

MIDDLE SCHOOL BITES

OUT FOR BLOOD



BY NEW YORK TIMES
BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

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BANKS**

ILLUSTRATED BY
**MARK
FEARING**

Advance Reader's Copy—Not for Sale



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BY
Steven Banks

ILLUSTRATED BY Mark Fearing

HOLIDAY HOUSE



New York

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Eleven-year-old Tom the Vam-Wolf-Zom is juggling the daily routines of middle school life while also trying to explore his newly acquired powers, but Darcourt, the werewolf who bit him, and Tanner Gantt, his archenemy, are not making it easy.

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To Annette,
who helps me enormously
with these books and so many
other things that it would take
another book to list them all.

1.

A Strange Conversation



I was talking to a werewolf.

It was the same werewolf who bit me two and a half months ago, a few hours *after* I'd been bitten by a vampire bat and a few hours *before* a zombie bit me. That all happened the day before middle school started.

I'm probably The Most Unlucky Kid Who Ever Lived.

The world's only Vam-Wolf-Zom.

Now it was Thanksgiving weekend. I was at Gram's house with Mom, Dad, and unfortunately,

my big sister, Emma. I almost ate the whole turkey at dinner because I was zombie starving.

Since it was a full moon, I'd turned into a werewolf, and I decided to go for a run in the woods. I stopped to get a drink from a stream and that's when I saw the werewolf, crouched on the other side. I hadn't seen him since he'd bitten me, but I knew it was him right away. Martha Livingston, the vampire who turned me into a vampire, had told me his name was Darcourt.

He looked like a regular wolf and walked on all fours. (I walk upright on my two legs like a human when I'm a werewolf, which I've only been six times so far.)

Darcourt was gray and white, with very large, very sharp, and very white teeth. He was basically big and terrifying, and he looked like he could rip my throat out.

This was a chance to talk to another werewolf. I had a million questions. But he didn't look like he wanted to talk. He looked like he wanted to leap across the stream and eat me. I wasn't going to wait and find out. I was about to turn into a bat and fly away when he spoke.

"Good evening," he said in a low, gruff, serious voice. He sounded *exactly* like a werewolf that was about to attack.



I got ready to become a bat, and then he said, "I'm just messing with you, wolf! Howzitgoin'?"

He didn't sound like he was going to attack me anymore. But I wasn't sure. Sometimes you meet people and they're nice and friendly, and then later on you find out they're not. Like the first time I met Tanner Gantt, one of The Worst People in the

World. We were in third grade. He pretended to be nice for about five minutes and then he punched me and laughed.

Plus, Martha Livingston had said that Darcourt was dangerous, and if I ever saw him I should run.

“Wait a minute . . . I’ve seen you before,” he said. “About two months ago. You were jogging down the road and I bit you on the ankle. I didn’t know you were a kid until I got up close. I usually go for adults. More meat. I just saw you running down that road and I saw *dinner*.

“But then that big truck came by and flashed its high beams in my eyes, honking its horn. I didn’t know what was going to happen. Maybe Mister Truck Driver might stop? Maybe he’s got some silver bullets? I had to get out of there. So all I got was a bite. But, hey, better I turn you into a werewolf, than eat you, right? Then we wouldn’t be hanging out.”

Was he ever going to stop talking?

“That whole ‘eating people’ thing? It’s in our DNA. I’ve been trying to quit, and man, it is crazy hard! I go to the meetings. I do the pledge.” He raised his right paw. “I will not eat meat, human or animal. Vegetables can’t be beat. I’m not a cannibal! But then . . . nature takes over. I am seriously

sorry about turning you into a werewolf. So, what's your name?"

"Tom Marks."

"Yeah? I knew a guy named Howard Marks. Had him over for dinner once. He was delicious. So? Are you out here looking for someone to sink your teeth into? Have a little bite?"

"I don't bite people," I said.

Darcourt looked surprised.

