

Total Bullfrog

by
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TB, CHAPTER 1

“Bullfrog!” That’s what my dad used to say when he thought I was lying. As I got older he became less concerned with protecting me from adult language. Maybe you will read this and think it’s all complete bullfrog. But I wanna tell people, and the Rubberneckers of the Multiverse said I could so...believe what you want.

You see it all started when my Language Arts Teacher, Mr. Vimm, ran out of the Aviation Museum. Actually, first he casually snuck away from us, while we, his ninth grade students, stared blankly at motionless ancient airplanes. He wasn’t too slick. I watched him slip away—it was more interesting than any dumb seaplane bomber kite. Then once he got outside, he bolted from that building as if it were about to explode. With his necktie all flapping behind him, it was stupid. It didn’t make sense.

So, I ditched the field trip. Of course, Vimm was mad when he found out, but he didn't threaten me with the whole On-Your-Permanent-Record thing. He just sighed in disappointment, mumbling about how he had to call my mother and outline the seriousness of the situation. It's true, I'll admit it, I begged him not to call and in the end he didn't because he needed me. I mean we saved his life. How can you call someone's mother when they saved your ass? And I don't mean "saved" as in save me a piece of that there cake, you greedy cake stealer, I mean saved from death. The real deal. You know what, I'm getting ahead of myself. Check it out, I'll start at the beginning – the morning of that long day and I'll tell you all of it. And not like other books and movies that promise to tell you everything or seem to and then you're like, *Don't these people ever get hungry or go to the bathroom?* If you give me your attention I promise not to bore you.

It was just before the bell of first period in the hallway of JFK High when Sam reminded me about the field trip.

You might think that it's a little weird that our Language Arts class would go to an Aviation Museum, but last year they sent my cousin's Algebra 2 class to the petting zoo, so who cares. Mr. Vimm explained to us that we were going with "The Future Is Bright To Me Club" (AKA Bright Me Club, AKA Bite Me Club, AKA Bite Me), which is comprised of a bunch of overachieving juniors and seniors that want to get exposed to all sorts of professional career high-end leadership stuff so that one day they can lead the nation and have fancy houses...They're annoying. No one in class said anything like, "Uh, hold up, what do airplanes have to do with English?" It was more like: "Take a break from writing stupid essays and reading boring stories and learning dumb literary terms? Swaaagg."

Anyway, Sam saw me outside of Ms. Wick's classroom.

“Sup, Henderson, you got your permission slip?” he asked me over the miniature sounds of doom emanating from the earbud hooked over his left ear. “They’re like all strict on those.”

“Huh?” I wasn’t really listening. I like Sam, he’s chill, but I was keeping an eye out for Elizabeth Appletine. Before that trip to the Aviation Museum, seeing her was one of the few things that I would look forward to. This is going to sound weird, but just a glimpse of her or even a waft of her perfume as she passed made me feel like I could see through the fog. I know what you’re thinking: Stalker much? And it makes sense that you would think that, but you’re wrong. I was just in that in-between place of wanting to ask her out and not being ready to ask her out.

“Doesn’t Elizabeth have Ms. Wick now?”

“Dude,” he said. “Permission slip, you got it?”

“I don’t know what you’re...” And then it hit me, “Daaaaaaammmmmn,” I said.

“Daammmmmnnnn,” he mocked.

“Yeah, I got it,” I said, holding tighter to my black Jansport backpack.

“Good, ‘cause I don’t wanna get stuck with those Bite Me’s.”

“And Elizabeth,” I reminded him.

“Yeeee,” he concurred.

For a while I had this idea in my head that Elizabeth was special only to me as if my recognizing her beauty demonstrated that I had a talent for something. It turns out that it wasn’t any secret that she was the hottest girl in the 9th grade. She wasn’t a Bite Me, not at all, and she didn’t have Vimm. She was going because she was Ms. Wick’s niece, so she was some kind of a monitor/helper for the club, I didn’t care. I just hoped to sit near her on the bus.

“I know the permission slips are due today,” I lied, “but when’s the actual trip?”

“Busses are leavin’ in like 10 minutes.”

“Bullfrog!”

