

**A HISTORY OF MY  
WEIRD**

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For Dylan and Rose.



**TUESDAY 7 SEPTEMBER**

*Don't move feet, don't move.* I'm sitting in my science classroom, in the uncomfortable seats, trying to stop my feet from twitching.

Mr Jones is going on about food chains to my new class, 7D. I learnt all this stuff in primary so I'm mainly concentrating on my feet and trying not to stim. I explained stimming to Maya once. It's something I can't help. Stimming makes me feel a bit calmer or happier. But she just said it was weird and if I wanted to be friends with her, I should stop.

My new class has a mix of kids from our old primary school and other primaries too. Mr Jones has let everyone sit where they like today as it is the first day. I wanted to sit with Ellie and Maya, but the tables are in rows and only have space for two. They are stuck together, as usual, so I sat behind them. On my own. I look around the class at all the new people. Loads of names I don't know yet. Loads of people who I have got to try to understand. The thought of it exhausts me.

Then Mr Jones starts talking about predators. He mentions sharks. I love anything to do with the sea, so I start to listen. He shows us a clip from a film where a megalodon is about to bite someone in half: a megalodon, *not* a shark.

Ellie puts her hand up. ‘My uncle lives in Australia. There are loads of shark attacks there.’

Another kid I don’t know says, ‘I’ve seen that film – the giant shark eats the whole village one by one!’

Most of the class start talking about it excitedly, apart from a couple of children on the edges of the room who are sat on their own like me, not speaking. One is a kid with black hair cut to her shoulders. I notice she is wearing earrings with dangly moons. It makes me feel a tiny bit better that I’m not the only person on my own; a tiny bit braver for what I’m about to do.

Mr Jones smiles. ‘Yes, sharks do capture our imagination as nightmares from the deep...’

I hate speaking in class. I only speak if it’s important ... but I know this stuff is wrong! Sharks get such bad press and I *have* to tell them — even though it feels like someone is trampolining about on my insides.

So I say, ‘That isn’t a shark. It’s a megalodon – they’ve been extinct for over three million years.’

‘Oh right, we’ve got a know-it-all.’ Mr Jones sighs dramatically. He checks the class register and glances at me. ‘Next time you want to speak, put your hand up, young lady.’

I put my hand up, like he asks, and carry on talking. ‘It’s Mo, sir. And sharks aren’t really dangerous. For your information, there are only five shark attacks on humans per year whereas humans kill millions of sharks every year.’

Mr Jones folds his arms. ‘True, but I think we can all agree that *some* sharks are *very* dangerous.’ He smiles at the class and nods.

Ellie flicks her ponytail round and glares at me mouthing, ‘*Shut up*’.

But I can’t. My hand waves about above my head like a flag in a storm.

‘Mr Jones, I think you should clarify *very*. You stand a greater risk of being killed by lightning or in a car accident.’

Ellie, Maya and the rest of the class have stopped talking and turned to stare at me. I try not to think about them, but about how important it is they know the truth. I can’t believe our teacher doesn’t know this! I’m sure he’ll thank me for setting him straight.

Mr Jones walks around his desk and fiddles with the remote for the whiteboard. I take this as a sign

he is listening, so I carry on. ‘Shark populations are decreasing across the planet and some are critically endangered. The demand for shark fin soup, for example, has led to millions being caught. Their fins are ripped from their bodies—’

‘Mo...’ Mr Jones’ hands are on his hips. Some of the other kids are whispering now.

‘—and they are thrown back into the water only to drown. It is truly barbaric.’ I hear *weird* and *why doesn’t she just shut up?* But I can’t stop. ‘You should be educating people about what beautiful creatures sharks are instead of feeding the false myths about them—’

‘Mo!’ Mr Jones face is going red and shiny. He looks like a cross giraffe.

‘—instead of scaring people saying sharks are dangerous, you should spend your time telling students that driving to school is dangerous, or ... or crossing the road—’

SMACK! Mr Jones hits the desk with his palm. ‘OUTSIDE NOW!’

I blink at him. This does not sound like he’s grateful. I don’t know why I bother! THIS is why I don’t do people. I never understand them.

‘NOW!’ he repeats.