"You don't? Seriously? Okay, I'm not going to judge. There are lots of different kinds of werewolves."

"Can I ask you some questions?"

"Ask away!"

2.

Top Secret



I sat down at the edge of the stream. “How come you’re on all fours, like a real wolf?”

He looked offended. “That’s kind of a personal question.”

“Oh. . . . Sorry.”

He threw back his head and laughed. “I’m pulling your tail! I’m a shape-shifter. Anytime I want to go full-on wolf? Bam! It’s showtime. I don’t need the full moon. But when Mister Full Moon does come up, I don’t have a choice.”

“Do you really kill people?”

He thought for a moment and sat down on his haunches. “*Kill* is such a strong word. Do I look like somebody who kills people?”

I wasn’t going to lie. “Yeah.”

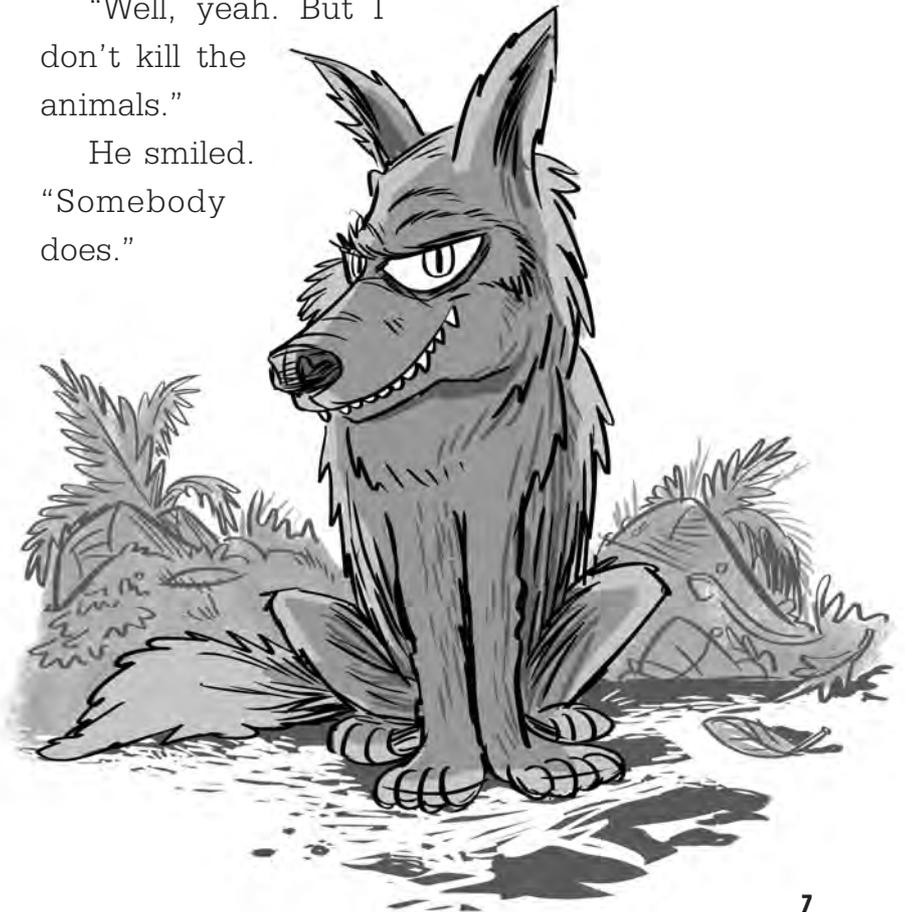
“Do you?”

“No. How can I kill people if I don’t even bite them?”

“Good point. But you do eat meat? Bacon? Chicken? Nice juicy steak?”

“Well, yeah. But I don’t kill the animals.”

He smiled.
“Somebody does.”



I couldn't argue with that.

"You hungry, Tom? I saw some rabbit tracks over there. I *love* fresh rabbit. Tasty as they are cute."