“Not cool, dude...not cool,” he shook his head. “You gotta stop saying that...You sound like one of these Bite Me’s, all dorky and whatnot.”

I ignored him, even though I knew it was true. I don’t like talking about it much, but my dad died not too long ago. He felt less gone to me when I thought of him, so I wore his dog tags around my neck and said things that only he said.

When I realized that I hadn’t gotten the dumb permission slip signed, I started to feel hollow and ill. You wouldn’t think that a trip to an aviation museum would be a big deal. But to me it was. I needed something different. Something new. I needed to get away because everything around me was too familiar and making me sad.

“Seriously? I thought the trip was next—” I began and as if I were on a game show and had gotten the answer wrong, the late bell buzzed loudly above my head. I stared up at the speaker.

My day was starting to suck. I wanted to see those planes. I’d never been on a plane, never seen one up-close. Except for those that I see coming and going to the nearby airport. I turned to Sam, but he was gone. The students had vacated the halls much like the cockroaches that scatter from my bedroom walls when I flip the lights on. Soon I was standing there alone in the hallway. I didn’t move. I was just leaning against the lockers as if I had nowhere to go and no reason to go anywhere—like the one cockroach that waits until the last second. The one that only runs off when there’s an imminent threat of a shoe, a possible squishing.

“Let’s go!” boomed the security guard from down the hall. “That’d be the bell!”

“All right, let’s get a move on,” shouted Mrs. Bombrey from the other end of the hallway. She’s an enormous lady who walks with a cane and I think it’s because her stomach is so big she needs a third support beam. “I know you heard the bell! Get to class!”

I watched as they closed in on me. Mrs. Bombrey’s giant silhouette slowly waddled in my direction. “Young man,” she said and took a breath, “where are you supposed to be?”

My mind began to race: *How do I get my mom to sign the field trip form? Where is that thing? Do I have a test in Earth Science today? Did a doctor prescribe the cane? Am I failing that class? Was he nice about it?* “What’s the center of an earthquake called?”

“Focus!” the guard shouted. His volume was unnecessary as he was now practically standing in front of me. “Where do you belong?” We both looked down the hall to see that Mrs. Bombrey was still heading toward me. I think she was still shouting. To say she moves slow is an understatement. The story goes that she outran a glacier once, but rumor has it the glacier let her win.

“All right,” she said. “Hold on, I’m coming.” The security guard had to hide his grin behind his fist. I looked up at him.

“What choo smilin’ at?” he snapped.

“Nothing. I was going to ask you the—”

“Do you know,” she interrupted, still closing in on us, “that we pride ourselves up here on the third floor on keeping students from meandering?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I called back.

“Where you supposed to be?” the guard asked.

“Vimm...ummm, room 315.”

“Mr. Shuman,” Mrs. Bombrey said, now close enough not to yell. “Would you be so kind as to escort this young man to his classroom?”

“Will do,” he said. “Let’s go, Three-Fifteen.”

We walked down the hallway.

I liked that the guard addressed me as a number. As if for a moment I wasn’t me; I wasn’t Joe Henderson with all my worries. I admired the look of strength he had in his dark blue polo with the words SECURITY spelled out on the back in a faded yellow iron-on. I want those camouflage pants, too, I thought. I’d never seen arms that large that close before. They were...bulbous. His shirt was pulled tightly across his frame and it hung loosely at his midsection. I imagined that his flesh was a mere coating over a reflective polymer of industrial grade bulletproof material. And that eye, I tried to look up at it as we walked. Was it scanning me? Was it mapping out our coordinates toward our walk to room 315?

“What are you looking at?”

“Your eye,” I said, and then I winced, slightly.

He laughed, “They call it a lazy eye.”

“Well, it doesn’t seem lazy to me,” I said with my politician-car-salesman voice. “Why, I think it’s absolutely live, raw and in my face awesome.” He ignored me and we walked in silence.

“Say, mind if...” I searched for the best euphemism to appeal to the guard so that he would allow me to use the Boys Room, “I hit the head?” I asked, using one of my Dad’s phrases—one that I never understood.

He looked at me with a sideways glance, “Fellow navy man? Yeah, Three-Fifteen, you can ‘hit the head.’”

