



For Jack, starting fifth grade at a new school is even rougher than pee wee football. But how can he join the football team and help Ellison build the Most Epic Bookmobile Bike Ever? Jack devises the perfect game plan—until he fumbles it with the most epic fail ever.

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# INTO THE LION'S DEN

I stood—frozen—before the massive, gaping jaws. Hundreds of innocent children streamed around me, sucked into the giant maw. Swallowed whole.

Never.

To be seen.

Again.

At least until the final school bell rang.

I stood in front of the double doors of my new school. First- through eighth-grade students filed past me and into the building, laughing and talking to their friends. But I was already looking forward to the end of the first day of fifth grade.

This felt like double starting over. I'd already moved from

my grandparents' farm to the suburbs at the beginning of the summer.

This kind of starting over was harder (and way less fun) than going back to the beginning of a video game quest. Worse than playing Chutes and Ladders. Scarier than a new-to-me blue house in a neighborhood where people live on blocks instead of on acres.

"C'mon, you're going to make me late for third grade." My little sister, Midge, yanked forward on my arm. "How can I be a biologist if I'm late for science?" As if she'd been reading my mind the way Mom does, she added, "You actually have to go *through* the doors. It's a school, not the mouth of a bowhead whale."

Then she skipped right into the belly of the beast, leaving me all alone.

### MIDGE'S PHENOMENAL FACTS

The mouth of the bowhead whale (Balaena mysticetus [buh-LEE-nuh mis-tuh-SEE-tus]) can be sixteen feet long, twelve feet high, and eight feet wide. That's definitely big enough for you and your classmates to walk into. And the bowhead's tongue weighs as much as a small car! Thankfully, bowhead whales don't eat kids . . . they eat only tiny animals called plankton.<sup>1</sup>



I watched as her ladybug backpack and flyaway blonde hair disappeared into a sea of dark blue-and-white school uniforms.

Kids jostled and waved and laughed around me.

The backpack I'd used since third grade hung heavy on my shoulders. Maybe the triple decker bologna sandwich I'd made for lunch was weighing it down.

I hefted the backpack and blew a puff of air upward. The cowlick my mom had slicked down earlier that morning popped back up.

Mom had insisted on waiting with us for the bus. Just as it squeaked to a stop in front of our new house on Cherry Avenue, Mom licked her palm and smeared it over my wayward hair. A bazillion kids watched from the windows.

Nope. Not embarrassing at all.

Now, hair stuck straight out over my forehead. I stepped bravely through the double doors and into the main entrance of Deer Creek Christian School. The hallways were filled with the chatter of students and the rattle of combination locks.

The air was a mix of floor cleaner, freshly sharpened pencils, dryer sheets, and nervous sweat . . . probably mine.

The beige doors and cinder-block walls leading to who-knows-where were plastered with colorful posters. One with a roaring lion with the words "God is Grrreat!" over

its head. Another with a stick bug and a tree branch with the Bible verse:

“One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin,  
but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”

Proverbs 18:24

A banner stretched across the main wall: “Welcome back, students! 1995–96.”

Everyone seemed to know one another and to know where to go. I was the only kid standing like an empty flagpole in the middle of the hallway. I’d had a dream just like this once, except I had also forgotten to study for a math test. And I was riding a giraffe.

“Jack, buddy, you’re a pro at making friends.” My dad’s encouragement over the speakerphone that morning echoed in my head. He’d called from his out-of-town job. “You’re friendly, funny, a great ball player—”

Midge had piped up too. “And you use that fancy man deodorant now, so you don’t stink.”

I looked around and spied a huddle of three guys. One short, one tall, and one about my size who had a football tucked under his arm. He led the way as he and his two friends started to walk in my direction.

What would I say? *Hi, I’m Jack Finch. I’m friendly. I’m funny . . . I don’t stink?* I started to smile, but my mouth was so dry my upper lip caught on my front teeth.

All three gave me that sideways “you must be the new kid” glance as they hurried past me without even a “hey.”

My hand froze halfway to an awkward wave. To cover, I raised it higher and smoothed my palm over my cowlick like I hadn't even noticed them.

At this rate, I'd be making new friends by eighth grade.

## THE THREE PEEWEES

So far this summer, I had survived tornado weather, getting lost in the woods, and even Buzz Rublatz, the neighborhood bully. Why did the first day at my new school feel so much tougher?

“Jack! Jack Finch!”

I blinked to clear my head and scanned the still-bustling crowd of students, from the shortest first grader to the tallest eighth grader.

Cutting a path through the blur of blue-plaid uniforms came a neatly dressed kid—brand-new basketball shoes, freshly trimmed flattop, and white shirt tucked all the way into his pants. Like always, he was carrying the latest book he was reading.

“Ellison!” I shouted, tucking my shirttail in and realizing I’d forgotten my belt. I waved like a big nerd.

To my relief, Ellison also waved back like a big nerd.

Ellison Henry is my, well, yeah, I’d say he’s my best friend. He lives right down the street from me on Oak. It didn’t take long for him to invite me (and even Midge) to join his group of friends, the Tree Street Kids. Roger Jennings lives on Pine and Ruthie Galinski lives on Maple.

