

My Bully, My Friend

I destroy my enemies when I make them my friends.

~Abraham Lincoln

I stared long and hard at the friend request on my Facebook page. I hadn't thought about her in thirty years, not since high school. But her friend request quickly transported me back to eighth grade, which I called "The Year of the Bulldog." I recalled with sharp clarity more details about her than I cared to. I'd named her The Bulldog because that's what she reminded me of. Two long folds of skin ran down each side of her face, nicely complementing her pug nose and dull black eyes.

My eighth grade class was housed at the high school and labeled sub-freshmen, a derogatory term in itself. There was a group of older kids who made it their mission in life to terrorize sub-freshmen. In study hall, a group of them sat behind my friends and me. They regularly fired spitballs at us, said hurtful things, and enjoyed many laughs at our expense—a real hell on earth. The Bulldog was part of this group.

She also rode my school bus home in the afternoon. The bus ride home had once stood for freedom. I had loved the moment the bus doors closed and created a cozy world of chattering kids and laughter. Windows snapped down as soon as we were seated—the

fresh air a taste of the freedom that would soon be ours once we spilled out onto our home turf. All that fun came to a halt during The Year of the Bulldog; the bus was no longer a safe haven.

She was alone on the bus, and not as scary solo—or so I thought. My bus driver appointed me Safety Patrol, but I didn't want to be Safety Patrol. It involved putting on a bright orange vest and getting off the bus to hold a red flag out across the road to stop oncoming traffic when a kid had to cross to the other side of the road. Isn't that what the big octagonal stop sign attached to the bus was for? Nevertheless, I couldn't say no. An adult asked me to perform a task and to refuse this "honor" felt rude or disrespectful.

On my first day as Safety Patrol I had to pass The Bulldog as I made my way down the aisle to perform my duty. She always sat on the end, hanging over the edge of her seat. When I walked past her, her elbow ripped into my side. Another time she reached out and pinched my arm to the snickers of her seatmates. I hated those bus rides home until the driver reserved the front seat for me. But even then, the long ride home never held the same allure it once had.

My friends and I got through that awful year and were soon freshmen on the way to The Rest of Our Lives. The bullies disbanded their pack and found other things to do, or rather another group of sub-freshmen to harass, and I filed the incident away.

That is, until this new friend request. The ill feelings came flooding back. Whoever believes that bullying is a common childhood occurrence and bears no negative consequences is dead wrong. I rarely turn down a Facebook friend request, especially if we share at least a mutual friend or two. But I did have to think about this one for a while before I accepted.

I did accept, and the funniest thing happened. We became friends—and not just of the Facebook variety. When I recently decided to start writing again, I posted some notes on my Facebook profile because I didn't yet have a blog. My new friend became one of my biggest cheerleaders. She particularly identified with a post about grandparenting and left some thoughtful feedback. When I wrote about donating peripheral blood stem cells (PBSC), she told

me about a family member who'd been the recipient of a bone marrow transplant. Who knew I'd share so much with my former childhood adversary?

Recently the high school we both attended held a reunion for all graduates. I sought out my new friend immediately; such was the bond I now felt with her. We chatted easily during our short visit, sharing many laughs. As we hugged goodbye and promised to keep in touch, my gaze landed on the shiny school bus parked on the football field behind us. I smiled at the irony, and at the same moment my heart loosened up. Light flowed in as love flowed out. It felt good to forgive.

~Candyce Deal