I walk out of the room stunned. What have I done



wrong? Why isn't Mr Jones pleased I was able to set him straight and stop him lying to the class? My insides fall into my feet, leaving an empty gnawing gap. I don't understand why he overreacted! I'm so rubbish at life.

I'm still standing outside the door a few moments later when the class pours out for break. One kid whispers 'Loser' when he goes past, but the kid with black hair and dangly moon earrings pauses in front of me. She thrusts a piece of scrunched-up paper into my hand and gives me a thumbs-up.

I open the note. There is an awesome picture of a shark with someone in its mouth, who looks a bit like Mr Jones. I snort with laughter and look up to say thanks, but she is disappearing down the corridor in a tide of moving bodies.

'Mo, next time, can you keep your opinions to yourself?' Ellie stops in front of me so I stuff the note into my coat pocket. She's flanked on either side by Maya and another girl I don't know. They all look the same – high ponytail, high eyebrows, their arms are folded making a barrier of crosses. 'Mr Jones won't show us the film now, because of *you*. He says some people are *too sensitive*. He said he *was* going to let us watch it all next lesson, but *now* we have to do an essay instead.'

'So? I'm glad we don't have to watch the stupid film. It's a load of crud.' I cross my arms too.

They all crowd round me, in my space. My skin prickles like electrocuted jelly. My brain feels too full. I want to go home and crawl into bed under the duvet away from all these 'pick-me' girls and idiot teachers.

'Just 'cause you wanted to show off. You have no idea about secondary school. You're just so *embarrassing*,' Maya says.

'No.' I close my eyes for a moment. A headache's coming. 'Just 'cause you're too stupid.'

'*Sharks don't bite at all! They're vegetarian!*' Another look-alike girl mimics. They all cackle and someone bumps into me, pushing an elbow into my arm.

'Get off me!' I blink my eyes open, bringing up my arm to protect myself, propelling Ellie away. She over-balances, topples backwards into the others, trips and falls.

Just at that moment Mr Jones opens his door. Typical.

'Sir, Mo just really hurt Ellie.' They crowd round Ellie on the floor, helping her to her feet.

'No, I didn't! I—'

'I've had enough of you, Mo! Get to the head's office and out of my sight!'

‘Detention already?’ Diane, my step-mum, asks.

I ignore her question and sit down for breakfast.

‘You need to learn to be quiet in class, Mo,’ she says, mashing some banana into a bowl.

Stink (aka Ewan, my baby brother) bangs his spoon and blows a raspberry at her. Exactly what I’m thinking.

‘Teachers hate being shown up – they’ll always make an example of you.’

‘But he was wrong!’ I splash milk into my bowl. ‘It’s not fair.’

Diane looks at me sympathetically. ‘It will get better. It’s only your first week.’

I stir the Wheetie O shapes, poke them and try to drown them in milk. I can’t imagine ‘it’ getting any better. All my classes have been rubbish so far, but science was the worst. The kid who gave me the note wasn’t sat anywhere near me after that and I am rubbish at all that socialising stuff. Ellie and Maya are being mean and no one else talked

to me. I think if secondary school is still this bad next week I'm going to run away to the woods and forage for my food. I could make a little house out of sticks.

'Mah?' Stink flicks his spoon in my direction and grins at me. I dodge the flecks of banana goop that spray across the kitchen table.

Diane comes behind my stool and gives me a hug. She smells of sticky banana and jasmine shower gel. 'Remember, we're going to go to Blue Zoo as a treat – just ten more sleeps.'

'Bribery,' I mutter, but not too loud, because I really want to go to Blue Zoo. They have piranhas.

'Ready for school?' Dad asks, walking into the kitchen.

'Mo's got a lunchtime detention.' Diane shows Dad the email.

'Disruptive behaviour?' Dad raises his eyebrows in disbelief at me.

I shrug and chew my Wheetie Os slowly.

'The school will know Mo's autistic, won't they?' he asks Diane.

'Bound to,' Diane says, piling another spoonful of banana goop for Stink. 'The primary school will have sent all the info. And anyway, I'm sure Ffion is all over it.'

'What about mum?' I say, hearing her name.

‘Diane just means your mum is bound to sort it. Don’t worry.’ He ruffles my hair.

‘We all know you’re not disruptive, are you, Mo? You’re clever and unique.’ He checks his watch. ‘Got your bag? Phone?’ He puts his arms around me and gives me a squish, too. ‘What’s your timetable for today?’

