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Chewie and the Sock Boy

The scene is this – a rundown town at the foot of the Berkshires circa 1990. A high school filled with white teenagers, of which I and three of my friends are four of about four hundred. We're in the first-floor hallway, with its dim fluorescent lighting, gray walls, and pale blue flooring. Chewbacca and Sock Boy hunch by their lockers – which are side-by-side – mumbling in hushed tones. Chewbacca – Chewie for short – has a pained look on his face, probably because his best friend, Joel, died last week.

The four of us – who comprise the non-legendary hardcore/punk band, The Garden Weasels – are laughing at them. Our band has a maligned series of basement tapes¹ featuring songs like “Bodily Function,” “Nintendo Mania,” and “Fat Cop.” The main purpose of The Garden Weasels is to make loud, aggressive music, which we can then play with the deliberate intention of irritating our fellow students.

As we watch Chewie and Sock Boy in the hallway, our bass player Kevin asks us, “You think they're speaking Wookiee?”

Kevin is six-foot four, can't really play his instrument, and collects Nazi memorabilia. After high school, he'll join the marines and I'll lose track of him. No loss there – he's not someone the future me wants to know. Still, as a teenage asshole, I laugh at his Wookiee joke.

“Yeah, Chewie is probably like, ‘Aaaraaar grrr,’ and Sock Boy is like, ‘I'm sad too, Chewie,’” Dirty Bob says.

Dirty Bob's our drummer, although his name isn't Bob or Robert, it's Gary. The reason behind his nickname is murky, and I never really sort it out. Dirty Bob's also a bigot who really dislikes Puerto Ricans – even though not one Puerto Rican seems to live within a twenty-mile radius of our town. I'll fall out of touch with him eventually, when – years later – he moves south and develops a cocaine problem.

Jim – who, like me, plays guitar² – is my one true friend in the band. He's also the Garden Weasel who's most dedicated to the punk lifestyle. He has the right side of his head shaved clean, with the hair on the left side cut to a normal length. He also wears a safety pin through his left ear. Years later, in our forties – when we have normal careers and lives – we'll talk on the phone weekly and take family vacations together. But, for now, we're perfectly content belittling our classmates and causing a daily ruck-us.

To understand why we're making fun of Chewie and Sock Boy, a little background is helpful. Regarding Chewie, he's a stocky, shaggy-haired wreck who actually does sound like Chewbacca when he talks. Of course, ragging on his appearance will seem lame to me in hindsight, but that will be the adult me, not the teenage me.

The story of Sock Boy, however, requires a little more exposition. Again, in hindsight, I'll realize that all of this is lame, and that the story's

1 Not to be confused with *The Basement Tapes* by Bob Dylan and The Band.

2 “Plays guitar” is a relative phrase for us.

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most likely apocryphal, but I don't worry about the story's nuances as a sixteen-year-old. Anyway, the tale goes that, one day, Sock Boy³ was prancing around the gym locker room in his boxer briefs, admiring the ample bulge between his legs. At that point, a phantom student—unnamed and unknown—crept up behind Sock Boy and pantsed him. Unfortunately for Sock Boy, as his underwear fell to his knees, no giant dong was revealed, and, instead, a rolled-up pair of white Hanes crew socks tumbled to the floor. Sock Boy wept, knowing that his sad secret had been revealed and that he would be the subject of torment for the rest of his high school years—a realization that would soon come to fruition.

So, in this dingy high-school hallway, the four of us continue to mock Chewie and Sock Boy while we wait for the bell for our next class to ring. I feel some minor pangs of conscience as the ribbing continues, but that doesn't stop me from participating. At one point, after Chewie yells at us to shut up, I reply, "You wouldn't say that if you were on Tatooine!"

"Good one," Dirty Bob says to me.

We all laugh as the bell rings.

Looking over my shoulder, I head to U.S. History class. Sock Boy glares at me as Chewie holds his head in his hands and cries.

I zone out during what the school attempts to call "U.S. History." The teacher drones on about the Three-Fifths Compromise and what a masterly agreement it was.⁴ *Whatever*, I think, without really thinking at all. Instead, in my mind's eye, I'm seeing Chewie weeping by his locker—and I'm feeling bummed.

I knew Chewie's buddy, Joel, too. In fact, we sat next to each other in English class. He was a cool kid, and I never understood why he hung out with a lame-o like Chewie—but, to each his own, I reasoned.