“Thanks,” I said and ran into the Boys Room. I almost knocked over the old janitor who was hunched over picking up all of the brown paper towels that had clearly been thrown everywhere. The old man grunted with each effort. When I saw him I smiled, but he stood up and gave me a terrible look as if I had created the mess that he was forced to clean up. “Wasn’t me,” I said in my defense as I went into a stall.

I can’t speak for the Girls’ Bathrooms, but I can tell you that Boys’ Bathrooms are awful. I try to never use them, but when I do, I gotta decide if I want to stare at smeared snot on tile at the urinal, or dare myself to sneak a peek into a toilet bowl. I gotta check to see if it’s safe so that I don’t gross myself out entirely. I gotta see if there’s a...horror show waiting for me.

I wish I had a lazy eye, I thought to myself after closing the stall door, fearing what lay in the bowl before me. I didn’t want to be in there, but I needed the privacy.

“Thank God,” I whispered, when I saw that there was nothing gruesome afloat. I slid the lock on the stall door and pulled a chewed pencil from the front pouch of my Jansport that read “ZOMBIES R PPLE 2” in silver pen graffiti, and then I began to dig around for a particular sheet of yellow paper.

I needed that permission slip. It would be my passport to freedom.

“Cuidado, piso mojado,” muttered the janitor.

“And a piso mojado to you too,” I replied, not paying any attention to the fact that I wished the old man a wet floor. My heart was racing as I dug through my bag, “No! No! No! Where is it?” I had a sticker-covered notebook and a few DVDs, a skateboard wheel, a balled up corduroy shirt, a shoelace, half a roll of Life-Savers, a smushed, bite-size Milky Way bar, an Earth Space textbook, and a whiteboard eraser. “Permission slip, permission slip! Come on.”

Then I heard new footsteps enter the bathroom. I froze. I looked through the gap in the stall door and saw a kid with long wavy hair in a football jersey walk by. He made me nervous when I watched him pass the urinals. It wasn't a second later that I began to hear the...sounds. I was reminded of my old man explaining to me that there was a good reason why, in Australia, they refer to the toilet as the Thunder Box.

Permission Slip!

The sounds grew louder.

Come on...oh God oh god. The noises! The smell! My freedom! "Kill me now," I whispered to myself.

"Let's go!" the guard shouted. "Best not be textin' in there!"

"I can't," said the kid in the next stall. "There's no paper." I was appalled.

"He means me," I said, quickly unrolling an oven-mitt of toilet paper. I passed it under to him.

"Thanks, bro," said my temporary neighbor.

"Yeah," I said and then it occurred to me, I was wearing the same black jeans from a few weeks ago. Nervously, I checked my back pocket, praying that they hadn't been through the wash. I closed my eyes, made a wish, reached into my back pocket and found the folded little yellow square that was the blank permission slip. "Yesss." I took the pencil to it, leaning up against the stall door, ignoring awful thunder from next door. I forged away: my mother's signature, the dates, all of it.

The numbers "3-15!" were shouted into my stall with a fist-bang to the door. It startled me so much that I almost fell backward into the bowl.

“Oh, hey,” I said, scratching my head, emerging from the bathroom. “I think I just realized something.”

“I do my best thinkin’ on the can too, son,” the guard said.

“Oh yeah, me too,” I said. “Anyway, I’m supposed to be on a field trip.”

“Field trip?” he asked and repeated. “They’re all downstairs. I think the busses are about to leave.”

“Oh, no,” I said, quite convincingly. “What do I do?”

“To tell the truth, if I were you, I’d run,” he said.

If there were a camera on me, I would have winked at it.

TB, CHAPTER 2

I had never been in the cafeteria in the morning before. It was bizarre, like being in a parallel universe where everything looks similar, but there are subtle as well as drastic differences. Like, it didn't usually have this hospital smell, and now the long counters of stainless steel were lacking food, and trays, and those lunch ladies that seem to love us individually but hate us as a whole.

