Freak the Geek

by John Green

Right after our last class, Kayley and I are walking past the only bit of stone wall that survived the epic 1922 fire that nearly destroyed Hoover Preparatory School for Girls. Tragically, the school was able to reopen, which led inevitably to our matriculation at this god-awful place. The only redeemable facet of Hoover is Kayley herself, who is about the best baof one could ask for. (Baof meaning, of course, best and only friend; it is the final frontier in friendship, the heady waters out past the Sea of Bff.) So we're walking past the waist-high ruin of the wall, which everyone since 1922 has touched whenever walking past it—the wall has been touched so many times that it is worn down into an almost pleasant oval. Kayley walks past, spits in her hand, and rubs the wall. I laugh, and then don't touch it myself, not because I'm scared of Kayley's germs, but because I hate traditions. Hoover Preparatory School for Girls has a number of profoundly stupid traditions—such as the singing-the-alma-mater-song-every-Thursday-at-lunch tradition, and the stand-when-your-teachers-enter-the-classroom tradition, and the everyone-has-to-wear-the-exact-same-uniform-so-that-no-one-will-beable-to-tell-who-the-geeks-are-except-of-course-everyone-can-tell-who-the-geeks-are-because-geek-isn't-something-you-wear-it-is-something-you-are-tradition.

As it happens, I think doing things solely because they were done in the past is absolutely idiotic. I suppose it shows respect to our teachers when we stand every time they come into the room, but you know what would show more respect? If the insolent students who have colonized this awful place paid attention in class. Or took notes.

Witness, for instance, seventh period: AP Physics. In the row before me, Amber and Nataley quietly discuss whose basically identical calf-length white socks are cuter. ("No, yours are," Amber whispers, when Dr. Halfrecht turns around to draw a diagram of how one can measure the speed of light. "No," Nataley mouths silently in response. "Yours are adorable.") Beside me, Amelia Lionel, the heir to the Wonder Bread fortune (really!), pretends to sip from a can of Coke. In fact, she is spitting tobacco juice into it. Dipping is cool here, for some reason, particularly if you are on the field hockey team, which Amelia is. The weirdest things get cool sometimes.

This is why I have never taken a lot of stock in 'being' cool (as if popularity is something that inhabits you, permanently, a virus that overwhelms your immune system so completely that you cease to 'be' you; instead you have become cool). Sometimes I like things cool kids like. But I find it a little ridiculous to like ALL of the things that the cool kids like. I mean, dip? Really? All the tooth-staining power of coffee with the extra added bonus of mouth cancer? Thank you, but no.

The bell rings. We stand and wait as poor Dr. Halfrecht, who just wants to share the magic of physics with young people, shuffles out of the room, shoulders slightly hunched. He perks up a little when he sees Kayley, who actually likes physics, smiling at him, and then shuffles out the door. So, yes. We are awash in a sea of traditions, and I hate them all. I like going to Hoover, because the only thing worse than having just a baof is being separated from her. I mean, Kayley is the badass I can never be, and if you can't be a badass, it is at least a privilege to hang out with one. Hoover is all right. But the incessant fetishizing of traditions?
Unbearable. And so when, just after Kayley spit rubs the stone, someone runs past Kayley and me and whispers "Freak the Geek," I am doubly pissed. First, I am pissed because Freak the Geek is a tradition. And second, I'm pissed because you only hear those words whispered to you when you are one of the geeks who are about to get freaked. I'm not ashamed that I love *Dr. Who*, or that I've read ten thousand pages of HP fan fiction online. I'm not even ashamed about my Pokemon addiction. (Okay, a little.) I like being a geek. But no one—not even the hard-core geeks who have g-e-e-k tattooed on their knuckles—wants to be one of THE geeks.

Kayley and I wheel around simultaneously, trying to identify the whisperer. But she's already several paces away, just a narrow-hipped body with a blond ponytail bobbing around. She could be any of us, really. And that's the idea, I guess: Freak the Geek is the one day each year when everybody at Hoover gets to be One of Us—except, I suppose, for Kayley and me. I feel weirdly embarrassed, like I've disappointed the universe by failing to claw far enough out of the social-caste basement to escape whatever humiliation awaits.

We know the drill, because we've seen geeks Freaked our freshman and sophomore years. The entire class gets together—at least everyone who is willing to participate in idiotic traditions, which is almost everyone—and on a chosen day in the second semester of junior year, they pick two geeks to Freak. Freaking takes various forms, of course: They might drag you by the ankles to the pond and throw you in, or they might egg your car with three hundred eggs. The Freaking always lacks cleverness, because—as previously noted—those doing the planning don't spend enough of their time engaged in academic pursuits. I mean, think of the Freaking opportunities physics provides!

