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Orange To The Thigh

by

Ben Wrixam, of Aldershot High School, Burlington

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Peanuts.

When you hear that innocent seven-letter word, what comes to mind? Some may instantly wander to the thought of favourite, salty snack (followed by a grumbling in their stomach). Others that are less-inclined towards eating may think of the classic, oh-so-lovable Charlie Brown and friends. However, the first thought that popped into my head was neither of those things. Do you want to know what it was?

Orange to the thigh; blue to the sky.

Never before have I tasted a peanut; I've been anaphylactically allergic to them from my first breath. I know this because my parents had me undergo allergy testing from a very young age as my father is allergic to everything. Chicken, fish, both red and green peppers, most other vegetables, spices and of course, peanuts. He's also allergic to kittens, birthday parties, door-to-door solicitation and Sarah McLachlan animal cruelty commercials.

Being saddled with some sort of allergy was inevitable, which is why I've spent my entire life avoiding peanuts like the plague. My dad's allergic to the plague as well. Since allergies are usually passed on genetically, I will now take this time to say that I'm sorry to my future children. However, not all hope is lost.

Once in a blue moon, there are exceptions like my father. Think of it like families where the one child wears glasses, but the other can read all the little letters on the eye test clearly, guaranteeing he will never be called four eyes, a nerd or Sir Specs-a-lot. Thanks for that last one Google. Eye problems and allergies have a lot in common, with that being they're occasionally a product of bad luck and/or wonky

genetics. Where they differ is that one makes you go crossed eyed, where the other makes your tongue swell up and covers you will pepperoni-sized hives. Might this be a good time to say I have eye problems as well? Without my contact lenses, my left eye goes sideways faster than Miley Cyrus's career.

Differences aside, one thing allergies and eye problems do have in common is testing. Let me tell you, my yearly allergy tests are not something I look forward to. Show up. Sit down. Get arm drawn on with Sharpie. Get stabbed by two dozen needles. Hives. Itchy arms. OH MY GOSH MY ARMS ARE ITCHY! The result? The doctors tell me the exact thing I knew going in: you are severely allergic to peanuts, young man. It's like a twisted subliminal messaging trick, that way when you hear or see 'peanuts' you'll think 'stupid-itchy-arm-bumps!' Needless to say, I learned to avoid the nasty legume very quickly.

It was easy when I was a little kid; one of my parents was always there to keep me safe. That was a good thing, as I preoccupied with earning my prize for successful potty training instead of watching what I ate. Hear me out here. When you're three years old and doing your business in the toilet is all that stands between you and a shiny new action figure, you're going to spend most of the day chugging water, not checking your food for peanuts. Unless I took it from a stranger, my mom had inspected it for traces of peanuts tenfold. It was a foolproof system. However, things changed when I was off to school for the first time.

When I was in elementary, my mother forced me to wear the most unsightly fashion accessory on earth: a big, bulky fanny pack. Covered in a half-dozen deep pockets, it was like wearing a bandolier of military-grade ammunition around my waist. It carried my Epi-pen for my safety, but it was also hideous and made an already stocky child look that much huskier. I was one dinner-plate sized rainbow lollipop away from being the stereotypical fat kid. I'm dead serious, I could have been Chunk from *The Goonies*.

To make things worse, everyone thought my fanny pack was hilarious. It was a *fanny* pack after all. It was one of many things that stockpiled and led to a rocky few years at school. I was in a dark place as I battled with things larger than any allergy. The older kids bullied me, making it a struggle to accept myself and the size that I was.

By the time grade seven rolled around, however, things started to change. I switched schools as my elementary one only went up to grade six. I was thinning out as well; my big behind was running on the treadmill every day. Even crazier, girls had become more interesting than Lego sets. And there I was, trying to pick up chicks with my fanny pack sticking out like a sore thumb. I knew then and there

that it had to go. While my mother wasn't high on the idea, I convinced her that leaving my Epi-pen in my backpack was enough for at school.

Now it's high school, and life with a peanut allergy hasn't gotten any easier. One might expect that with age, kids would have matured and developed an understanding for the life-threatening danger that is a peanut allergy. After all, back in elementary school kids always told me to eat Reese's Pieces and then stab myself with an Epi-pen right afterwards like the needle was a get out of jail free card.

Unfortunately, some things never change.

The lower-brow students at my school throw food every lunch break, turning the cafeteria into a battleground and leaving me ducking and covering from peanut butter sandwiches as if they were mortar fire. Seriously, these guys are old enough to drive by themselves and they're flinging grapes like boogers at tiny seventh-grade girls. As soon as the shenanigans started, I knew I was in danger. The guys didn't know about my allergy, and there was no way I was going to paint a target on my back by telling them. Then it got nasty.

My friends and I sit at the same lunch table every day; ten of us crowded around the little round thing, totally breaking the non-enforced six-person policy. We were minding our own business when a crisp, red apple plopped down on the centre on the table. Looking over, I saw the usual suspects (Ironically, one of them looks like a young Kevin Spacey with a dirt stache and a backwards baseball cap), preparing their next round of projectiles.

My one friend had other ideas, however. The rebellious type, he sent the apple right back like a boomerang. Before long, it was a full on food fight. A loosely tied plastic bag filled with a sandwich, grapes and crackers was enough incentive for me to scurry out of the cafeteria. It was a good thing I did because I found the rest of my friends later with their sweaters a Jackson Pollock painting of peanut butter.

When I went home and told my mother, she panicked. As much I like to joke about it, allergies are scary stuff. It certainly didn't help when I accidentally ate a Nutella-filled croissant for dessert at a friend's house right in front of her (while the tests say I'm not allergic, I avoid all nuts due to the risk of cross-contamination).

Speaking of panic, you should see what happens when we go out for dinner. Both my parents have always preached the importance of informing the waiter of my allergy. Being sixteen, it's my responsibility. Most times, it's painless. I've learned a lot by listening to them; especially my dad. He has his own little-patented speech!

“I’m *the* food allergy guy... I come here often because you guys take care of me... please tell your chef to wash their hands and change their gloves... and brush their teeth... that last part is super important.”

When we go to a place that serves foreign food (which is uncommon and only possible with my mom), the workers don’t always understand the concept of allergies. This was on full display when we went to a Japanese teppanyaki restaurant (they kind where they cook your food in front of you on a Hibachi grill) on this year’s Jamaican vacation. My mom engaged the waiter in a rapid-fire game of twenty questions. Asian places are scary since most of them use peanut oil - it’s cheap and flavourful - but this one used vegetable oil, meaning my vacation would not include an anaphylactic reaction.

Now, moving forward, it will only be more difficult. I’m sixteen now, which means the end of high school is just around the corner. I just got my G1 license, and it won’t be long before I’m spending a lot of time by myself, buying my food (Kraft Dinner) and really having to cook for myself (Kraft Dinner). Those days will be the toughest. I can’t afford not to check everything I buy (especially the Kraft Dinner), because even though peanuts are tiny, they’re dangerous. Most of all, they’re part of my life.