

Yellow Bus

School buses are caution yellow by design. It's a color you learn early: Never sit in the back of the bus near the Murray brothers. Never talk to them, not even if Russell the Retard says "Hi." Never look at them. Become invisible.

I'd heard the whispers about them, mostly from what Russell blabbed to Angie Jacobs on the bus: A family of boxers with a father who was a welterweight with some success, but who was beaten and beaten until he was forced to let go of his dream to be a world champion. His mission then became teaching his boys the art of fighting, practicing with them until he could see whether they might surpass the talent he had, taking out his frustrations on his wife when he found his offspring didn't measure up.

Nobody said anything when Bucky, Dan, and Russell the Retard came on the bus with half-shaved hair. In the sometimes-lice-ridden locks were wild designs and pieces an inch longer than the opposite side -- as if a blind, drunk barber cut some hair, shaved some on one side and then became tired and pulled out chunks. Russell the Retard had told everyone how they drew names to see who would cut each other's hair. And they could cut it any way they wanted -- except for Bucky, the oldest. Bucky had Dan shave his hair to the usual ¾-inch reddish stubble. As short as Bucky's temper.

Russell showed Angie his trim -- a shave that spelled "D-u-n-s" across the top of his head. Dan had told him that Bucky misspelled the word "dunce." Russell thought that would be funny to share.

"Bucky's so stupid he doesn't know how to spell dunce," whispered Russell to Angie. Bucky pushed Russell's head into the metal of the bus seat in front of him.

"Shut the fuck up, retard," said Bucky. Russell adjusted his bent glasses back onto his Downs-faced head.

"If you're so smart, why don't you spell it," said Bucky, again pushing his head into the back of the seat. "Spell it, retard. SPELL IT!" The bus became quiet each time Bucky knocked Russell's head into the back of the seat. "Spell it." Thump. "Spell it." Thump. "What letter does it start with?" Thump. "What letter?" Thump. "What letter, Retard?" Thump. Russell's head was red and squished almost two-dimensional from Bucky forcing it into the metal.

"Fuckin' retard. Don't even know it begins with a D," said Bucky, surveying the bus, daring anyone to laugh at his salon misspelling. I kept my head buried in my favorite Spiderman comic, knowing there was nothing a fifth-grader could do outside of getting bit by a radioactive spider and gaining super powers.

Nobody dared look at Bucky. Not even the bus driver, Mr. Coulee, said anything. As long as the Murrays were pounding on their own kind, he was going to keep driving 50 miles an hour down the road to school. He was too old to jump at every little push or shove or improper word. Or maybe his hearing aide wasn't working again. No sense getting worked up over Russell the Retard. He was damaged long ago.

Doctors had to take Russell early. He told Angie: "Momma said I was too scared to come out and she says she don't blame me 'cause she wished she'd a never come out, neither."

"I wished you'd never come out either, retard," said Bucky. He moved close to Russell's ear to whisper. "Don't you be tellin' stories about Momma or I'll give you a beatin' that's twice as bad as she ever got, dumbshit."

If you violate the rules of school bus caution, people disappear. After Bucky nearly strangled Mr. Coulee one day, we never saw Mr. Coulee drive our bus again. And we never knew what became of the Murrays.

Five years later, I watched the new era for bullying come in with the latest angry teen pummeling a friend of mine. I stuck my head into "To Kill a Mockingbird." Frozen, I watched my friend being punched in the face, in the stomach, in the groin, his nose bit by the Davis kid, who had no

sense of fighting fair. The new bus driver was going to let this fight play out until the police arrived.

Today, I didn't need radioactive Spiderman powers to stand up for my friend. I simply needed to be Boo Radley -- an unknown, quiet stranger who stood up for justice. I would stand up to the bully who now was pounding the blood out of my friend's face in dark red splatters. But instead of being filled with courage, I was filled with disappointment. I knew the blood flowing through me was school bus caution yellow.

All yellow.