I sat at the long table with all of the other kids from our class plus another group of about five more Bite Me's. Everyone was leaning over everyone else to talk and text while simultaneously listening to music and snapping selfies. Quick fluttery no-redeye flashes were flickering before duck faces as if the paparazzi were accompanying us to the museum. Louis, this kid that just bothers me because he thinks he knows stuff, and because he's still got the baby face, and because every once in a while he tries to sound like he's from the 'hood, and because his mom will bring him his lunch, and it's like, "Bro, come on, this is high school, buy your own

lunch or don't eat when you forget it, no one wants to see your mom come and pinch your cheek and give you your lame-ass lunch," asked me a question:

"Joey, you been on a plane?" Louis asked. I was distracted, looking straight ahead at Elizabeth who stood shimmering while talking to some older kid with a mustache.

"Why the hell do you need a mustache in high school?" I replied.

"I have to shave like every month, no matter what," said Louis.

"Oh, yeah, Louis?" I asked.

"Yeah, man, soon I'll be shaving my cheeks and chin. You'll see, I'll get that 'stache and I'll have to tell Elizabeth to leave me alone."

"Right," I said "and then your mom will bring you your drink-box and ham and cheese."

"Bro, I'm hypoglycemic."

"What's with you all anyway?" asked a softer voice amongst the commotion. Louis and I realized that Tiffany Habberstad was directly in front of us, and it was one of those rare occasions where her nose was out of her book.

"Oh, hey Tiff," I said. "When did you get here?"

"What's with all of whom?" Louis asked. See what I mean? *Whom*. What a doosh.

"You and you and all of you," she pointed with her book at Louis and me and, I think, all the other people.

"Huh?" I said.

"That Elizabeth," she said, "should have a bright neon sign blinking VACANT over her head."

"Huh?" Louis said.

"Knock, knock?" she said, to Louis. "There's nobody home."

“HUH?” we said.

“She’s all,” Tiffany said in this funny flirty way while batting her eyes. “I’m starving and I haven’t had a thing to think all day.”

This was not the quiet girl I thought I knew.

“Are you saying that Elizabeth is...?” I began.

“Dumb!” she snapped. “She’s dumb.”

“I don’t care if she’s smart. I don’t need her to take the SATs for me or nothin’,” Louis said.

“And you’re even dumber,” she said to him.

“Henderson,” she looked at me. “I thought you might have had a clue,” and then she disappeared into her paperback.

“What?” I said defensively, “I have clues.”

“Sure you do,” she said to her book.

When I saw the three-legged, behemoth Mrs. Bombrey, step into the cafeteria, I slid over a little so she wouldn’t spot me and said, “Louis, your mom is here.”

“Maybe he forgot his lunch again,” said Tiffany with a smirk in her voice. My eyes widened.

I looked at Tiffany, “I didn’t know you were funny.”

“What!” Louis said, as he scrambled through his backpack making sure he had his stupid lunch. “Neither of you are funny!” he snapped when he found it. “Man, I thought I forgot it. Why you gotta try me like that, Mrs. Bombrey isn’t my mother! Are you kidding me, she couldn’t bring me my lunch!” Louis continued, louder and without his realization that the entire cafeteria had grown quieter because Mrs. Bombrey had instructed everyone to settle down. “She couldn’t

bring me my lunch, 'cause she'd eat it first! Paper bag and...all?" he looked up to notice that everyone in the cafeteria was listening to him. Even Mrs. Bombrey, with her hand on her hip, was looking over her round-frame glasses at stupid Louis, whose face had drained of all blood.

"All righty," Mrs. Bombrey said as Louis crossed his arms on the table and buried his face in humiliation. "Soon we will be heading off to the Aviation Museum. I'm certain that your teachers have gone over all of the rules with you. We want you to know that you will all be representing your school, especially, our Future Is Bright to Me Club!" This brought on loud applause from the Bite Me's. "We're all very proud of each of you," she said and then added, "most of you," looking over at poor ghostly Louis. This brought a roar of laughter, under which you could hear words like "Stupid" and "Freshman."

"Good job, Louis," I said, sarcastically.

"Fo real," Tiff said, looking at Louis who looked as though he had been dead for about a week. I looked at him and soon the commotion of the loud cafeteria returned. I almost felt bad for the kid. Almost.

After I felt that Louis had suffered enough, I broke the silence by replying to his earlier question: "No," I replied. "I haven't."