Kayley and I don't say anything; we just take off sprinting toward my car. I figure it's our best chance. But when we get within view of the parking lot, I see fifty girls standing in concentric rings around my SUV. Each of them appears to be holding a gun. "Jesus, Lauren," she mumbles under her breath to me, "have they renamed it Kill the Geek?" One of them—honestly, they all look the same from this distance, but I think it might be this field hockey girl named Josie—raises her weapon toward us. It's a strange-looking gun, with a pink handle and an exceptionally long barrel. I'm pretty sure it doesn't shoot bullets, but even so I dive for the ground and cover my head. Kayley just stands there, and when I look up at her, she's shaking her head. "Paintballs?!" she shouts. "Paintballs?! The whole world of mischief and malfeasance is available to you and you pick PAINTBALLS?! You disappoint me, ladies." I cover my head up and want to disappear, but I manage in a shaky voice to say, "You're an f'ing folk hero, K?" The sound that interrupts me is not like a gunshot; it's just a loud puff of air. I'm watching from the ground: Kayley doesn't even flinch when a splatter of scarlet red paint bursts a foot away from her head against one of our campus's famed live oaks. I'm inclined to stay down, but Kayley reaches down and pulls on the collar of my school-provided itchy white blouse, and I rise.

We take off running together, away from the parking lot toward the lacrosse practice field. I don't hear any more paintball firings as I race across Hoover Green. I want to run back toward the classrooms, because surely someone will help. I mean, the administration has no official policy on Freak the Geek because they love traditions too much to denounce any of them, but they wouldn't let this happen to us. But Kayley grabs me, steering me toward the woods. "We just need a teacher," I say. I can hear them behind me, some girl shouting, "Switch to automatic mode, Scarlet Ballers!" Kayley swivels around and starts running backward long enough to shout, "You call yourselves the Scarlet Ballers and we're the geeks?" I hear a series of air
bursts, and I turn back long enough to see how far away they are and the bright red explosions littering the ground behind of us. Kayley shouts, "Lauren, come on. Fast."

We're almost across the lacrosse field now, a thick stand of trees before us, and the Freakers must have terrible aim or else paintball guns are hard to shoot, because the trees are soon riddled with abstract paintings in red, but nothing's hit me yet. Kayley's running just in front of me, crouching slightly, and I say, "Stay low, stay low," and she says, "I know," and then finally we're in among the trees. And here is our advantage: The Freakers might be in better physical shape than us, but no one knows these woods like Kayley and me. We've been walking around the hundreds of acres of forest on Hoover's campus for three years' worth of lunch periods.

Both the food and the atmosphere at the cafeteria are unbearable, and anyway, we've never really gotten along terribly well with the girls who eat there--which is to say all of them. So as Kayley and I weave parallel paths through the trees and brush, a thick blanket of rotting leaves cushioning our every step, I can hear the voices of the Freakers grow more distant. I'm still half-running, which makes me fully out of breath. Still, my wits have recovered sufficiently to talk in complete sentences.

"I never really thought about it before," I tell Kayley as we simultaneously duck under a low-hanging oak branch, "but just the phrase 'Freak the Geek' is just hugely lame."

"Yeah," Kayley says. "True. It's almost like the name was thought up by a bunch of mustachioed purple-hued maltworms." Kayley likes using Shakespearean insults. I get down on one knee in a flash to pull up my sock -- a girl has to protect herself from poison ivy. "Richard III?" I guess.

"Henry IV," she says. I nod. I can hardly hear the girls behind us anymore; I mostly just hear our breath coming fast and hard and the ground scrunching beneath us.

"Like, admittedly I am not an expert in slang," I say, "but isn't freaking usually kind of sexual?" Kayley turns around to me and runs backward just long enough to say, "Example?"

"Madam, I wish to freak your body.' Or, 'My heart desires to become freaky with you."

"Ha," says Kayley. She doesn't laugh much, but she ha's a fair amount. "Yeah, well, maybe that's what they want. Maybe that's why they picked the cutest girls in the junior class. Maybe they just want to slather us in paintball paint and do unspeakable things to us." I laugh, but only for a syllable. I Kayley is beautiful--oval face and big eyes and very curvy--and I think that I am marginally acceptable. I mean, there are no large scale problems with me that I can detect, except for a general lack of vroom in the bust area and a nose that occupies a bit too much space. But no one would think of me as pretty at Hoover. Or even Kayley. Being pretty here involves so much more than just being pretty, and frankly I don't have time for it. By the time we crest the hill, I can't even hear the Freakers anymore, and even though my Mary Janes are half-soaked, I feel good. I wish they hadn't picked us. There are plenty of unpopular people to go around--the drama kids who do the tech work, the girl who single-handedly runs the student newspaper, the girls who Kayley and I play Pokemon with in the student lounge during free periods--but if they had to pick us, at least they've picked BOTH of us.

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We descend the other side of the hill, headed toward the cemetery where the school founder and her family are buried. My weight is way back on my ankles as I half-walk and half-slide down the hill, dodging boulders and trees and the immense mounds of kudzu that have overtaken bushes twice as tall as me. We get down the hill much quicker than we got up it, and I know we're near the bottom when I hear Hoover Creek.

"The bridge," I say.

"Yeah, obviously," Kayley answers without looking back at me.

