

Bullfrog  
by  
Pete Barry

A group of school children on their very first bus trip discover  
that their teacher's plans are not what she claimed.

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INT. GARAGE

A rickety wooden door rattles on its rails. MARIA, 27, plain green sweater and skirt, grunts as she throws the door open, letting in the morning mist and pale light.

A dirty yellow Crown Supercoach flat nose school bus, sixteen years out of use, waits inside.

Black.

EXT. SCHOOL

Wet, foggy morning. The bus sticks halfway out of the garage. A line of schoolchildren begin to file in.

Maria fills the front tire from an airhose. WHRRRR. She watches the children carefully.

INT. BUS

JEREMIAH, the oldest child at 13, races to the back of the bus, beaming.

JEREMIAH  
Man, this is *huge*.

SARAH, 11 and reserved, smiles. Other children, some as young as 6, eagerly file in to seats.

SARAH  
Where are we going?

JEREMIAH  
Does it matter? Let's just drive around in this thing!

BADEN, 11, dark haired, plops down in the third row of seats, sullen.

BADEN  
I guess this is all right.

JEREMIAH  
Are you crazy? This is fantastic!  
What's the matter with you?

BADEN  
When she said "a surprise" I thought she meant Chocolate Milk Day.

Sarah rolls her eyes.

SARAH  
You always think it's Chocolate  
Milk Day.

BADEN  
(glumly)  
Someday it will be.

JEREMIAH  
This is going to be better. Well,  
at least *almost* as good.

Maria jogs up into the bus, looks out over the children,  
mentally counting heads.

MARIA  
Peter? Where's Peter Barris?  
Martha?

Peter and Martha raise their hands obediently.

MARIA  
All right. Everyone sit down right  
away. We have to get going.

The children all immediately grab seats.

MARK  
Can we sit anywhere?

ESTHER  
My chair has no buckle!

But Maria is already in the driver's seat, fiddling with the  
gear stick, not paying attention to the children.

Sarah moves over to Esther.

SARAH  
It doesn't look like the bus has  
seat belts. You're just going to  
have to hang on.

ESTHER  
(pleased)  
That's scary!

Jeremiah begins to stroll up and down the aisle, checking to  
make sure everyone is safely seated.

JEREMIAH  
 It's OK, folks, the first  
 Fayetteville school bus tour is  
 about to take off!

As if the words were magic spoken, the bus roars into life.

Maria plants her foot on the gas.

Jeremiah nearly topples over as the bus lurches forward. He rights himself, laughing.

JEREMIAH  
 HERE WE GO!

EXT. SCHOOL

The muffled CHEERS of children ring out from the belly of the bus. It swerves uneasily out of the gravel parking lot onto a dirt road.

INT. BUS

The children press faces to the windows. The school dwindles into the distance; this is deep rural territory, unbroken fields bordered by woods, devoid of human life.

Jeremiah continues to act as tour guide.

JEREMIAH  
 Thank you for riding Fayetteville  
 tours, ladies and gentlemen, it's  
 great to be here with you all this  
 morning.

He points an invisible microphone at Sarah.

JEREMIAH (CONT'D)  
 Where are you from, ma'am?

SARAH  
 You're crazy.

JEREMIAH  
 A traveller from Yorecrazy,  
 Pennsylvania, folks, nice to have  
 you with us.

The younger kids giggle at Jeremiah's antics, even Sarah cracks a grin.

JEREMIAH

Out the left side, you'll see some dirt. Soon we'll be on our way to...

He makes his way to the front of the bus and pokes his head around the Plexiglas driver's shield.

JEREMIAH

Maria? Where are we going?

Maria doesn't answer. She stays focused on the road.

JEREMIAH (CONT'D)

Maria?

MARIA

Sheckleton.

JEREMIAH

OK. Are you all right?

MARIA

Fine.

Jeremiah turns back to the other schoolchildren.

JEREMIAH

We're on our way to Sheckleton, folks!

Some cheers. Sarah twists up her face, almost shocked.

SARAH

Why Sheckleton?

Jeremiah tries Maria again, a little tentative.

JEREMIAH

Maria?

A sound escapes Maria, a little half-gasp. She coughs. Jeremiah doesn't ask again.

JEREMIAH

(to the kids)

Sheckleton, home of the famous Sheckleton frankfurter factory!

Squeals and laughs. Baden rolls his eyes.

BADEN

I hate frankfurters.

SARAH  
You love them.

BADEN  
They're better with chocolate milk.

JEREMIAH  
Then, after the frankfurters, we  
head down to the Chocolate Milk Bar  
for Karaoke Night!

PETER  
Sing the song, Jeremiah! Sing the  
Jeremiah song!

Applause and laughter. Jeremiah check one more time with  
Maria.

JEREMIAH  
Maria? Can I sing my song?

MARIA  
(immediately, quickly)  
Yes. Please keep the children  
happy back there. We'll be there  
soon.

Jeremiah struts down the aisle.

JEREMIAH  
Karaoke night in Sheckleton, where  
they sing like this:

He walks up to Abigail, 6, who claps her hands over her mouth  
in excitement. Jeremiah belts out in a scratchy, pseudo-rock  
voice:

JEREMIAH  
JEREMIAH WAS A BULLFROG!

Laughter erupts from the bus. Some join Jeremiah, but he  
carries the tune:

JEREMIAH (CONT'D)  
HE WAS A GOOD FRIEND OF MINE!  
I NEVER UNDERSTOOD A SINGLE WORD HE  
SAID,  
BUT I HELPED HIM TO DRINK HIS WINE!

