

Ed Wicke

The first chapter of

Bullies

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1 Alexander the Great

The car swung round the corner in little jerks, like an old man on roller-skates for the first time. My mother peered nervously over the steering wheel at the school that crouched above us on the hilltop, all yellow and black like an angry wasp, like a hungry tiger slumbering in the late October sunshine. I tried to explain this to her but she wasn't listening to me. As usual!

'You *will* remember to give my letter to the Headmaster, won't you?' my mother asked with a frown. 'It explains why I can't come see him on your first day.'

'Yes, Mother!' I sighed, trying to make the sigh as small as possible. I pulled the letter from the pocket of my baggy, faded second-hand school trousers, which matched the second-hand sweatshirt with sleeves that hung down to my ankles. Turning the letter over, I read the name "Mr Prossy" in my mother's tiny, timid handwriting. Then, just in time, I snatched it away from the grubby fingers of my crazy four-year-old sister Brenda, who was on the car seat beside me.

Brenda doesn't think schools are tigers. She believes they are fairytale lands full of games and frolics and heavenly delight. She whispered in my ear so that it tickled: 'Give

Mister Bossy Mummy's lettuce to put on his head so she can't see him!

This was her version of what my mother had said, but since Brenda was having a lisping day it came out as 'Give Mithter Boththy Mummy'th lettuth...'

The car gave an old man's cough as it rattled through the rusty white gates that gaped at us with bloodstained tiger's teeth. It faltered to a wheezing stop and I was alarmed to see my mother unfastening her seatbelt.

'You don't have to get out!' I exclaimed while I tried to get my door open. But I was too late: she was out of the car already, looking about with a bright, motherly smile and cooing in a bright, motherly way about the loveliness of it all. I glanced at the three large boys who stood lazily in the main doorway, their eyes running over the babbling stream that flowed into Newton Primary School. I didn't say anything because my mother was still talking, and doing it far too loudly:

'Oh - and Alexander, tell your teacher I'll come see her as soon as I've got an afternoon free!'

I knew once she began calling me "Alexander" that something embarrassing was on the way. It was no good

my reminding her that I wanted to be called Alex - she would stop and puzzle out loud why I insisted on being Alex when dear Granddaddy was Alexander, and how my father had been so pleased when I was named after *his* father, and ever since my father died she had looked upon me as her Dear Grown Boy and - anyway, you see I couldn't possibly say anything just then, not in front of everyone.

She took me right up to the school door. I gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and was turning to go inside when she called after me, '*Dear Alexander! Be good, my precious!*'

There was a snort from one of the three boys. As my mother turned back to the car, he exclaimed to the others, '*Alexander? The name's bigger than he is!*'

I walked inside quietly, pretending I'd heard nothing. But it was no good...

Close Encounter of a Bullying Kind

'You!' cried the biggest boy, a long finger hooked towards my eyes. 'Come here! What's your name? And how old are you?'

I walked back, composing my face into a respectful blank. I said I was ten years old, and my name was Alex. They laughed.

‘Come on, mummy’s boy! What’s your name really? You can tell *us*!’ one of them sneered.

‘It’s the same as it was a moment ago,’ I promised. ‘It’s Alex!’ I said this with a friendly smile. They didn’t smile back.

‘But your *dear* mumsy called you something else,’ the large boy said in the sort of voice people use for talking to especially stupid babies. ‘Can’t you remember your *real* name? It was *Dear* something, wasn’t it?’

The shortest and fattest of the three interrupted. ‘No, Simon! He’s called ”*Be good my precious!*”. Didn’t you hear his *dear* old mummy call him that?’ He laughed and elbowed the third boy. ‘That’s his real name, isn’t it, Grabber?’

‘Wrong, Cubs!’ said the middle-sized sharp-faced boy. ‘He can’t afford decent clothes, and his mother can’t afford a decent car, but he’s still a *great* man, you know!’ He sneered down at me. ‘Alexander the Great!’

The AAABST

Now, I know almost everything there is to know about bullies, through hard experience. I'm like the caterpillar with athlete's foot: too many, and all too painful!

You see, my father died a few years ago and after that my mother couldn't settle. So we moved from place to place, looking for a home she felt happy in. By the time I was ten, I'd been to five schools and had been bullied by some of the most talented and dedicated bullies in the universe. They seemed to home in on me - I suppose it was because I was small and wasn't from their village. And wearing glasses didn't help.

And how I hated it. What I wanted most of all was to exterminate the lot of them! I remember how scared and sick and angry I sometimes felt. I even pretended to be ill so I wouldn't have to go to school. But I realised I had to learn how to survive them - so I became the world's expert at bully-busting. The Alex Adams Advanced Bully Survival Techniques made me invincible. At least....