"Jesus, sorry," I say. The land flattens out and Kayley launches into full stride, and she gets way out in front of me, as if she feels compelled to remind me that she's faster than I am. But it doesn't matter--we're going to the same place. I watch her reach the dirt road that leads back to the stables, run parallel to it for a moment, and then dip her head down underneath the one-lane bridge that crosses over the creek. Kayley and I had spent many lunches under the bridge--the cement outcropping lets us sit with our legs dangling over the water, which ran loud enough to muffle our voices to anyone walking or driving above, but quiet enough that we could always hear each other. I reach the bridge a couple minutes later and sit down next to Kayley, who is staring into the water. She doesn't say anything to me, so after a while, I tell her, "I feel kinda like an ork, hiding out under a bridge."

"A troll," she says, and then sighs. "You feel kinda like a troll."

"No, trolls are people. I don't feel like a person. I feel like an ork," I insist. She sighs again, this time clearly annoyed.

"Lauren," she says. "You're so stupid sometimes. Trolls are not people. Orks are not people. Only humans are people. Orks are from Tyrol folklore, and they live on mountains. Trolls live under bridges. And they have really long hair and big noses, and that's clearly what you mean when you say ork." I reach over and put my hand on her shoulder and say, "Okay. Sorry. I meant trolls. Jeez, are you okay?"

"Yeah, Lauren, I'm splendid. Everyone in my entire class is trying to attack me with paintball guns, and I've officially been declared one of the two least liked people in my peer group, and my best friend doesn't know crap about folklore, and I'm dirty and sweaty and gross and just splendid."

"Well, you don't have to be bitchy," I say. "It's not my fault." She says nothing. "It's not my fault," I repeat, and she says nothing, and then smaller, I say, "You think..."

She takes that as a start. "I think that sometimes you can be a little...I don't know. Meek. And they prey on that. So they prey on us." I just stand up and climb out from under the bridge. Maybe what bothers me so much is the thought that Kayley might be right, but mostly I'm just furious with her for even thinking that, let alone saying it out loud.

"Where are you going?" she asks.
"To the car," I say as I walk away. I'm talking so softly she probably can't even hear me. "All things being equal, I would rather be paintballed." I'm walking for about thirty seconds when I hear Kayley's footfalls behind me.

"I'm sorry," she says.

I wheel around. "You know, you're a total know-it-all. And it's incredibly rude sometimes; I mean, you're not perfect either, and you act like it's my fault but it's not my fault for being quiet or your fault for being a know-it-all. It's not your problem or my problem; it's their problem. They're the demented ones, not us, so don't take it out on me, because the only thing that holds anything together for me is having someone else on the Not Demented Team."

Kayley just nods, and then we stand there for a second, and then she hugs me. She says, "I'm sorry," and I can hear her crying in her voice a little, but then when we separate, she has her hands on my shoulders and says, "Back to the bridge for the trolls!"

We go back to the bridge and just listen to the water run. There is this phenomenon that Dr. Halfrecht taught us about in physics, about particle behavior, and I'm thinking about it while I watch the water rumble over the pebbles in the creek bed. When particles are suspended in water, they move around really weirdly, I guess, and one way to think of how they move around is that every time they run into another particle, they immediately forget everything about where they've been before. Fighting with Kayley is like this, thank God.

We can completely forget our fights as soon as we run into each other in a not-fighty way, and I love that about her. So after a minute, I say, "I still think trolls are people."

"They aren't human," Kayley answers, friendlier now.

"Right; I'm not saying they're human. I'm saying they're people."

"Dude," she says, "I think you have a completely insane take on what constitutes personhood. For starters, people are real."

"Oh, really? The Freakers strike me as pretty fake, but they're still people," I say.

"Ha," she says. "Fair enough. Would they were clean enough to spit upon, as the Bard would say, but they are people."

"And so are trolls."

"No," Kayley says, smiling. "Trolls are trolls; elves are elves; orks are orks; fairies are fairies."

"I would say that trolls and elves are definitely people. Elves have to be people, because interspecies sex is gross, and there's nothing gross about Aragorn getting it on with Arwen in Lord of the Rings."
"Is the kind of thing someone would say," Kayley scoffs, "if someone was basing their analysis on the movies, not the books. Doesn't happen in the books!"

"Wrong!" I say. The burden of meekness has lifted. "They get married in the appendices! It's a total symbol for the restoration of Numenor! Pwned!"

"We will have to continue this discussion," Kayley says, realizing her defeat, "at another juncture. For now, let us return to your car." On the walk there, circling back around the other side of campus, we find other debates: Do zombies bleed blood? What happens if a zombie attacks a unicorn? How can mermaids hook up with seamen if they have no legs to spread? Princess or Toad? Dawn or May? By the time we make it to the car, in the gray twilight, I've forgotten our fight entirely in a way that the Freakers never forget their fights, because their fights are all they have. The Freakers have gone home, their cars all disappeared from the parking lot.

There's a single lipstick-red splotch of paintball goo on the front grill of my car. It doesn't wash off for months, but I don't mind. It is not my scarlet letter. It's theirs.

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John Green is the Printz Award-winning author of the novels Looking for Alaska, An Abundance of Katherines, and Paper Towns. He is also an unabashed fan of underappreciated role-playing games, most particularly Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: The Game.

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