



Odd Roger

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Third period science class, just before lunch.

When the geiger counter your physics teacher is holding decides that you're more radioactive than polonium, it's never good news. Especially when you've just handed in homework about how polonium is the most radioactive metal on earth.

Odd Roger or Roger Roger as he was known to anyone who hadn't yet been corrected, strolled into his very first physics class of the year not knowing that his entire life was about to change. Odd was small for his age, with flat brown hair, (which stuck to his forehead like glue if he didn't wash it often enough) a wicked smile and a calculating stare which made people say things like "Stop that at once!", "What are you planning?" and "Ahhhh, please don't eat me!" Though if questioned, Mr Asquith (Odd's history teacher) would never admit to that last one.

Odd had never been sure where his nickname had come from, though he suspected its origins lay in the fact that though he didn't mean to, he seemed to unnerve people. Rather a lot of people in fact. Odd had started a list. It began:

Dad

Mr Asquith

Old maid Mary (from Sunday school)

Mr Musgrave the milkman

Billy Bob Banister from year four (now year five)

Mr Peters the Postman

The family that owns the Chinese takeaway down the road

That girl over there

Her dog

Mum

X-ray Simon

The list had grown so long that he'd given up and started a new one. This one named all the people he knew that *didn't* find him odd. It was considerably shorter. It read:

Betsy Roger

~~Mum~~

~~X-ray Simon~~

Betsy was Odd's older sister. She was three years above him in school, captain of the hockey team and according to Odd's classmates, very very pretty. Betsy said the reason she didn't find him odd was because he wasn't but Odd knew that it was actually because she was just very good at being an older sister. Betsy was so good at it that she was also better than him at everything. Odd found that he didn't particularly mind, he felt it was sort of a requirement for an older sibling.

To Odd, it just meant that she baked the best cakes, made the best paper aeroplanes and came up with the best games to play. Betsy was fifteen so Odd knew there were a lot of things that Betsy would probably rather be doing instead of making him planes out of paper, but because she was such a great sister, she made him feel like there wasn't.

Odd himself was eleven years old. At least he thought he was. Even his mother and father weren't really sure. Five years ago, Odd had simply appeared in the Roger's sitting room whilst they were in the kitchen eating dinner. No one, including Odd himself knew where he had come from, or who had left him there. The only member of the household present had been their cat, Professor Plum. But the cat either didn't know where Odd had come from or simply refused to tell. The Roger's had adopted Odd into their house and called him a blessing from God. Well, that's what Odd's mother said. Odd's father called the event an unfortunate, tricky situation which was simply unavoidable if they didn't want the neighbours to think that they were bad people.

The answer to where he came from arrived in the form of Mr Womble, who did his usual jog into their physics lab, holding a box of geiger counters. "Ready scientists?!" This was his usual greeting. He liked to think that all of his pupils were all aspiring scientists instead of simply attending his mandatory classes. His thick Scottish accent, wild hair and manic behaviour were something of a joke to the entire school but his lessons were always entertaining, so no one made fun of him for it. That was the mark of a great teacher, Odd thought. Even if they were completely ridiculous, they got away with it if they taught well enough. "Ready to wobble, Mr Womble." replied the class.

"Now, do I have a treat for you today!" Mr Womble said, setting the box down. "Today scientists, we are continuing our exploration of radiation!" There was a polite collective 'Ooooh' from the class. "But first, your homework if you please!" There was a chorus of groans from the awaiting students and then a scramble to get their worksheets out of their bags. Mr Womble grabbed the waste paper basket and shook out its contents.

"Come on, throw them in!"

Each student crumpled their worksheets into balls and threw them at Mr Womble. A few landed in the basket but most bounced off his person and he had to scramble to pick them up, weaving around and under desks, tripping over bag straps and packed lunches. Odd watched triumphantly as his own homework sailed through the air to land neatly on top of the others. Mr Womble set the bin down on his desk and cleared his throat loudly. The chatter died down immediately. "So," he shouted, "radiation! What do we know about it?"

There was silence in the room, save for the sound of one of the gas taps being repeatedly opened and shut by Davey Lewis. Eventually, from somewhere on Odd's right came a quiet: "It's dangerous."

"Aha! A very astute scientist, you will make Miss Raine!" Mr Womble praised, clapping his hands together. "Yes, radiation can be very dangerous indeed. Just look at what it did to the animals of Chernobyl! A one eyed goat! A toad with three heads! Yes, radiation can be very, very dangerous. Any more observations?" The class was silent. Davey opened the gas tap for a little longer before closing it this time.

"They use it when you get an X-ray." said X-ray Simon. Simon was one of Odd's only sort-of friends. Simon had probably had more X-rays than the rest of the school put together. He was an accident prone boy and had broken just about every bone in his body.. His arm was currently in a sling. He'd fallen over on his garden path. Again.

"That's right Simon, well done! Oh, don't look too worried. It's a very very small amount. You don't have to worry about growing two extra heads or turning green if you break your wrist. Though Simon here might at the rate he's going.. He already looks a little funny."

Simon turned to Odd (who was sitting next to him) in alarm. "You're not green." Odd said flatly. Even though he was always in hospital, or perhaps because of it, Simon was very health conscious. He panicked over the slightest upset. It wasn't annoying exactly, Odd didn't mind, but he did tire of constantly reassuring Simon that he wasn't going to die an early death. "You know what? " Mr Womble said, after the class had sat for two minutes in another almost-silence. Davey had stopped opening and closing the gas tap and had started fiddling with the bunsen burners. "Let's get the geiger counters out! That's much more fun."