"No, thanks. I just ate half a turkey."

"That's right! It's Thanksgiving. Turkey-lurkey time. Mmmm. I could go for some bird. Still, rabbit's not bad. Did you ever have fresh rabbit?"

"No."

I didn't tell Darcourt that I'd eaten my sister's pet mouse, Terrence, last month. Technically, I didn't *eat* him. I just swallowed him for a little while and then I threw him back up. It was gross. I decided not to do anything like that again.

"Hey listen," said Darcourt. "I've got a proposition for you. My pack is called The Howlers. You want to join up? We have some serious big-time fun."

At first, it sounded like a good idea. I quickly made two lists in my head.

Reasons for Joining a Pack

- 1.** No school (which meant no homework, no tests, no Phys Ed)
- 2.** No more Tanner Gantt
- 3.** Wouldn't have to deal with Emma
- 4.** Could howl whenever I wanted to

5. Nobody would stare at me or ask to take a picture with them

Reasons for Not Joining a Pack

1. I'd miss Zeke.
2. I'd miss Annie (if she ever started talking to me again).
3. No more band (if Annie let me back in).
4. There might be a Tanner Gantt-type werewolf in the pack.
5. I'm only a werewolf twice a month.

"Um. . . . Can I think about it?" I asked.

"Sure!"

"Where's your pack now?"

"They're off doing some top-secret awesome stuff, but I can't talk about it until you join up."

"How many werewolves are there?"

"In our pack? We've got six. In the world? Who knows? They don't count werewolves in the census."

"When'd you become a werewolf?"

Darcourt looked around, like he was making sure no one was nearby. He lowered his voice. "Have you ever heard of . . . The Lycanthrope Project?"

"No."

"Top secret government project in Dallas,

Texas, at an old abandoned prison. They wanted to turn people into werewolves for an elite army of super soldiers. I was the first test subject. I escaped. I've been on the run ever since."



I couldn't wait to tell Zeke. He would think it was the coolest thing ever.

"Did they make a werewolf army?"

Darcourt let out a big laugh. "Nah! I made that up! That was a movie I saw. Hey, what's your favorite werewolf movie?"

"The old black-and-white one, *The Wolf Man*, with Lon Chaney Junior."

“You’ve got good taste, my furry friend. Check out *An American Werewolf in London*.”

“So, when *did* you turn into a werewolf?” I asked again. “Who bit you?”

“*That* is a good story. Epic. Love to tell you, but don’t have enough time tonight.”

I realized he wasn’t answering my questions.

“Where do you live?”

“Here, there, and everywhere. I like to keep on the move. Hey, do you like being a werewolf, Tom?”

“I’d rather be a normal kid.”

“Yeah, I hear you. It is what it is. You have to embrace your werewolf-self. Own it. Joining a pack would help.”

I decided to change the subject. “So, Mr. Darcourt, do you have gatherings of werewolves, like vampires do?”

“How’d you know my name? I didn’t tell you.” His voice wasn’t so friendly anymore.

“Oh . . . Martha Livingston told me.”

“You know Martha Livingston? The vampire girl from way back in seventeen seventy something? That is one fierce, smart girl. How do you know Martha?”

“She bit me when she was a bat and turned me into a vampire.”

His jaw dropped. “What?! She *bit* you?! You’re a vamp?!”

“Yeah.”

“Are you kidding me? How come I didn’t smell you? I can smell a vamp a mile away!”

“Well, technically, I’m only one-third vamp,” I explained. “I’m also a zombie.”

Darcourt’s blue eyes almost popped out of his head.

“You’re crazy. There’s no such thing. Now you’re pulling *my* tail.”

“I’m not. I think I’m the first and only one. I’m a Vam-Wolf-Zom.”

“Vam-Woof-*What?*”

“Vam . . . Wolf . . . Zom.”

“So, you got bitten by all three biters. I gotta take a sniff.”