... At least, that's what I *thought*. I was just about to find out how wrong I could be!

Anyway, just now I was applying AAABST number 4: "Understand and Avoid". You see, it's important to

understand bullies if you want to avoid being picked on. For instance, I'd discovered that there are three main bully types, and if you know which type you're dealing with, you have a better chance of outwitting him or her.

Piggy Thumpers

Piggies are fat and stupid and very tough. Their fists look like lumps of dough, but they feel like concrete blocks! They don't understand jokes, so don't tell them any because they'll think you're making fun of them. And they don't care for intelligent arguments. It doesn't help to say things like 'Why are you picking on me?' They just laugh and hit you harder.

Piggies thump everyone within reach - just out of habit! - so the best way to deal with Piggies is to keep away from them. Since they move slowly, this is easy to do: nine times out of ten, anyway. But watch out for the tenth time!

Donkeys

Donkeys are tall and strong and very, very stubborn. They're really good at sports and most of them are pretty good at talking too, so grown-ups think they're

wonderfully mature and let them get away with their bully tricks. They laugh loudly and especially like to laugh at other people. They can't stand to lose, *ever!*

The best way to avoid being thumped by a Donkey is not to annoy him. A Donkey likes to be spoken to politely and treated as if he's a little bit special. He wants you to tell him how great he is. But if he thinks you need putting in your place, you're dead meat.

Weasels

Weasels can be any size and shape. They love to make nasty jokes, tell lies and get people into trouble. They like to hurt people when no one is watching. They are clever at anything they want to do. Never argue with a Weasel: you will lose.

The only way to avoid being hurt by a Weasel is never to meet one.

Bully Helpers

Bullies usually have helpers. There are:

Slimers who tell them how wonderful they are.

Squealers who spy for them.

Stinkers who follow close behind the bullies, like vultures following the wolves, so they can kick you when you're down.

When a bully has enough helpers he can make life pretty nasty for you.

.....

So here I was at this new school, and I'd met three top-rank bullies in the first minute! For a crazy moment I imagined flinging myself at the three and making them pay for poking fun at my mother, but I knew how *that* would end. So instead of breaking my scrawny fist on a bully's iron stomach, and then getting my face flattened and my ears stretched to the size of two matching pancakes – instead of that, I went to deliver my mother's letter. It seemed the safer thing to do.

There were some promising doors to my right, and I knocked at the one labelled:

Mr Prossy

An old, tall, severe man opened the door. His face was

long and bony, with cold, sunken eyes and the stony gaze of a freshly-wakened funeral undertaker. A long, fleshless hand with plenty of veins on it slid towards me. In a quavering voice - high, echoing and very refined - he asked if I was Adams, and I nodded.

‘Well, come in, then, boy!’ he exclaimed with sudden ghastly friendliness, making me jump. He spread a gruesome smile for me, with all his teeth showing like tombstones on a gummy hill. Then his face resumed its serious look as he beckoned to the tall, muscular Donkey by the main door.

‘Cobbett - come join us while I explain the gwound wules to this noble initiate!’ he commanded, and added in a quieter tone for my ears that Simon Cobbett was Head Boy and Captain of Games and a Fwightfully Fine Chap and Good Fwiend to Have.

I nodded dismally. ‘I’m sure he’s a delightful fellow in his way,’ I said.

Mr Prossy nodded his head a dozen times, like a string puppet with a loose joint. He grinned at me again, so I grinned back, but my heart wasn’t in it. I didn’t much like Mr Prossy and I was fairly sure I wouldn’t like his Head Boy either.

Cobbett strode over to us in that relaxed, strong manner

that all Donkeys have. Mr Prossy had finished chilling my hand with his cold, bony, long-fingered dead man's grip and he passed it over to Cobbett to mangle in a proper knuckle-cruncher of a handshake.

'Don't hurt him, Cobbett!' the old man squawked nervously as my face went white. He confided proudly to me, 'That boy doesn't know his own strength!'

'I think *I* know it,' I muttered, rubbing my hand. I sat in the chair indicated by a limp wave of the Head's arm. Cobbett yawned and leaned against the wall. He lazily flexed a bicep, just to keep in practice for the next handshake. Mr Prossy sat himself carefully in his black leather recliner and folded his hands together beneath his chin while he rolled his eyes to the ceiling as if to read his speech from it.

I can't remember much of the talk - it was all the usual Headmaster stuff about running a happy school and every boy and girl Doing Their Bit, Working Hard and Playing Jolly Hard, too.

