

CHAPTER ONE

A BIKE, A BUS AND SOME BULLIES



Ruth was better on a bicycle than any kid she knew. She could do wheelies and a skid stop, and could jump over 3 cousins (until her mum told her that was definitely not allowed). She could ride faster than the boys, even without her hands on the handlebars.

Ruth loved her bike. Unfortunately for Ruth, her mum thought riding to school was too dangerous. But she didn't know what the school bus driver was like. When you got



on the bus, you had to sit down quickly before Mrs Kawners, the driver, hit the accelerator, otherwise you ended up being launched into the back seat by the G force. She was even worse at slowing down and just as you thought she was going to run a red light, she would brake so hard that anything you didn't hold on to would catapult into the front windscreen.



Mrs Kawners drove as if she was running late for something really important. It wasn't. It was only school and they were never late... worst luck.

The good thing about the bus was that Ruth got to sit next to Amanda. She was two years older than Ruth and she had a Saturday job at a magazine store. She always had a stack of

magazines that were perfect, except for their missing covers. Amanda loved the ones about pop stars, especially Andy Armarda. Her crush on him was funny, because she said he was the man she was going to marry. Ruth thought

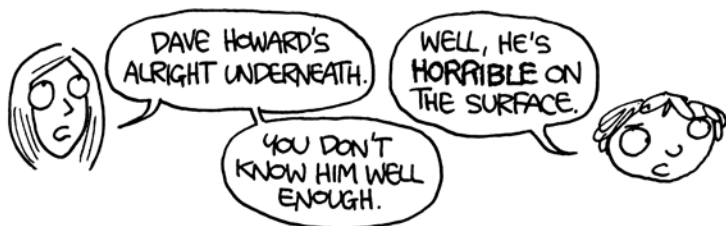
♥♥♥ Amanda Armarda ♥♥♥

sounded ridiculous. Amanda thought it sounded cool but what did Ruth know - she was just a kid.

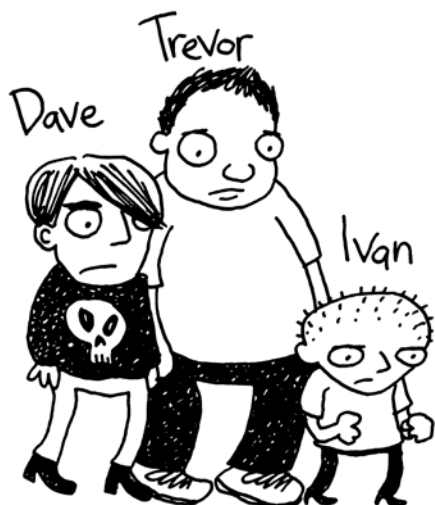
Amanda insisted on sitting near the back, because she said,



said Ruth, looking at the boys on the back seat.



Ruth didn't want to know him. Dave had lank, dark hair, which hung across his face like a mouldy, wet shower curtain. He was a big fan of skulls and chains and black t-shirts.



Dave hung out with Trevor and Ivan. Trevor was the biggest kid in the school. He towered over all the other kids. Ivan was quite the opposite, but what he lacked

in size, he made up for in sheer meanness. He tortured any creature he could get his bony hands on. Especially flies. Even if you don't like flies, it's cruel to rip their wings off.



One lunchtime, Trevor stopped Ivan from smashing some little kid's glasses and Ivan was furious. He punched Trevor in the stomach so hard that you could hear the whole playground gasp.

The only one who got to tell Ivan what to do was Dave. Ivan worshipped him like a god, which suited Dave just fine. Dave thought he was King of the Bus and sat in the middle of the back seat like it was his throne. Trevor and Ivan sat either side of him, like a pair of court jesters. Ruth imagined them wearing the silly outfits and it made her giggle.



When Ruth got to school, she bolted for the trees at the bottom of the playing field. She was tall enough to reach the lower branches and pull herself up. Then she climbed up where no one bothered to look and waited in her own world for the bell to ring. Often, kids would gather below the trees. She got to hear the secrets of the school. One day, Dave's gang even passed around a cigarette they had found. That day she heard a lot of coughing. Why cigarettes were cool was beyond her.



When the school bell rang, she loped up the field to the main doors and jumped in just before they closed. She liked to be unnoticed, remain *under-the-radar*, as her dad said.

Ruth didn't hate school, but she didn't like it either.