He leaped over the stream and started sniffing me with his big nose. It was a little rude. I’d never had anybody sniff me like that before. But we’re both werewolves, so I guess it happens.

“You’ve got some serious smells going on. . . . Yeah, I smell the zombie. Not bad. Kind of dead, but sweet and meaty. . . . And the vamp smell. That coppery blood. . . . And the musty wolf smell is right in there too.” He stopped sniffing,



thankfully, and backed up to look at me. “Tom, the Vam-Wolf-Zom.”

Then I heard footsteps.

Coming toward us.

Both our ears perked up and we each went into a crouched position.

3.

A Stranger in the Woods



I hope it's not hunters," whispered Darcourt. "Watch out for those bad boys."

I'd never thought about hunters. One more thing I had to worry about. Most kids my age just think about school—how you look, who likes you, who doesn't, where you sit in the cafeteria, pimples, and growing pains. I have to worry about those things, plus staying out of the sun, getting blood, eating enough food, silver bullets, wooden stakes . . . and now hunters!

"People hunt wolves?" I asked.

“Well, it’s illegal to shoot a wolf unless they’re attacking you. Of course, they’ve got to have silver bullets to take *us* out. But if they do? Sayonara. Adios. Auf Wiedersehen. Adieu.”

The footsteps got closer. I sniffed. It was Emma. I could smell the perfume she pours on herself every day. I saw her in the distance, through the trees, but she was too far away to see us.

“Hey! Wolf Boy!” she yelled, with her hands cupped around her mouth.

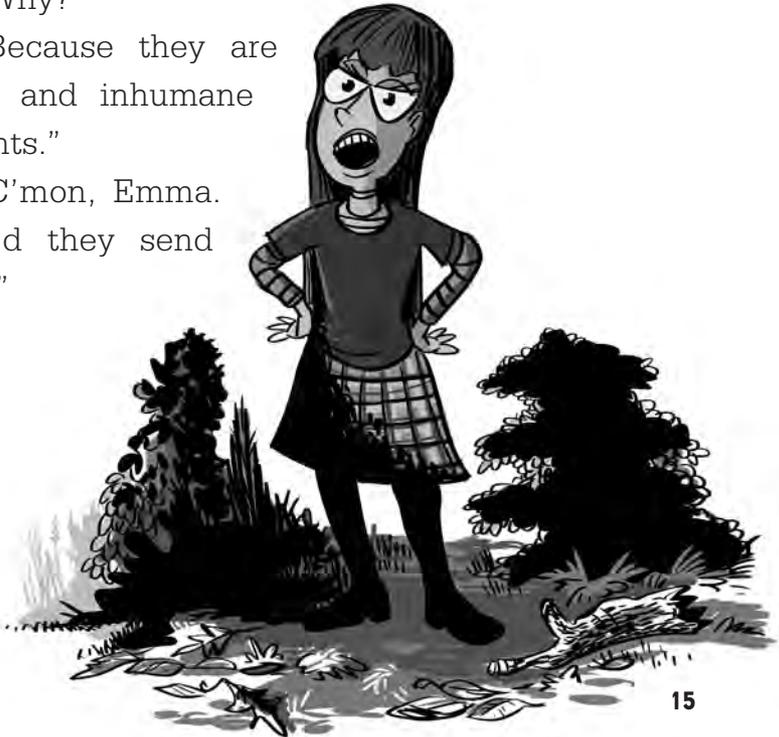
“What?!” I yelled back.

She stopped walking. “Mom and Dad *forced* me to come out here to get you!”

“Why?”

“Because they are cruel and inhumane parents.”

“C’mon, Emma. *Why’d* they send you?”



“They want us to have some stupid family togetherness time and watch some movie called *Never Cry Wolf*.”

Darcourt whispered. “That’s a good movie. Very pro-wolf.”

“I’ll be back in a while, Emma!” I yelled. “I gotta do some stuff!”