The class gave a cheer and began chattering excitedly. Mr Womble walked round the edge of his desk and grabbed a machine. "First, can anyone tell me what background radiation is?" He didn't wait for an answer before continuing. "Background radiation is left over from the big bang. We find it in rocks like granite and in cosmic rays which come from space."

The sound of pens being put to paper filled the room. Odd looked around at the others in his class, furiously writing down notes but he didn't move to start his own. He would remember, he always did. "This means that even when the counter isn't near anything radioactive, it will still record radiation. Since the Fukushima disaster, the amount has actually doubled, but I won't bore you with that today!"

Mr Womble switched the little box on and it crackled into life. It began to emit a ticking noise. Mr Womble checked the little screen. "You can expect to take readings between point zero eight and point fifteen." He held it out to June, who liked to sit at the front of the class in every lesson. "What does that say there, June?"

She peered at the reading. "Zero point ten."

"Very good." Mr Womble moved around the class, showing others the reading on the counter. "Now, if we put it next to something a bit more radioactive," Mr Womble produced a pocket watch. "Like my dad's watch with luminous radium paint for example." He held the counter and the watch out in front of him. "Can you read that for me Davey?"

Davey peered closely at the instruments. "Uh, ten past eleven sir." The laughter which ensued lasted for a good few minutes before Mr Womble managed to bring the class around.

"You may want to try that again Mr Lewis," said Mr Womble kindly. Davey had sunk low in his seat, the backs of his ears tinged pink. He leaned forward just a fraction. "Fifty counts per second sir." he mumbled awkwardly. Odd felt Simon tense beside him. Mr Womble seemed to notice. "Don't worry Simon, it's quite safe!" The rest of the class turned to Simon, who had now actually turned green. He looked like he was about to be sick.

“There’s nothing to worry about. Even humans are radioactive! Here.” Mr Womble walked over to Simon. “Look. you’re only recording five counts, that’s absolutely nothing! Though I expect it will be higher than some of your classmates! Let’s compare you to...” He looked around for someone to test it on. “You!” He held the counter out next to Odd.

A second later, Mr Womble jumped backwards and let out a very loud, very bad word which made the entire class snigger. Mr Womble stared at Odd, who stared back. Slowly, he took the counter again and held it near Odd’s arm. The needle didn’t so much as falter before reaching the max count, emitting a high pitched whining noise. Without taking his eyes off Odd, Mr Womble moved the counter away from him. The clicks instantly became slower. Odd looked up at his teacher, the smile which was always plastered on the man’s lined face had slid off, leaving wide eyes and an open mouth. The rest of the class were whispering between themselves, some standing on their stools to look at what was going on.

“Odd, would you come over here for a moment?” Mr Womble said, smiling. Odd could tell it was forced. “The rest of you get into pairs and grab a geiger counter. I want you to measure the radioactivity of each item from your packed lunches and record it in a table like we learned how to do last week.”

Immediately there was a stampede of students running to the box, all trying to get the best counter. Mr Womble gestured for Odd to stand up and they moved to the corner of the classroom. Odd’s knees felt like jelly, he didn’t like to be in trouble. Mr Womble grabbed another counter from the box and held it out in front of him towards Odd. The needle went berserk again. “What’s happening?” Odd asked quietly. Mr Womble didn’t reply. Instead, he walked around his desk and grabbed a smaller machine which looked like an old fashioned mobile phone. Odd watched his classmates empty their lunches onto their desks and soft, uneven clicking began around the room. “Sir?” he asked again.

Mr Womble still didn’t reply. Odd had been considering adding him to his ‘People who don’t find Odd odd list’ but it now looked like that plan was out the window. Mr Womble switched the device on and held it out at arm’s length. He looked at the screen and paled. Odd tried to read it upside down. “Sir,” he tried again, “what’s happening?” Mr Womble backed away from him, reaching for his phone. “Stay there.”

“What?” Odd stepped forward and Mr Womble hurried away.

“Odd, stay there and don’t move.”

Odd planted his feet where he stood and watched as Mr Womble hurried to his desk, pulling out a high-vis jacket. “CLASS!” shouted Mr Womble, cutting through the babble, “Everyone needs to leave, right now!” Odd’s class looked around in surprise. Most of their eyes landed on Odd and he felt as if he was pinned to the spot. His cheeks flared with heat and his heartbeat suddenly became very noticeable. “NOW!” Mr Womble bellowed. The class scrambled to pick up their blazers, coats and bags. “Leave your things, just go!”

Odd looked around, wondering if he should be doing the same but something told him that if he followed Mr Womble and his class out the door, they would run away faster. Odd made eye contact with Simon who looked like he was on the verge of tears. He didn’t do well with stress, he even fainted on injection day. Odd smiled at him, but knew it didn’t reach his eyes.

“Odd, just stay there.” Mr Womble said firmly. Mr Womble shepherded Simon and the rest of the students out of the classroom and shut the door behind them. He used the end of a stapler to smash the glass on the fire alarm and sped off out of sight down the corridor. The alarm began to blare and the sound of scraping chairs and hundreds of feet sounded throughout the school.

Odd stayed where he was. He reached out tentatively to touch one of the discarded counters and it went haywire, the needle trembling over the max. Odd put his hands firmly back into his pockets and sat down to wait.