'There's never any trouble about discipline, is there, Cobbett?' he asked the Head Boy, rolling his eyes down again, like roller-blinds dropping. He said it with a little laugh and added, 'Cobbett sees to it that no one steps out of line! No pwoblems, Cobbett?'

‘Nothing I can’t handle, Mr Prossy,’ the boy replied with a smile that would have stripped wallpaper. He turned it on me. ‘We run a tight ship, Adams! Everyone knows his place, or else walks the plank, you know!’

“Dweadful boy!” laughed Mr Prossy uncertainly, remonstrating with a long, crooked finger. ‘You mustn’t say such things, you know. Someone will think you’re serious! What will you suggest next - keelhauling?’

Cobbett looked genuinely interested. He rubbed his chin and puzzled aloud, ‘Well now, that’s an idea I’d not considered yet, sir...’

‘... Come on, Adams, don’t be all day about it!’ Cobbett hurried me along the corridor. He was tall and broad with short brown curly hair, and he walked so fast that I had to jog to keep up with him. ‘There’s your classroom, number four. Hang up your bag and coat inside. And Adams - ‘

‘Yes?’

‘*Don’t* run in the corridors!’ He made a face at me and left, his heavy shoes thumping on the green linoleum.

Teachers

I stood with my knuckles poised to knock, wondering about my new teacher. Now, there are too many types of

teacher for anyone to list. For a start there are:

Trendies, friendies, shouters, clouters, smellies, bigbellies, jollies, dollies, cold oldies, silly fillies, game-contrivers, slavedrivers, mutterers, flutterers, thunderers, blunderers, breezy-and-brighters, dull-as-nighters, crabby grabbers, kind minders, smilers, frowners, uppers and downers.

The Alex Adams Teacher Classification System allows you to mix these together, so you might end up with a Trendy Dolly Slave-Driver, or a Game-Contriving Muttering Old Frowner! The worst type I have met is the Dimwitted Thundering Blunderer, who makes mistakes and then blames *you* for them, blasting you out of your seat with sound; but that's another story...

Miss Spade

Miss Spade, my new teacher, was none of these. She had red hair that wouldn't stay in place and large, soft orange freckles over as much of her as you could see. I used to wonder whether she had them everywhere. Her eyes were

large and blue and always seemed to be puzzling over something.

I suppose it was *us* they were puzzling about. We must have been her first class, because from time to time she would stop in the middle of telling us something, with the air of a new mother pausing halfway through putting on a nappy and wondering whether it was perhaps upside-down.

When I knocked on the door of her classroom, she paused just like I said, left her sentence hanging in the moist autumn air, and came to open the door. Her red eyebrows swung upwards as I stammered out my name, and she read the Headmaster's note with her lips moving as if to be sure of the words.

'*Alexander?*' she asked doubtfully, reading the full name that the Head had insisted on writing. One eyebrow was raised now, and she gave me a quizzical look that made me giggle. I said "Alex" was better, and she nodded delightfully.

She shooed me inside and announced, 'Children - this is Alex. He is ten years old, like most of you. He will be in Red group, and will sit at the front, here by Natalie. Is that all right, Natalie? You'll have to move your desk a frog's hop to the right. Make that three hops. Unless it's a

gruesomely big frog. Good! Sit down, Alex. I'll find you some books and a pencil in a moment. We were just discussing the best way to start a project on weather.'

The Class

Oh, we were a puzzle to her, right enough! Some days, it must have been like finding buttons in the church collection bag, or looking down and discovering that you were wearing one blue sock, and one orange. For example, there was Fred Rumble who knew everything about spiders, including the bits you'd rather he left out. Marvin Pyle could make bird noises so realistic that the birds would come over to peer at him. Helen Welther was the best footballer in the school, better even than Cobbett. Najeen Shahn was a whiz on the piano. And now there was me, the world's expert on bullies. However, no one knew this yet.

When I met my mother at the school gate that afternoon, I told her all the good things she wanted to hear and left out the parts that might upset her. She was too easy to upset anyway, just at the moment.

Brenda asked, 'What about the lettuce on Mr Bossy's head?'

‘Well, Brenda,’ I told her, ‘poor Mr Prossy has only one ear and a wooden leg. He used to be a pirate, you see, but he had to retire when he got to be eighty, so they made him a Headmaster instead!’

‘Poor man!’ said Brenda soulfully. ‘Having to become a teacher after being something good like a pirate!’

‘He doesn’t mind,’ I said. ‘He still keeps a bloody cat o’nine tails – you know, a pirate whip - in his desk drawer, and he has an evil one-legged parrot at home to guard his second-best eye-patch.’

She believed me.