“What kind of stuff? Wait. Never mind. I don’t want to know. I’m sure it’s disgusting!”

Emma walked away.

“That’s my sister.”

“She looks like a nice girl.”

I was about to tell him that Emma was the opposite of nice when he said, “Listen, I’ll walk back with you and then I’ve gotta get some food in my belly.”

We headed back through the woods to Gram’s.

“Hey, Tom, did Martha Livingston ever tell you about an old book, about how to be a vampire? I forget the title.”

“*A Vampiric Education* by Eustace Tibbitt? Yeah. She lent me her copy.”

His eyes got wide for a second. Then he smiled. A wolf smiling at you is sort of creepy. *Am I creepy when I smile, when I’m a werewolf?* I’ll have to ask Zeke.

“Has it taught you how to do vampire stuff?”

“Yeah, I’m trying to transform into smoke. I also

want to get better at hypnotizing people. It's hard if the person doesn't want to be hypnotized."

We jumped over a fallen log.

"Where do you keep the book?" he asked, when we landed on the other side.

The book was in my room, at Gram's, in a secret pocket of my backpack. I'd put another book cover on it: *Danny the Detective*. Emma gave me that book for my birthday last year. She got it out of one of those Little Free Library boxes that people have in front of their houses, so it didn't cost her anything.

Emma always gives me horrible gifts. *Danny the Detective* is a really bad book. Danny is the worst detective ever. I figured out who stole his bike by the second chapter. He missed every clue. My twelfth birthday is coming up on January sixteenth. I wonder what stupid thing Emma will get me this time.

Anyway, I figured it was okay to show the book to Darcourt. He wasn't a vampire. He wouldn't be able to learn how to do any of things. Or would he?

Then, I remembered that when Martha Livingston gave me the book, she'd said, "This was a gift from my instructor, Lovick Zabrecky. Only one hundred copies were printed. If it fell into other

hands, I would be *greatly* displeased. It is quite valuable. Do *not* sell it on eBay.”

I told Darcourt I hadn't brought the book with me to Gram's house, that I'd left it back home.

“Too bad,” he said. “I'd like to check it out. Do you keep it somewhere safe?”

“Yeah. I keep it under my bed, hidden in my baseball mitt.”

I would seriously regret telling him that.

4.

Talk to the Animals



Darcourt and I were getting close to Gram's house.

"Hey, Tom, let's keep our little encounter on the down low. Swear, by the blood of the wolf, you won't tell a soul about me?"

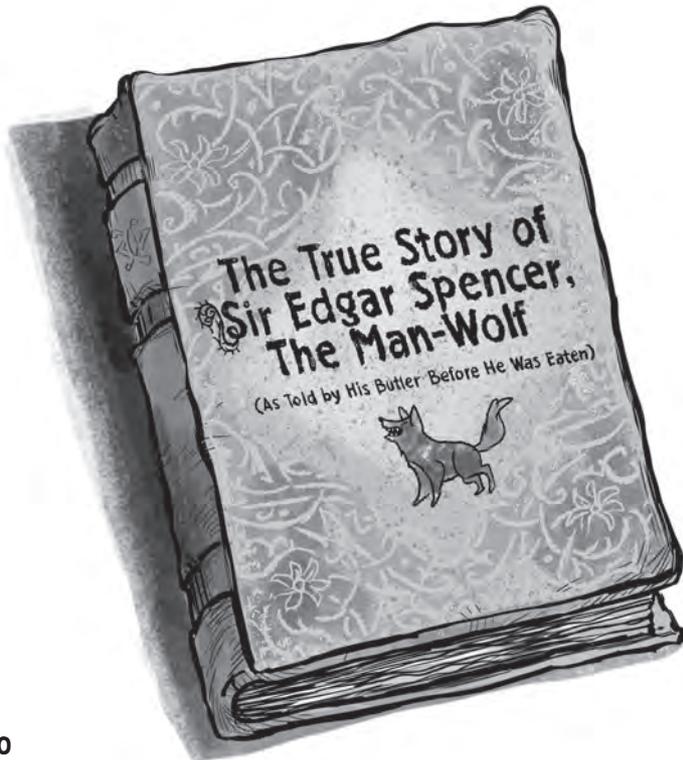
"Sure." I raised my paw. "I swear, by the blood of the wolf, I won't tell a soul."

