyone was terrified of him. Even me, who had come to a draw with him in Wormageddon. But he had his growth spurt way before I did, and I knew he could whip me if he wanted to. He never picked on me, though. I'm not sure if that was because he'd forgiven me for my betrayal or because he regretted his.

Cindy and I "broke up" even before our bruises faded.

Walking the dog an April evening forty years on I'm reminded of Wild Bill as rain brings out the worms, glistening on the sidewalks. I think of how I left him, alone, to become our schoolyard Godzilla.

And I wonder, could I have been the monster, not him?