One day, a week or so before he died, Joel and I were in the halls talking about music. We realized we liked some of the same bands and decided to exchange cassettes. He had a tape of Led Zeppelin's *Physical Graffiti* that he let me borrow, and I lent him my tape of The Clash's *Combat Rock*.

In fact, the morning of the Friday on which Joel died, he had called me to check if I wanted to see the band The McKnickKnicks, who were playing in Springfield. I declined, since The Garden Weasels already had plans to see PiL perform at an outdoor festival at Lake Compounce. My decision, as I later discovered, was the correct one.

Early the next morning, Dirty Bob called my house. I was still sleeping, and my mom woke me. She said it was important. When I got to the phone, Dirty Bob told me Joel had died in a car crash on his way to Springfield. Dirty Bob had heard the news second-hand from his dad, who had a friend who worked in the police department. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and had two immediate thoughts:

First – Good thing I didn't go with Joel to see The McKnickKnicks the night before or else I might not be waking up at all.

3 Prior to this ill-fated day, Sock Boy's name was Jay.

4 No Black students were in this class to object to the teacher's assessment.

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Second – I'll never hear that Clash cassette again.⁵

I knew, even then, that the whole thing was sad, but I didn't let it get me too down. I told myself that I didn't really know Joel all that well anyway. And, as a teenager, I didn't feel like dwelling too much on death. I thanked Dirty Bob for giving me a heads-up and told him I would see him on Monday.

Now back to the present. The school day is over, and Jim and I sit on the school bus as it winds through streets lined by dilapidated two- and three-family houses. The bright early-summer sun paints the grass greener and the roses redder than usual and masks the otherwise humdrum nature of a town that has seen better days.

I tilt my head back and think of the upcoming summer holiday. I feel content and am ready for mischief.

Turning towards Jim, I smile. "Watch," I say, motioning toward Sock Boy, who sits a couple of rows in front of us. "I'm about to commit what I dub an 'apropos assault'."

I take a dirty pair of soccer socks from my gym bag, roll one sock into a ball, and shove the rolled-up sock into the end of the other. Wielding the socks like a pillowy mace, I stand and whack Sock Boy on the head. Those near me laugh at the irony of Sock Boy falling victim to a smelly weapon made of the type of clothing that brought his downfall.

Basking in perceived adulation, I raise the sock-mace to strike again.

Just then, before I can land a second blow, Sock Boy jumps to his feet and reels around. His face is red, and tears well in his eyes. "You do that again," he shouts, "and I'll punch you!"

I hold my ground, but Jim nudges me with his elbow, indicating that I should stand down. I relent and take my seat, but not before saying, "OK, Socky – don't get your knee-highs tied in a knot."

I admire the cleverness of my retort. But the satisfaction doesn't last long because, a few seconds later, I hear the muffled sobs of Sock Boy as he slouches in his seat, head in hands.

I feel empty.

"Let him be," Jim says with serious look. His expression is especially unsettling since it emanates from a face half-crowned with hair.

I know Jim is right. I sit silently in my seat and reflect. For the first time, I feel sadness for Sock Boy, who is still crying a short distance from me. I try to remember a wrong he has done to me but am unable to recall one. *Perhaps I'm just an asshole*, I think.⁶ I sigh and look through the window at the pine trees floating past the school bus.

That evening I eat dinner with my family, retire to my bedroom, and flip through a boring novel⁷ I'm supposed to read for English class. Bimbo,

5 This assessment was only partially true. A few years later, I bought The Clash's *Combat Rock* on compact disc. And now the future me listens to that album – and most other music I enjoy – on Spotify.

6 As stated earlier in this story, the future me agrees with this assessment.

7 Most likely *Moby Dick*, which, years later, I'll read and enjoy.

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our fluffy gray and white cat, nudges the door open and joins me on the bed. I pet him and imagine what the future me will do when I finally ditch this dead-end town.⁸

Minutes later, as I tire of staring at the ceiling in pointless introspection, I grab my backpack from the corner and fish through notebooks, crumpled papers, and other detritus until I find the object of my interest. Retrieving the cassette I borrowed from Joel, I place it in my boombox. Before I press play, I admire the gothic-looking tenement on the cassette cover, wondering where this strange building might be.⁹

When I start the cassette, I realize it isn't playing from the beginning. I hear the fading snippets of one song before a distorted slide guitar kicks in. The bluesy intro lasts for about a minute before Robert Plant's voice yelps, "In my time of dying...." I feel a chill run through my body. In my silly adolescent mind, I believe that Joel deliberately must have stopped the cassette at that point because he desired to send me a message from the beyond.¹⁰

I walk to the bedroom door, shut it completely, and extinguish the lights. I lie in bed, pondering whether a connection exists between those who live on earth and those who've passed into some unknown hinterland. Still, despite the depth of these philosophical reveries, I am quite tired and fall asleep within minutes.

