


# MIDDLE SCHOOL BITES

BY  
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To my brother, Alan,  
who knows that both monsters  
and middle school can be scary  
*and* fun.—S. B.

You are not going to believe this happened.  
I wouldn't believe it either.  
I would think you were lying or crazy.  
But it all *really* happened.  
I promise.  
Just *look* at me.  
See?



1.

## Horrible Beginnings

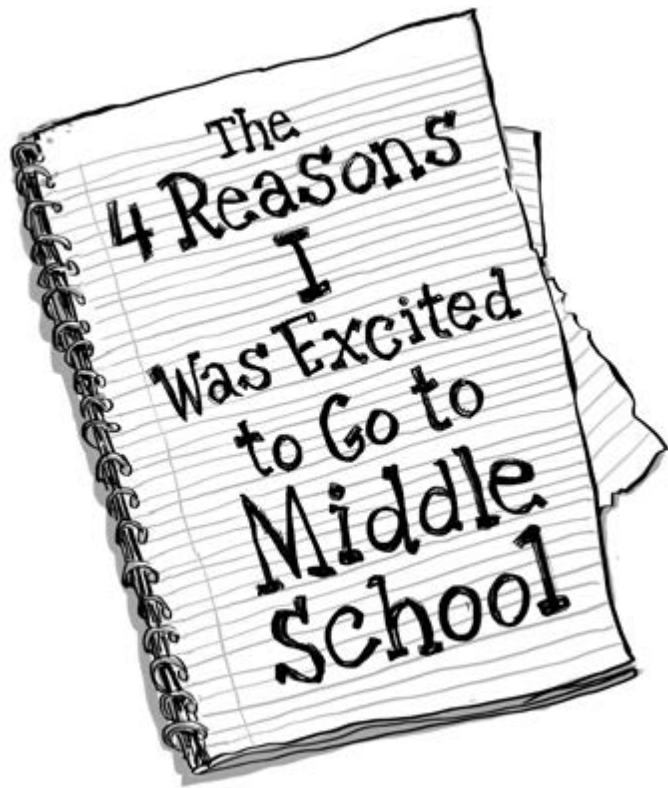


**I** got the first bite when I was asleep in bed at 2:54 in the morning.

I got the second bite three hours later as I was running down a dark road in the woods.

I got the third bite that afternoon in an old, abandoned carnival trailer.

It all happened on the second-worst day of the whole year. The last day of summer vacation. The next day I was starting middle school. There were four reasons I was excited to go to Hamilton Middle School and four reasons I wasn't.



**#1** I wouldn't be a scrawny little elementary school kid anymore.

**#2** Tanner Gantt would not be there. Tanner Gantt is a guy who bugged me all the time in elementary school. My name is Tom Marks and he always calls me Tommy Farts. He's big, and he shoves kids and calls them names and makes fun of them. He pretends to accidentally spill his drink

on you and then he says, "I'm soooooo sorry!" He also throws food at people and puts people in trash cans. Nobody fights back because he would probably kill them.

But now I didn't have to worry about him anymore. My best friend, Zeke Zimmerman, had called me two weeks before school started.

"Tom!" he yelled on the phone, all excited. "Tanner Gantt is *not* going to Hamilton! He's moving away! He's going to Kennedy Middle School!"

This was the best news ever. But I have to admit, I sort of felt sorry for the kids at Kennedy.

**#3** I would get my own locker. I could keep all my school junk in it and put up cool pictures and stash emergency food. I could keep secret stuff in there too. I didn't have any secret stuff yet, but I might someday.

I was a little worried about forgetting my locker combination.

My sister, Emma, who is sixteen and my second-least favorite person in the world (Tanner Gantt is number 1), said to me, "If you forget your combination, you have to



pay the grumpy janitor a hundred dollars to open your locker . . . and the principal announces to the whole school that you forgot it.”

I imagined sitting in class and hearing over the loudspeaker: “*Attention, students and faculty, this is your principal! Tom Marks forgot his locker combination. Don’t*