"Haven't what?" he mumbled. "What are you talking about?"

"I haven't been on a plane. Have you?"

"'Course!" he said, sitting up, regaining his life-force, as if the humiliation he withstood a moment ago were back in the deep annals of history. "I've been on lots of planes. I've been all over the place. Just last month my mom and dad and I" (and this is where I was reminded as to why I didn't much care for Louis) "went to Las Vegas," he looked at Tiff, "Vegas!" he continued on like that as we were herded out of the cafeteria. Some kid expressed my thoughts perfectly,

mooring like a cow as we pushed our way toward the exit. Mrs. Bombrey and some random Bite Me drone were collecting the permission slips. I could see the blue sky of freedom behind them, but I worried that soon I would be busted, so I recalled my previous performance.

As the form was snatched out of my hand by the Bite Me, Bombrey stared at me over those glasses of hers.

“Pencil?” commented the Bite Me, showing the form to the behemoth.

“I do believe so, yes,” I said. I couldn’t believe this kid was selling me out.

“Pencil?” Bombrey asked, looking at the form and then at me and then back at the form.

“Your mother signed this in pencil?”

“We’re a big believer of pencils at home, because the eraser is a constant reminder to everyone that no one is perfect...” I waited... “And might I add that I think it’s great that you’re giving us all an opportunity to further understand what is possible in this crazy world.”

“Get on the bus, 3-15,” she said.

I was escaping for the day.

#Whew #Shawshank #RealTalk

TB, CHAPTER 3

We were told to sit alphabetically on the bus, so I was where I think I've been my whole life, behind Tiffany Habberstad. For years, whenever I heard a teacher say Habberstad, I knew I was next to be called, but it's not just that. It's more like she's always one step ahead of me. We never really talked much, but I know she has stuff figured out. The seats on the bus were low, so I could see her pin straight brown hair. I thought of saying something to her, but I didn't want to bother her, she was busy doing her Tiffany thing, reading.

I looked around for Elizabeth. She was sitting with her aunt, Ms. Wick, who was trying to get Sam to sit down, but he, like Tiff, was in his own world, leaning up against the glass windows, head moving slowly, probably due to his Doom Slash Sludge Metal pounding in his earholes. Stupid alphabet. Nothing against Tiff, but just once I'd be fine with staring at the back of Elizabeth's head. Don't be weird, you know what I mean. It's just that her being all shimmery and glowy made things better. For me, she was like a celebrity. She brightened the room and left the scent of cotton candy behind when she left it.

The informalities of a field trip had an effect on everyone, including the teachers. You got to see them with their guard down. Even Mr. V. looked less like himself on the bus, all chill with his sleeves rolled up. Don't get me wrong, he still looked old—dude is like 53. His reddish hair is gray at the sides and he always wears a shirt with buttons and some ugly, splotchy tie. Still, I gotta say for a teacher, he's in pretty good shape. He does pushups before his coffee to wake up—I know this because he tells us to do 'em, but we're all like, nah. Vimm was sitting on the edge of a seat, letting the students share their music and pictures on their “electronic devices.” It was funny, because as nice as he was, he usually confiscated mp3 players, cameras, cell phones, you name it. If you had to charge it and he saw it, it was gone, disappeared to the dreaded desk drawer. And here he was, getting an earful of *Apophis*' new album.

“It's...” he searched for the word, “interesting. Honestly, I can see why you like this—”

“Don't do it,” interrupted purple-haired Jackie. “We all know how you hate bad words. Say your word...feces.”

Mr. Vimm laughed, while others asked what feces were. “I wouldn't go as far as to call it that, maybe it's just elevator music in hell. But, who am I to judge?”

“What's elevator music?”

“It's a type of music, dumbass,” some kid said, “continue, bruhh, I got choo.”

“This is why I sit with the teachers,” Vimm said to himself after shooting a disapproving glance at some kid. “What I was going to say was that these sounds, they seem to speak to the feeling of being a slave to some other force.”

“Say that again,” Tiffany asked as though she were yanked out of her book.