School was a series of endurance tests:

Test 1: Sitting through the boring classes, like History.



Test 2: Getting through a whole art class without one of Dave's gang ruining things by gluing someone's painting to the ceiling, or emptying all the glitter into another kid's bag.

Test 3. Eating your lunch in peace without having to trade the good stuff for a horrible meat paste sandwich that a knucklehead had stolen off someone.

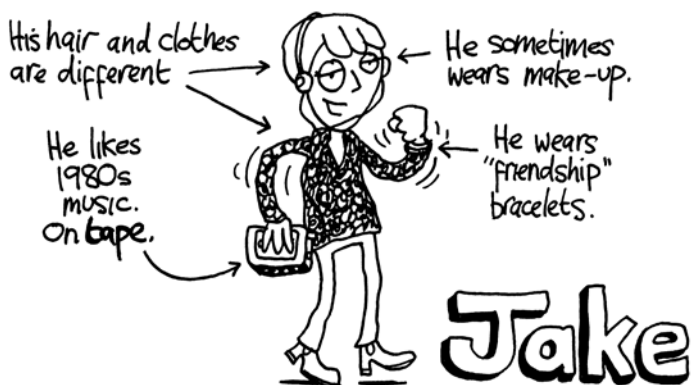


Test 4: Trying not to answer too many questions, even if you know you are the only one who knows the answer, because no one likes a teacher's pet. This was completely obvious when Nancy put up her hand to every other question.



Nancy doesn't care if people think she's a teacher's pet, but she does care when she opens her locker and finds Dave's gang have squirted a whole bottle of ketchup into it.

Test 5: Making sure you don't stand out in other ways. Like Jake. Jake never said anything in class, unless he had to, but he didn't blend into the background like Ruth.



Dave didn't know what to do with Jake, because nothing really bothered him. He didn't even care when they called him "weirdo," or "gayboy" or "stinkyfartbutt."



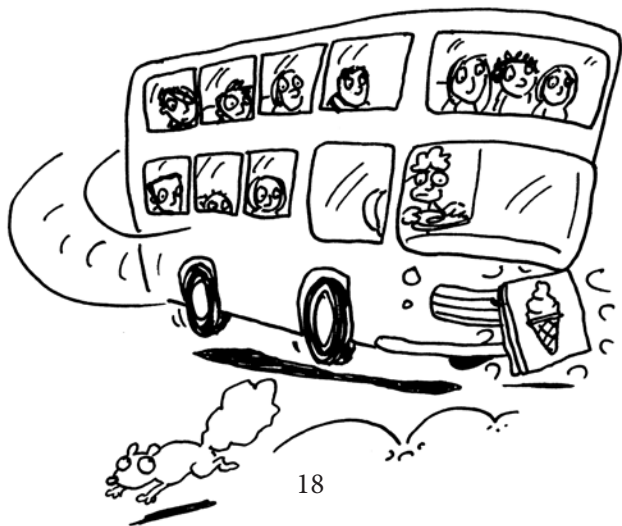
Jake's smile just got bigger and bigger and that made Dave's gang mad. Especially Ivan. Ivan would find a way to wipe that smile off his face for sure.

CHAPTER TWO

AN INVITATION, MIXED TAPES AND A SECRET



Ruth got on the bus the next day as usual. Amanda was bleating on about Andy Armarda as always. Mrs Kawners swerved to miss a squirrel and collected a corner shop's A-board. It remained attached to the front of the bus until Alan Butsnark pleaded with Mrs Kawners to stop to remove it, as he couldn't stand the scraping noise any more.



“I wonder who put that there,” said Mrs Kawners, with surprise.

Meanwhile, Dave’s gang were using peashooters to fire gobby paper balls at everyone. Amanda insisted they were far enough away to be safe, but Ruth felt a slimy sting on the back of her neck.



“Ow!”

she said. “That hurt!” She looked around at Dave’s gang, who were laughing.

Except for Dave. He stood up and walked down the aisle towards the girls.

“Sorry, Ruth,” he said. “I didn’t mean to hit you... You know, I like, like you...”

“Well, you’ve got a funny way of showing it,” said Ruth.

“Yeah. Heh. Heh.” He laughed and then stopped when he saw that Ruth was still mad.

“Look, why don’t I show it by taking you to the movies on Friday? Randomly Rearranging Robots 4 is on.”

Now it was Ruth’s turn to laugh.

“You’ve got to be joking,” she said.