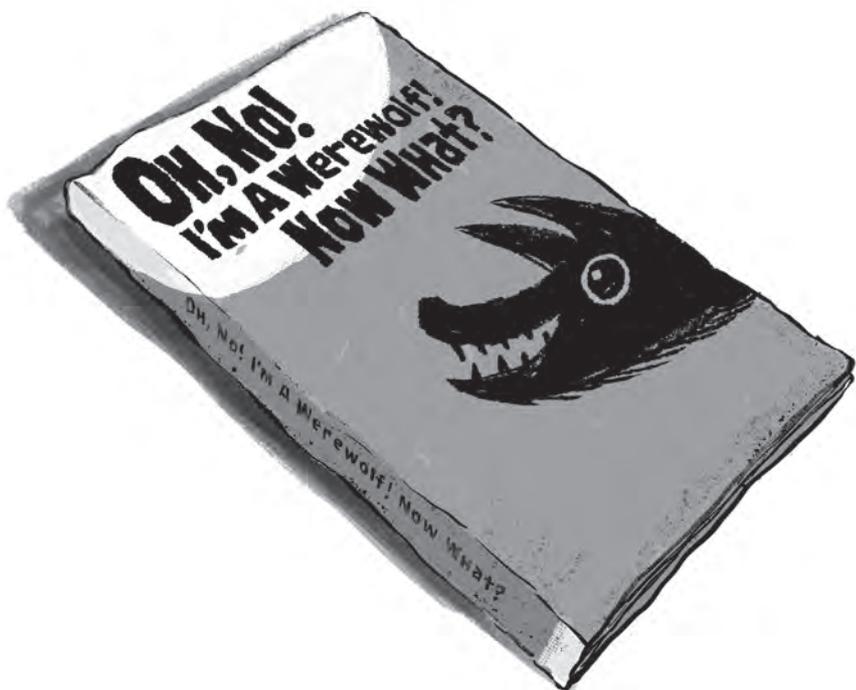
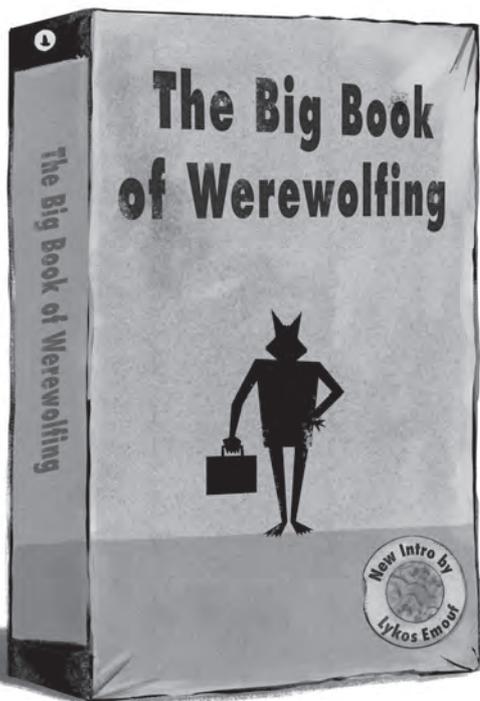
Martha Livingston had also made me swear not to tell anyone about her, but Zeke figured it out. Then, on Halloween she hypnotized him so he

wouldn't remember. But Darcourt already knew about Martha, so I figured it was okay that I told him.

“Are there any books about how to do werewolf stuff?” I asked.