I get my planner out of my bag and look in the back. I scan through. History, sigh. Science, double sigh. ‘I think I’m getting a fever and you need to let me stay off.’

‘Fat chance,’ Dad says reading over my shoulder. ‘You’ve got HWE in the afternoon.’

‘What is *that*?’

‘Hippos, Whales and Elephants. You’ll get to learn all about how to be a hippo, then how it feels to be a whale... Oww!’ Dad pretends to nurse his arm where I slapped it away.

‘Didn’t your parents ever tell you it’s rude to hit people?’

‘Shut UP, Dad!’ I put the planner back in my bag and zip it up.

‘Health and Wellbeing Education,’ Diane says, being the sensible one as usual.

‘Dah!’ Stink says, grinning and waving his arms about.

‘Come on then, Mo.’ Dad takes my hand and pulls me off the chair to a standing position. ‘It’s time to go.’

‘See you next week.’ Diane catches me for a last hug as I walk past.

‘Gah!’ Stink explains. He smells sweet today and not of poo, which is nice. There’s still quite a lot of banana on his cheeks and some globs in his hair. He holds out the spoon in his fat little banana-encrusted hand and waves it at me. He is way too sticky to touch. So, I boop his nose instead.

‘Mum’s this weekend then. I’ll see you on Wednesday, okay?’ Dad pulls up and waits for me to climb out of the van. I watch other kids walking slowly up the school drive, and up the steps into the mouth of the building. I wonder how bad it will be today.

I’m lining up for registration and the kid who gave me the shark note appears behind me. I’m just about to say thank you and tell her I loved her drawing when Ellie barges into the queue behind me and the girl is pushed to the back. I make it my mission to say something to her by the end of the day.

I avoid any trouble in the morning by simply not talking. At all. For my lunchtime detention I have to go and sit in a classroom with some other kids, all from other year groups. It’s really boring and means I

hardly have any time to eat my lunch and no time at all to try to speak to the note-giving kid.

At the end Mr Gross, the deputy head, says to me that he understands I'm autistic and I might not be able to manage my feelings but that I'm going to have to learn. It's a good job I'm still so cross about the unfairness of it; it stops me feeling upset. Eventually it's the afternoon and it is time to find out what HWE is really all about.

'Come in! Come in!' The HWE teacher is dressed in a bright orange shirt with a sun on it. I see a tattoo peeking out of the edge of her collar. She's smiling – a teacher actually smiling! That's a first for secondary school. I was coming to the conclusion that it must be part of their training: YOU MUST NOT SMILE.

She doesn't have a seating plan – we are allowed to sit with whoever we want. I spot Ellie and Maya and hesitate, wondering whether I should try and sit near them. At least I'd have someone to talk to. But Ellie turns her back on me and starts whispering to one of the wannabes hanging around her and Maya. They all start giggling and looking at me. I wonder if Ellie and Maya are going to be this horrid when we are back in gymnastics on Friday or if they will stop being so mean. I decide to keep away from them and I head to the back. There is

one desk with a space free, next to the kid from science class who gave me the note! She doesn't look at me, so I assume it's okay for me to sit down. I put my coat on the back of the chair and wonder if I should say thank you now or—

'Welcome!' The weird smiley teacher beams. 'So, you're 7D.' She pauses a minute as she looks about the class. It's as though she is drinking us all in. 'My name is Ms Latimer.'

'Miss,' Ellie says, putting her hand up and speaking at the same time – like I was told I *must not* do. 'What is Ms, miss?'

'And you are?' Ms Latimer looks down at a paper in her hand. 'Ah, Ellie!'

Ellie nods, smoothing away an imaginary wisp of hair into her perfect ponytail.

'Ms – well, does anyone know what Ms stands for?' Ms Latimer looks about.

I avoid her gaze. I know it stands for someone who isn't married or doesn't want people to know whether they are married, but I don't say anything. One thing I've learnt at secondary school: *I must not show that I know things.*

'Men just have Mr, don't they?' The class nods. 'So, people don't know if they are married or not. It's private information. Women have traditionally had



two titles that show whether they are unmarried, Miss, or if they are married, Mrs. Ms is fairer. That's why I like it. But I won't get cross if you accidentally call me Miss.' Ms Latimer grins. 'Right, what is HWE?'