When I lived on the farm, my nearest friend was a two-mile bike ride away. But since we’d moved into the house on Cherry Avenue, I’d hung out with Ellison, Roger, and Ruthie almost every day.

Ellison raised his hand for a high five.

“Hey, sorry I couldn’t take the bus with you this morning,” he said. “I rode in with my mom. She had to get Booker and Langston to their first day of kindergarten.”

They were Ellison’s twin brothers and were named after writers, just like Ellison was. I’m pretty sure Ellison would be a book instead of a kid if he could.

He motioned for me to follow him down a side hall full of lockers.

“I’m number twenty-seven,” I said.

“Cool! I’m twenty-five,” Ellison said. He soon stopped in front of the tall and narrow blue locker doors—twenty-five, twenty-six, and twenty-seven.

Unlike in my bad dreams about school, I managed to conquer my locker combination in one try. I dropped my backpack at the bottom, fished out my lunch bag and shoved it onto the top shelf, and slammed the door.

“We’d better get to the gym,” he said, walking back the way we’d come. “Opening chapel is about to start.”

The first bell rang just as we walked side by side through the double doors of the gym.

Across the shiny wooden floor, kids filed into long rows of metal folding chairs that faced a raised stage. Ellison and I hurried to the middle section, marked by a red construction paper flag with a white number five. We crawled over a few kids seated at the end of the row and sidestepped our way to the middle.

Ellison slid into his seat and stuck his nose into his book. As usual.

I slid onto the cold seat beside him.

It felt kind of weird for Roger and Ruthie not to be with us. They went to the public school in town. Roger would be starting fourth grade this year, and Ruthie would be in fifth like us.

The clanking of folding chairs and kids chortling announced the arrival of more fifth graders.

I looked to my left. Filing down our row were the three guys who had brushed right past me in the hallway.

“Football players,” Ellison mumbled.

The kid in the lead was about my size with curly blond hair that someone had tried to slick down on top. Maybe his mom had tried the humiliating spit-on-palm trick before the bus picked him up too.

This had been the first summer since I was five that I hadn’t played baseball. Football sounded awesome.

I tried to play it cool this time. I leaned back in my folding chair . . . then lunged forward when it almost slipped out from under me. I quickly bent down to tie my already-tied gym shoe to cover.

The kid didn’t seem to notice. He was high-fiving the fifth graders in the row behind us and some lucky fourth graders in the row in front of us.

“Anyone sitting here?” he asked me. He nodded at the empty chair on my left. But he didn’t wait for me to answer. “Thanks,” he said. He picked up the empty folding chair, turned it around, and plopped onto it to face the kids behind us.

Chairs scraped and scooched closer to him.

“My summer was awesome,” he began.

Even I couldn’t wait to hear why.

“I got to snorkel in the Bahamas, and the water is so clear you can see all the way to the bottom, and I was paddling around on the surface and then—*duh-duhn, duh-duhn, duh-duhn*—a *shark* started swimming along the bottom

right underneath me. I mean, it was a baby shark, but I bet its mom was HUGE . . .”

“Whatever . . .” Ellison mumbled on the other side of me, turning a page in his book. “That’s not nearly as exciting as *Treasure Island*.”

I wasn’t sure what Ellison had against football . . . except that maybe it didn’t involve reading. All that page turning, plus practicing his fastball in my backyard over the summer, *had* turned him into a decent pitcher.

“Cool!” I said to the kid, a little too loudly, mostly to cover for Ellison. “Maybe his mom was Jaws.”

The kid looked straight at me.

Everyone around us hushed.

“You’re . . . *new*,” he said, like he had opened a Christmas gift only to find a pair of socks.

“Thanks,” I answered. *Thanks?* “I mean, I’m new to some people, heh-heh.”

“You’re funny,” he said. “I’m DJ. I’m captain of the Lions football team.”

“*Peewee* football team,” Ellison mumbled from behind the book in front of his face.

DJ leaned backward, tipping the chair to look around me at Ellison. “Hey, Ellison,” he teased, “any good tips from your football playbook?”

“Hilarious,” Ellison said.

DJ smiled and shrugged. He pointed at the kids on the

other side of him. The first one wasn't much bigger than Midge. "This is Marky, also known as Sonic. Fastest running back in town."

Marky held out his hand for a handshake. When I reached out, he yanked his hand away and slicked back his already slicked-back black hair. "Ooo, too slow."

The kid on the other side of Sonic took up nearly two chairs. Not including his hi-top haircut, he stood a head taller than almost everyone in the gym.

"That's Mini-Fridge," DJ said. "His real name is Michael. But he's nicknamed after the *way* bigger William 'The Fridge' Perry. Chicago Bears football legend."

"Yo," Mini-Fridge yoh-ed. He sounded older than my dad.

A teacher stepped up to the podium on the stage to begin the opening assembly.

DJ scooted his chair around to face the stage and never gave me a second look.

Yep, making friends was going to be easy.

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