“Sam's *music*,” he continued, “is nothing new. All that pounding in unison—it's tribal. It's working together within a system.” Our little group on the bus, leaning over seats and one

another were, for a few seconds, hanging on his every word. “You hear these beats and you all clamor for the connection to those like yourselves.”

“I knew you’d like it!” Sam said. “I don’t get you, but it’s lit, right?”

“You get me, Sam,” he said. “You know those old ships where the slaves rowed down below?”

“Oooh,” some kid said, “I seen that sh*t in some movie once, sh*t was—”

“Say ‘Feces,’ f*ckhead,” Jackie snapped. “Sorry, Vimm.”

“No,” Vimm sighed. “Please don’t help, Jackie. Listen, all of you, the profanity...it needs to stop.”

“Jusss words, V.,” another said.

“Just say what you were sayin’,” Jackie told V.

“*Just*,” Vimm said, “be...nicer. Respect is all any of us want.”

“We get it. Continue,” someone said, in that Oh-My-God-Get-To-The-Point tone.

Vimm took a breath and said, “Look, you’re all on the same slave ship rowing in time.”

And with a grin, he added, “That’s why you need those beats.”

“Yeah, doesn’t help, bro.” said another kid. “Still lost.”

“Who cares,” said another.

“Consider it this way, it’s more or less what I’m always talking to you about. You remember, think about it. It’s a type of condition.”

“Huh?” Sam asked.

“The human condition,” Tiffany said and then addressed Sam. “We just had an essay prompt on it, duh.”

The bus hit a bump, and for a moment I felt weightless.

“That’s right,” Vimm said. “It’s something I want all of you to understand...and don’t say ‘Duh.’”

“Why?” I asked.

“Duh, just sounds—”

“We’re all getting’ A’s for being here, right?” a girl in an army jacket asked from the back of the bus.

Vimm ignored her, “Because, Henderson, the—”

“Stop teachin’ We’re not in school. Hello!” someone else said (Sorry, I don’t know everyone’s name that was on the bus).

Mr. Vimm took a deep breath and was about to say something when someone shouted, “—Boring!”

“You needn’t announce your every thought,” V. said.

“If you’re bored, you’re boring,” I said, hoping to impress him.

“I like that, Mr. Henderson,” Vimm said to me.

“My mom says it to me every day,” I replied.

“My mommy says it,” one mocked.

“Idiot children,” Tiff mumbled into her paperback.

“We must be patient,” he said to Tiff.

Sam held his earphones out for Vimm, “Okay, you gotta hear *Ocean Korpse*.”

“Thank you, Sam, but bear with me for a moment,” he said. “Think of your earliest memories. Go ahead, think back.” He paused to let us try and recall our oldest memory, mine was of my dad helping me drink from a water fountain. “Well, that memory of yours is probably

from when you were first starting to talk or understand words, so you were able to articulate a thought to yourselves.”

“So,” some kid said.

“So,” Vimm addressed the kid, “it’s all words and thinking. Just think of all of the wires, signals, satellites, mp3s, computers, everything, the pictures, all of it, it’s all out there, set up to communicate some sort of idea.”

“If aliens exist, do they have the human conditions or is it just an alien condition?” someone asked.

“I don’t give a sexual intercourse about space feces,” Sam told Vimm, while trying not to laugh.

“Gee Zhussss. How much longer? You’re all killing me, I hope you know,” a Bite Me said.

Mr. V. grinned at the kid who asked about the aliens and ignored the kid who accused us of slowly murdering him.

That voice of dissent came again, “Aliens probably don’t even exist. This is too stupid.”

“Is it?” Mr. V. asked, “Think about it for just a second. If there are say, 400 billion stars in our galaxy alone, and there are 50,000 billion, billion galaxies, don’t you think that, somewhere out there there’s a young person going through the same sort of problems as each of you here on this bus?”

“Sci-Fi alien bullsh*t,” spoke the Bite Me.

“Dude! We’re here!” shouted Sam, sitting up from his seat.

“Thank effing God,” muttered someone.

Mr. Vimm told all of us, even though he was looking at me, “Don’t let random voices or thoughts quash your thinking. And let no one stifle your creativity.”

“Yeah,” Tiff said to her book, “buncha toxic bitches.”