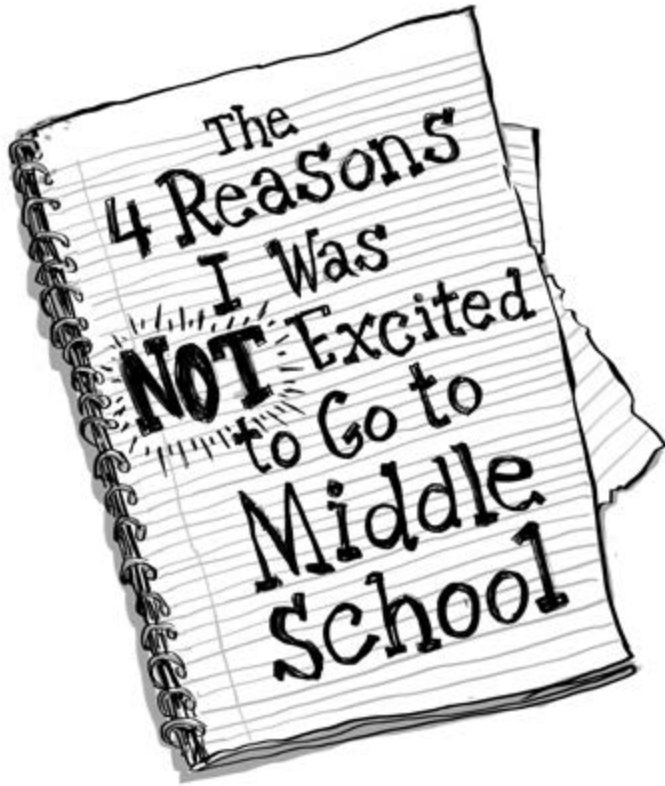
*forget to laugh and point at him all day. Thank you.*”

I decided to write the combination on the bottom of my shoe in case I ever forgot it. I found out later that Emma was lying. She does that ALL the time.

**#4** Annie Barstow is going to my middle school. She’s eleven, the same age as me. She’s smart and funny, and I like the way her hair looks. I hoped that someday Annie would be my girlfriend, but I was going to wait until we were in high school to ask her about it. We’d just be friends in middle school. I called this *The Girlfriend Plan*. I think it’s a good idea to make plans.

If Annie agreed to be my girlfriend, then, after high school, we’d go to college together, then maybe we’d get married and get really, really rich and live on our own private island. I didn’t know how we were going to get rich. I was counting on Annie to figure that out because she’s so smart.

I haven’t told Annie about *The Girlfriend Plan*, yet.



**#1** They give you a TON of homework.

Last year Emma warned me. “The books in middle school weigh twenty pounds each. Some kids get so much homework that they break their backs carrying books home.”

“No way, Emma,” I said. “You’re lying.”

Then she pointed out the window at a kid walking down the sidewalk. He was wearing a back brace.

“There goes one now,” she said, smiling.

I later found out she was lying.  
Emma is the worst.

**#2** Finding my seven different classrooms and getting to them on time before the tardy bell rings.

“One time a kid got lost trying to find his classroom,” said Emma, “and they *never* found him.”

She is *such* a liar.

**#3** There might be some brand-new bullies at Hamilton School who could be even worse than Tanner Gantt.

“Oh, there totally will be,” said Emma with a smile.

**#4** They force you to run four laps—a whole mile—in Phys Ed around The Biggest Track in the World. I hate running.

I knew middle school wasn’t going to be easy, but I was prepared because I had a plan. I called it *The Invisible Tom Plan*. I was going to be quiet and stay in the background and not get noticed. That way I wouldn’t get bullied or get a dumb nickname for doing something stupid and embarrassing.



One time, a kid at my elementary school was giving a report about hot dogs. He was really nervous, so he kept saying “dog hots” instead of “hot dogs.” From then on everybody called him Dog Hots.

One little mistake and your whole life changes.

My whole life changed on the day before I started middle school.

## 2.

### The First Bite



**I** always go to Gram’s house the last weekend before school starts. She lives out in the woods about three hours from my house.

Gram is pretty old, but she doesn’t act old. She rides a mountain bike and hikes and does yoga. She has long gray hair, and always wears blue jeans, colorful shirts, wire-rimmed glasses, and crazy necklaces. I think she used to be a hippie.

Gram has a lot of vinyl records at her house, that she sings along to. She plays them super loud.





“That’s because she’s losing her hearing,” says my dad.

Gram says, “If you don’t play rock-and-roll loud, why play it?”

On my last day at Gram’s—the day before school started—I had set my alarm to go off at six o’clock. I had decided to get up early and go running to get in shape, so I could do those stupid four laps in Phys Ed. It’s like they want you to be in the Olympics. I don’t want to be in the Olympics.

But I also don’t want to be the loser guy coming

in last, huffing and puffing and looking like I was going to faint. So, I’d been getting up early to run. This was my second day. I probably should have started about two weeks ago, but I *hate* running and getting up early.