“A few. . . . One from the eighteen hundreds is called *The True Story of Sir Edgar Spencer, the Man-Wolf (As Told by His Butler, Before He Was Eaten)*. Another one, *The Big Book of Werewolffing*, is not bad, but it's not good either. *Oh, No! I'm a Werewolf! Now What?* is total junk. The best way to learn werewolf skills is from a real live werewolf. If you join The Howlers, you'll learn a lot.”





That was another good reason to join a pack. When we trotted over the hill to Gram's, her neighbor's dog, Stuart, started barking his head off.

Darcourt stopped. "Hey, that dog could be my twin. Brother from another mother."

He barked at Stuart, who then barked back at him.

"Are you talking to him?" I asked.

"Yep."

"You can talk to dogs?"

"Some. He's got a heavy accent, so he's a little hard to understand."

"What'd you say to him?"

"I said, 'Hello. I mean no harm. This is your territory. Respect.'"

"And what'd he say?"

"I *think* he said, 'I have to poop soon and will be embarrassed if you watch.'"

"Can you teach me how to talk to dogs?"

"Yeah . . ."

"Excellent!" I sounded like Zeke.

". . . if we had two weeks for classes." Darcourt stopped walking. "Hey, I'd better not get any closer. Wouldn't want to freak out the fam. Big ol' wolf coming toward the house. 'Hey, Gram, it's Little Red Riding Hood time!' Grams aren't too fond of Big Bad Wolves. . . . So, don't forget my

offer about joining The Howlers. Good thing to be part of a pack, hang with your werewolf brothers and sisters, have a posse.”

“I won’t,” I said.

“Maybe I’ll come see you sometime. Check out that book. Stay cool, Tom. Stay wolf.”

He trotted back into the woods and disappeared. It wouldn't be the last time I'd see him.

5.

Cranberry Sauce



The next Monday, at home, I put on my long-sleeved shirt, sunglasses, hat, and sunscreen and went to the bus stop.

I needed to see if Annie was still mad at me. She thought I'd been spying on her when I'd turned into a bat and flew outside her bedroom window. She even kicked me out of our band. I kept trying to explain, but every time she'd either walk away or talk to someone else like I wasn't there. I even wrote her notes, but she just threw them away without reading.

Capri was also mad at me because I'd said her voice wasn't that good and she should stick to piano. Honesty is not always the best policy.

Zeke was late and ran up just as I was getting on the bus.

"Hey, T-Man! How was your Thanksgiving?"

I really wanted to tell him about Darcourt, but I had sworn I wouldn't.

"It was . . . okay," I said. "How was yours?"

"Excellent! You're not gonna believe this. I finally tried cranberry sauce. I love it! Why didn't anybody tell me it was so awesome? I had some for breakfast on my toast."

When we got on the bus, Annie and Capri were sitting next to each other. Annie was reading a book, as usual. It was called *Poems of Emily Dickinson*.



“Hey, Annie. Hey, Capri,” said Zeke.

“Hi, Zeke,” said Capri. Then she gave me a dirty look.

Annie looked up from her book and smiled. At Zeke. Not me.

“Don’t forget about band practice tomorrow, Zeke.”

“Hey, Annie,” I said.

Her smile disappeared and she went back to reading her book. I sat down behind her and leaned forward.

“Is that a good book?”

She ignored me, turned the page, and kept reading. I leaned back in my seat. What if Annie never talked to me again for the rest of my life? I had a plan called *The Girlfriend Plan*. I was going to ask Annie to be my girlfriend when we got to high school. If she never talked to me again, it would be hard to do that.



Tanner Gantt got on the bus. He didn’t call me Freak Face or Monster Boy like he usually does. He didn’t punch anybody or make fun of anyone or knock books out of their hands. Instead, he slumped down in the first empty seat and looked out the window. He must have been having a bad day too.



Everybody was acting different. Except Zeke.

“T-Man, if this bus could fly, where would you want it to go? I’d want it to go to a cranberry field.”