The next morning, I wake, wash, and eat breakfast¹¹. I collect my things for school and throw Joel's cassette into my backpack. I bring my yellow Sony Walkman Sports with me in case I want listen to Joel's tape later in the day. As I wait by the side of the road for the school bus, I hear the coo of a mourning dove in a nearby birch tree.

When the bus arrives, the three-chord rock of The Garden Weasel's *Nintendo Mania* explodes from a boombox in the rear. Jim gives me a two-finger salute as I walk down the aisle and sit beside him. The students around us glare, seemingly annoyed by the cacophony blaring from boombox's speakers.

After the bus ride, Jim and I laugh at the success of our song as we enter the covered brick corridor leading to the high school's main entrance. A boy in a denim jacket lingers near the door and smokes a cigarette. We breeze past him. Without looking up, I say, "Watch out, man. Those things will kill you."

We reach the first-floor hallway, and the scene resembles the scene from the day before. Chewie and Sock Boy hunch by their lockers, and Jim and I take our places beside Kevin and Dirty Bob amidst the mass of students. I exultantly relay to them how singularly *Nintendo Mania* had irritated our schoolmates on the morning bus ride.

8 Whatever I was imagining then certainly does not resemble the present reality.

9 Years later, I'll find out as I unexpectedly stumble upon this building in Greenwich Village as I walk from Maamoun's Falafel to Tompkins Square Park.

10 To this day, I don't know what that message might have been, other than that Led Zeppelin made some pretty rockin' songs.

11 Most likely a bowl of Cap'n Crunch's Peanut Butter Crunch cereal.

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"Wait till we play the talent show," Kevin says. "Those dumbasses won't know what hit them."

Dirty Bob gives Kevin a high-five.

Just then, Chewie's voice grows animated, although I miss what he's saying.

"Aaaraaraar grrr," Dirty Bob responds, mocking Chewie's Wookie-like tones.

Jim and I exchange glances. Kevin laughs.

"Chewie, too bad you and Sock Boy couldn't get the Millenium Falcon up and running in time to take Joel to his concert," Kevin shouts across the hall. "He'd probably still be here today."

"Yeah, what a couple of cosmic fuck-ups," Dirty Bob says. Then, in his best Yoda impression, he adds, "Weak with you is the Force."

Chewie's face contorts. He cocks his arm and lunges toward us from across the hall.

Sock Boy grabs Chewie's flannel shirt and manages to restrain him. "Not now, Tim¹²," Sock Boy says. "Those assholes aren't worth it."

I look at Kevin. His fist is clenched, as if he wants Chewie to come at him.

My stomach turns.

"I thought Wookies are supposed to have superhuman strength," Kevin says to Chewie. "And yet little Sock Boy held you back. You're a disgrace to your species."

Dirty Bob gives Kevin a high-five again.

Jim shakes his head, and the two of us walk away.

Before lunch that day, I'm at my locker. Most of the students already are in the cafeteria. I see Chewie and Sock Boy nearby. Both of their shoulders are slumped as they converse.

"Hey, Tim," I say.

With a quizzical look, Chewie turns his shaggy head toward me. "What do you want?" he says.

Sock Boy puffs out his chest. "Don't give that piece of shit the time of day," he says. Then, pointing at me, he adds, "And The Garden Weasels suck!"

"I have something for you," I say to Chewie, ignoring Sock Boy and thrusting my hand into my backpack. I grab the *Physical Graffiti* cassette and walk toward the two friends.

"What's that?" Chewie says, motioning toward the cassette. "Is that one of your crappy band's tapes?"

I shake my head. "No," I say. "It's a tape Joel let me borrow a few weeks ago. I thought you should have it. You were his friend."

12 Tim is Chewie's actual name.

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I hand the tape to Chewie.

He takes it. Without a word, he looks into my eyes.

I avert my gaze and shuffle my feet. "You know," I say, "I'm sorry about Joel. He was a good guy. I know this is a tough time for you—and I shouldn't have acted like such a jerk."

Chewie grunts, then nods. He says nothing as he slips the cassette into his back pocket.

I try to think of something else to say, but all I can come up with is "See you later." In silence, I shuffle my feet before turning around. Without looking back, I walk toward the stairwell to meet The Garden Weasels in the cafeteria.