She starts to discuss what it means. (Dad was so wrong – surprise. Diane was right.) And we haven't even done the register!

'Okay, I need some volunteers.' Ms Latimer grins.

Loads of hands shoot up. Mine stays firmly by my side. I don't understand why kids do that – volunteer for something when you don't even know what it is! *Hey, child, you have volunteered to jump off the roof. You have volunteered for extra maths after school for the rest of the year.*

Ms Latimer picks a few people and – *surprise!* – Ellie's one of them. The volunteers get to do drama at the front of the class. Ellie is the teacher and she has to teach the other kids. They are being deliberately difficult. Ellie ends up shouting they are all in after-school detention – yes, she does have a sly look in my direction. Ms Latimer asks people to put their hands up to talk about Ellie's good leadership qualities. (Errr...) And then we have to do a spider diagram about what makes a good leader.

I think about Mr Jones. He's a rubbish leader. He's made me hate my favourite subject. I think about my gymnastics coach. I've not seen her since before the

holidays. She's okay, but I don't think I would describe her as good.

My spider diagram is empty and Ms Latimer's walking up the rows looking at people's work. I'm going to get yet another telling off.

Think. THINK! Leadership. Leeeeeeead.

'Hey, you must be Maureen.' Ms Latimer is by my desk. A waft of coffee, lavender and mint billows about her.

'I prefer Mo.'

'Okay. Cool. I'll just make a note – Mo. How are you doing with this? Any ideas?' she asks. I am looking at her silver bracelets. She has loads of them all falling over each other.

I move my hand to show her my empty mind map.

'Not got any ideas?'

'I can think of what isn't good leadership,' I mutter, twiddling my pen.

'So, what isn't good?'

I shrug. 'Making people feel bad?'

'Oh yes, brilliant. If a leader makes people feel bad, those people aren't going to want to do what the leader asks, are they?'

I shake my head and raise my eyes from my pen. Ms Latimer's lanyard is covered in badges: a Shakespeare quote, a Harry Potter badge, a hedgehog...

‘So, what is the opposite of that?’

I shrug again. ‘Making people feel good?’

‘Yes! Exactly. So how do leaders do that? What do you think – Carys?’ Ms Latimer directs this to the curtain of black hair that is sat next to me. Carys shakes her head. ‘Why don’t you two help each other think about what leaders can do to motivate and inspire others?’ Ms Latimer grins at me again, and I let my eyes meet hers just for a moment. Her smile is even in her eyes. She begins to walk down the next row talking to each student as she goes.

‘You got anything?’ I ask Carys.

‘Nope.’ She shakes her fringe and shows me her blank page. ‘No teachers here are any good. I can’t think.’

‘She’s okay.’ I nod at Ms Latimer.

Carys’ mouth twists a little.

‘Well, at least she smiles,’ I say.

‘Let’s put friendly.’ Carys writes it on her mind map in even scrawlier writing than mine.

‘Yeah. And kind. Better than all the other teachers at Ysgol *Awfu...l!*

She smirks. ‘Like what you’ve done there – Ysgol *Offa...l!*

The lesson goes fast. Carys and I end up thinking of loads of ideas, including giving kids sweets and extra lie-ins, and I decide Hippos, Whales and Elephants isn't so bad. We are packing up when I finally get the courage to say it.

'Thanks for the shark drawing. You're a really good artist.'

Carys shrugs and puts her head on one side. 'I like art. I thought the teacher was really stupid that lesson.'

I'm just about to reply when Ms Latimer gets everyone to listen.

'Before I forget. Even though I'm here teaching you HWE, my main subject is drama! You don't get to do much drama in year seven – though we do a bit in HWE. You do, however, get to come to my lunchtime club. It starts next week: Tuesdays and Fridays in the drama studio. Come along. We even have biscuits.'

I catch a glance from Carys and she grins at me as we file out of the classroom.

I trudge out after everyone else. I have English next. It isn't until I'm lining up outside the door that I realise Carys Curtain Hair is beside my elbow.

'You gonna go to drama club?' the hair asks.

'Maybe. You?'

She shrugs. 'I will if you will.'

'Okay.' I smile at her. I think I've made a friend!