Since I ran early, before the sun came up, it wasn’t hot. I didn’t want to get all sweaty and disgusting. Who likes to get all sweaty and disgusting? Probably the same people who want to be in the Olympics.

That morning, I turned my alarm off and looked out the open window. I could see the moon through the trees. It was about three-quarters full. That’s when I felt something weird on my neck, like a bite. I remembered feeling something on my neck in the middle of the night

and brushing it away and going back to sleep. I *always* get bit and



stung by things at Gram's house. I even made a list that I keep on her refrigerator.

It's like the first bug that sees me arrive at Gram's house tells the other bugs that I'm there. "Hey! Guys! Look! Tom's here!"

"I love to bite that kid!"

"Me too! I bit him five times last year!"

"Oh, yeah? I stung him ten times!"

"No you didn't!"

"Yes I did!"

"You're a bee! If you sting him one time, you die!"

"Well... um... I... *wanted* to sting him ten times."

"Hey! Let's have a contest to see how many times we can bite and sting Tom!"

"That is an awesome idea!"

"Attack!"

I know that doesn't *really* happen, but it feels like it does.



I thought the bite on my neck was a spider bite, but it turned out to be something a million times worse.

•••

I put on my running shoes, some sweatpants, and a T-shirt. I was kind of tired because Gram and I had stayed up late the night before watching a movie.

After we had eaten dinner—homemade pizza and root-beer floats—she leaned across the table and whispered, "You want to watch a scary movie?"

Gram *loves* scary movies.

The one we watched was pretty old and in black-and-white. I thought it was going to be boring, but it was actually pretty scary—and funny too. It had Frankenstein and Dracula and the Wolfman in it, chasing these two guys named Abbott and Costello. I have to admit, I might have closed my eyes a few times. I hoped Gram didn't see me do it. But I knew that even if she did, she wouldn't tell anybody.

•••

When I came downstairs, Gram was in the kitchen making her coffee. She gets up early every day even though she doesn't have to.

"Good morning, Tommy! Ready to go running?"

She's the only person that I still let call me Tommy. Everybody else calls me Tom. (Well, except

Tanner Gantt, who calls me Tommy Farts, but he doesn't count.)

I showed her my neck. "Is this a spider bite, Gram?"

"Let me take a look."

She looked at my neck. "I don't see anything—wait.



There's two tiny little red dots. You must taste so good, he bit you twice."

She wrote "spider" on the list on the refrigerator.

•••

I went out the back door and down a path to the road. It takes longer, but I didn't want to walk by Stuart.

Stuart is Gram's neighbor's ginormous dog that is always tied up in the front yard on a rope. He's a Siberian husky, with gray-and-white fur so he looks like a wolf.

"Stuart" was the worst, dumbest, most ridiculous name for that dog. He should have been named Brutus or Killer or Max.

Stuart always barks at me when I walk by.

When I was five, Emma said to me, "If Stuart ever chews through his rope, you'd better run, because he will chase you and bite you and kill you and eat you."

I didn't want to find out if she was lying.

•••

It was still pretty dark out, but the moon made enough light to see as I ran down the dirt road. I'd been running for about five minutes when I came around a corner and stopped dead in my tracks.

Stuart was standing in the middle of the road.

He must have finally chewed through his rope and decided to wait out here to attack me. (I hate it when Emma is right about stuff.) He tipped his head back and howled. I'd never heard Stuart howl before. On the scary scale of 1 to 10, it was a 9.

He lowered his head and looked right at me, growling.

"Stay," I said. "Stuart . . . stay."

I didn't know if he would actually stay, but it was worth a try.

Slowly, I started walking backward.

"Good dog. . . . Stay. . . . Staaay. . . ."

He didn't stay.

Stuart started running right at me. Now I wished I *had* wanted to be in the Olympics and had been training since I was five years old, so I could run super fast.

He was getting closer. I turned around and started to run as fast as I could. "Stay! . . . Sit!" I yelled over my shoulder. "Roll over! . . . Play dead!"

He was right at my heels now, trying to bite me. I could hear his jaws snap together every time he tried and missed. I was getting tired and I knew I couldn't keep running this fast.

Why did I get up to run? Who cares if I was the loser guy in Phys Ed class, huffing and puffing and fainting when we had to run the mile? Now I was going to get bitten by a giant dog who couldn't do any tricks.



Stuart bit me on my ankle. I felt his teeth go through my sock and into my skin.

All of a sudden I saw bright white lights shining ahead.