The truth was, she didn’t want to go to any movie with Dave, but she watched his face turn from his version of charming to plain sad. She had upset him and she felt bad.

She tried to soften the blow by adding “I’ve heard that film’s rubbish.”

But it was too late, as Dave wasn’t listening to her anymore. He was walking to the back of the bus with a face like thunder. Ruth was glad they were at the school gates and rushed off the bus before Amanda could tease her.



Ruth's first class was history. She didn't mind it, as Mr Senchurry told some good stories, and he allowed her to boost her grades by drawing illustrations in her homework. As she sat down, she saw that Ravi was surrounded by piles of paper.



“What are you doing, Rav?”

“It’s my textbook. I was unpacking my bag when it dropped out on Ivan’s foot and he went nuts. Dave got Trevor to rip the binding off and Ivan threw the pages all over the place. I’m trying to put it back in order,” Ravi replied.

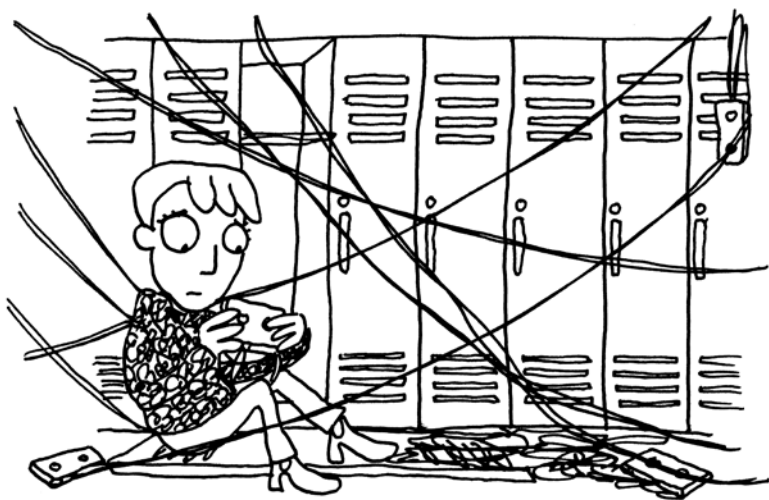
“Oh. Right.”

Ravi asked her, “Have you seen Jake?”

“No. Doesn’t he sit next to you?”

“Yeah. Okay...don’t worry.”

But Ravi did worry. History was the one subject Jake always turned up to. When the bell rang, Ravi was the first out and the first to find Jake. He was in the locker room, slumped against the wall. Ivan had found a way to get to him. Jake had sealed his own locker with silicone putty, but that didn’t stop Ivan. Ivan had unscrewed the door and taken it off its hinges. When Jake came back to it, he found his entire collection of 1980s mix tapes had been pulled out of their cassettes. They were strewn all over the hall like a giant spider web.



Ravi was really sad when he saw that, as he knew those tapes had belonged to Jake's dad, who wasn't around any more.

"We'll get our own back, Jake, don't worry," said Ravi, as he put the ruined tape into a pile.



"How? Those knuckleheads get away with everything. I'm sick of it!" Jake said and stormed out into the playground.

"We'll think of something, Jake. We're not like them. We've got brains!" As Ravi said this, he began to think of a way they could beat Dave's gang.

Jake walked over to the fence by the field and stared up at the sky.



He muttered a few words he wasn't allowed to say out loud and then began to calm down as he watched the birds flying overhead. It was then that he became aware of someone crying. It was Toby, who was sitting by the goal posts, bawling into his backpack.



Jake walked over and asked what was wrong.

“They took my lunch money. They always take my lunch money. I can’t remember the last time I got to have lunch in school.”

“Why don’t you bring a packed lunch?” asked Jake.

“They’d take that too.”

“Not if they didn’t like it. You need to find something you like that they wouldn’t.”

“Like what?”

“I adore peanut butter, salad and sweet chilli sauce wraps.”

“Eewwww... that sounds gross! No wonder they don’t steal those!”

Jake reached into his satchel and pulled out a wrap. He gave half to Toby. “Have a bite.”

Toby took a bite and prepared himself for the horrible taste but he really, really liked it. “That tastes delicious!”

“Sssshhhh! Don’t tell them that, or they’ll want some. Can you keep a secret?” asked Jake.

“Yes. Yes, I can.”

“Good,” said Ravi, who had crept up behind

them. “There’s something else I want to tell both of you...”