I shrugged. I was trying to figure out a way to get Annie to talk to me. I wanted to get back in the band and be friends again.

Luckily, I was about to get a chance to make that happen.

6.

Crime and Punishment



Mr. Kessler was the only teacher who assigned
us homework over Thanksgiving vacation,
which was totally unfair. You shouldn't have to do
any homework when you're on vacation.

I looked up "vacation" in the dictionary. It
said, "An extended period of leisure and recre-
ation." It didn't say anything about writing short
stories.

I didn't write mine until the night we got back
from Gram's.

THE DEADLY SHORT STORY

by Tom Marks

Tim Martin sadly sat at his desk. He was on vacation, but he had to write a story for one of his classes. Tim stayed up all night writing the story, because he wanted it to be good, and fell asleep at his desk. His window blew open and it started raining. Tim got a cold, the flu, and pneumonia.

The next day, he handed the story in, and then he collapsed and died, right in the classroom. They arrested his teacher and he went to prison. They renamed the school The Tim Martin Middle School. They put up a life-sized statue of Tim in the front of the school sitting at his desk writing the story, with a plaque that said: "He Died Because He Had to Do Homework During Vacation."

Every day, kids would cry as they walked past the statue, remembering how awesome Tim was and how much they missed him. Some put flowers on the statue and lit candles and left letters to

Tim and poems about him. The whole school wore T-shirts with Tim's picture on them.

A law was passed that made it illegal for a teacher to assign homework over any vacation. It was called The Tim Martin Was Right Law. They made a movie about Tim's life and it won the Oscar for Best Picture and made a billion dollars.



When we got to class, Mr. Kessler said we had to read our stories out loud. I read mine and a lot of people laughed. I thought Mr. Kessler would get mad, but he didn't.

"Very amusing story, Mr. Marks."

Then, Annie got up to read hers.

"The Bird Who Was Not a Bird on the Windowsill, written by Annie Delapeña Barstow."

I didn't like the sound of that.

"Anita Fresno was sitting on her bed, playing her guitar, when she looked out the window and saw a bird on the windowsill. It was staring at her. She looked closer. It wasn't a real bird. It was a boy at her school, named Terry Sparks, who had magical powers. He was spying on her, invading her private space, looking at her without her permission."

Annie looked up from her paper, gave me a dirty look, and went on reading.

"Anita stood up and shouted at the bird, 'Hey! Get out of here, _____!'"

Then she said a word you're not allowed to use at school. Tanner Gantt says it. So does my dad when he gets mad.

"Annie!" said Mr. Kessler. "You can't say that word in class."

"Why not?"

“It is not appropriate.”

“But it’s what the character would say.”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“Everybody says it,” said Annie.

Maren Nesmith raised her hand. “I have *never* said that word in my whole, entire life and I never will.”

That was probably true.



“I bet *you’ve* said that word, Mr. Kessler,” said Annie.

“This isn’t about me, Annie. You can’t use that word in school.”

“That’s censorship.”

“It is not censorship.”

“Yes, it is!” Annie can get mad really fast.

“Calm down,” said Mr. Kessler.

“I *am* calm!”

She wasn't calm. People who say 'I *am* calm' never are.

“It is an offensive word,” said Mr. Kessler.

Annie looked out at the class. “Was anybody offended by that word?”

Maren Nesmith was the only person who raised her hand.

Annie said, “The character would say _____. It's just a word. Writers have rights. If I want to say _____ in a story, I should be able to say _____!”

Now she'd said the illegal word four times.

“Okay, Ms. Barstow,” said Mr. Kessler. “You just got yourself lunch detention.”

Annie stormed back to her desk, sat down, and crossed her arms. She had tears in her eyes. But they were “mad tears,” not “sad tears.” There's a big difference.

“You have to sit at The Table of Shame,” whispered Maren Nesmith.

Annie whispered an illegal word to Maren.