They were the headlights of a big truck coming down the road, right toward us. Stuart got scared and ran off into the woods. The truck drove by and I stopped running and bent over, with my hands on my knees, trying to catch my breath. I rolled up my pants leg and saw that the back of my sock had some blood on it. I pulled my sock down and saw the bite marks.

Was I going to get rabies?

Gram and I saw a movie about a kid who got rabies. He went crazy and started drooling white, foamy bubbles. It was pretty disgusting. I could just see myself on the first day of middle school, foaming at the mouth. People would call me Bubble Mouth the rest of my life.

Now I *wish* I had gotten rabies. That would have been so much better than what happened next.



•••

Gram was on her front porch, doing yoga, when I ran up to the house.

“Gram! You’re not going to believe what just happened!”

She untangled herself from the position she was in and smiled. “Try me.”

“I got bit again!” I said, rolling down my sock to show her.

“What got you this time?” she asked.

“Stuart!”

Gram got *really* mad. I’d never seen her get that mad. Even at the TV news. She took out her phone and called her neighbor and started yelling at him. She said some words I had never heard her say before. I didn’t even know she knew some of those words. She must have learned them when she was a hippie.

Then she stopped yelling and listened. Her face slowly got less mad looking. After a while, she quietly mumbled, “Oh, uh . . . well. . . . Sorry, Jasper. Bye.” She hung up the phone, cleared her throat, and looked at me.

“Well . . . It seems that Stuart is at the veterinarian having some eye surgery. So, it must have been some other nincompoop’s dog! Tommy, have you ever had a rabies vaccination shot?”

*I hate getting shots.*

“Uh . . . I think so—yeah. I have. Definitely. I don’t need one. I’m good.”

Gram grabbed her phone. “Well, just to be safe, let’s call your mom.”

She told my mom what happened and asked her if I’d ever gotten a vaccination. Then she hung up and turned to me. “Well, I guess you and I are going to the emergency room.”

On the way out of the house, Gram went to the refrigerator and wrote “dog” on the list of things that had bitten or stung me.



...  
I sat next to a kid about my age in the waiting room. He had long hair that hung across his face, and he was staring down at his thumbs like they were the most interesting thing in the world. Gram was at the desk, talking to a nurse.

The kid held up his right thumb. “Dude. Doesn’t this look broken to you?”

It looked normal to me, but it sounded like he wanted me to say it was broken.

“Yeah. It does.”

He nodded and slouched down in his seat. “Why are you here?”

“I got bit by a dog. I’ve gotta get a rabies shot.”

He shook his hair out of his face and his eyes got wide. “Rabies? Seriously? That sucks. My brother has a friend who has a cousin that got bit by a dog and he had to get five shots.”

*Five shots?* Why would you have to get five shots? I only got bitten once.

“Really?” I said. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah! And the shots hurt wicked bad. They use, like, the biggest needle you have ever seen, and they stick it super far into your arm and they’re like the most painful shots you can get.”

He reminded me of Emma.

I hoped he was lying, or his brother’s friend’s cousin had made up the story, or he just liked to hang out in emergency waiting rooms and scare people. I could see Tanner Gantt doing that.

“Tom Marks?” said the nurse.

I stood up.

The kid shook his head. “I am so glad I am not you, dude.”

...

The doctor examined the bite on my ankle, cleaned it, sprayed it with something that stung, and gave me some pills to take.

“These’ll make you drowsy,” she said. “You’ll get a good sleep tonight.”

I only had to take some pills? No problem. I could handle that. I knew that stupid kid was lying. The doctor smiled.



“Now roll up your sleeve, I’m going to give you two shots. You’ll have to get another shot in three days. And then another shot after that in seven days, and *one more*, two weeks later.”

*Five shots.*

That kid hadn’t been lying.

I decided I was *never* going to go to Gram’s again.

The doctor picked up *The World’s Biggest Needle*.

“This might pinch a little.”

I hate it when doctors say stuff like that. They’re lying! Shots *never* pinch. They hurt. I wish doctors would just say, “Listen, kid, this is going to be extremely painful, because I’m going to jab this sharp, pointy thing right into your arm. Get ready to scream.”

If I were a doctor, that’s what I’d say.

I rolled up my sleeve, turned my head away, squeezed my eyes shut, and gritted my teeth. It didn’t *pinch*. It hurt!

The doctor was washing her hands when Gram remembered the bite on my neck. “One more thing, Doctor? Can you check something on his neck?”

The doctor looked at my neck and smiled. “Well, I’m certainly glad you’re getting the rabies vaccination shots.”

“How come?” I asked.

“That’s a bat bite.”