He mimes draining a bottle, then motions to everyone to join  
him in the chorus:

CHILDREN  
 JOY TO THE WORLD!  
 ALL THE BOYS AND GIRLS!  
 JOY TO THE FISHES IN THE DEEP BLUE  
 SEA!  
 JOY TO YOU AND ME!

In the driver's seat, Maria listens to the chorus. Tears stream down her face, and sobs wrack her entire body.

A sob becomes a gasp.

Three hundred feet down the road, standing on the shoulder with a sack, is BRYANT. He is staring wildly at the bus.

Maria accelerates.

As the bus passes Bryant, the kids flock to the windows and wave. Jeremiah keeps singing.

JEREMIAH  
 IF I WERE THE KING OF THE WORLD,  
 I TELL YOU WHAT I'D DO-

Jeremiah breaks off his song, frowning.

Bryant is charging after the bus, screaming, a man possessed. The younger children are laughing and waving to him.

Sarah looks up at Jeremiah, brows furrowed, eyes questioning.

SARAH  
 What was Mr. Bryant doing?

Jeremiah doesn't answer. Far behind, Bryant runs out of breath, pants, then pulls out a cell phone. The road winds into a thicket of woods, and Bryant is left behind.

The bus continues to accelerate.

Jeremiah approaches Maria again.

JEREMIAH  
 Maria? I think Mr. Bryant wanted something.

No response.

JEREMIAH  
 Maria? I think we should stop the bus.

A quick and audible sob.

JEREMIAH  
Are you all right? Maria?

Maria rounds on him, eyes red and bloodshot, screaming:

MARIA  
Jeremiah, SIT DOWN!

Silence. Jeremiah is stunned at the outburst, unable to move.

BADEN  
LOOK OUT, MARIA!

EXT. ROAD

The bus is pushing 50 miles per hour, and from around the tree-lined bend springs a small guard's booth.

The lone WATCHMAN is dressed casually, and is totally unprepared for the school bus barrelling around the corner. He throws his hands up in surprise.

A metal chain stretches across the road.

INT. BUS

Sarah cries out.

JEREMIAH  
WHOA!

Maria closes her eyes.

EXT BUS.

SHHRCLANNNG. The bus crashes through the metal chain, uprooting the steel posts that suspend it.

INT. BUS

THUNKRUNNNCH. Jeremiah is thrown into the air and crashes down on the rubber floor matting. The children are launched into the backs of seats.



EXT. BUS

Sparks erupt where the chain catches the front wheel as the bus drags it along. The bus careens onto a paved road running perpendicular to the path.

INT. BUS

Jeremiah sits up, grips the back of his head and checks for blood.

The bus is now full of the sounds of children crying. Peter is forcing out long wails of UUUUNNNH, only pausing to suck in breath for more.

Sarah helps to pull Jeremiah to his feet. Her face is a sickly pale color.

Baden's hands tremble, but his face is remarkably composed. He stares at Maria.

Maria checks the rearview mirror, sees no pursuit. She takes a few deep breaths, then addresses the children loudly, not looking back.

MARIA

OK, kids. It's going to be OK. I know this is scary. I'm scared too. But we're all going to be OK.

JEREMIAH

Where are we going?

MARIA

I DON'T.

Maria catches herself, starts again.

MARIA

Just try to stay calm. Please. I need everyone to keep calm.

ESTHER

I WANT MY MOMMY.

Esther's plaintive cry is joined by a chorus of others, calling for mommy, daddy, or any kind of explanation.

Jeremiah holds up his hands.

JEREMIAH

Guys. Guys!

The verbal complaints stop, though Peter continues his loud sobbing.

JEREMIAH

Let's just try to take it easy.  
Let's sing, OK? *He's got the whole world...*

The children join in with the refrain. Baden does not sing. He looks at Maria vindictively, then gets up and marches to the back of the bus. He plops down in a seat.

SARAH

I'm going to make sure nobody's hurt.

JEREMIAH

That's a good idea. Then check on Baden.

SARAH

He's all right.

JEREMIAH

Check on him.

The command is forceful and awkward. Sarah studies Jeremiah's face for a moment, then nods. She moves over to Theresa, 10, whose nose is bleeding badly.

Jeremiah moves into the driver's area so that he can talk to Maria quietly, confidentially.

MARIA

Thank you, Jeremiah. Thank you so much. We'll be in town in five or ten minutes, it won't be long.

JEREMIAH

I have to know if you're going to hurt us.

Maria takes her eyes off the road and stares at Jeremiah, as if slapped. Her face crumples.

MARIA

Hurt you? I'm-

She breaks off, crying, and turns back to the road.

JEREMIAH

OK, OK. Will you call our parents?  
Let them know...

Maria begins sobbing at the word *parents*. Jeremiah lets it go.

He sees Sarah sit down next to Baden. She talks quietly to him; he does not respond.

JEREMIAH

I'll try to keep them calm.

Jeremiah walks up the aisle, through a verse of *he's got you and me, brother, in his hands*. He sits down in front of Baden, next to Sarah.

SARAH

What is she doing?

JEREMIAH

She's kidnapping us. She's not going to let us go back to our parents.

SARAH

What do we do?

Jeremiah looks back at Maria, then down at his feet. He takes off his right sneaker.

SARAH

What-

JEREMIAH

Shh. Grab anything you can that could be a weapon.

He begins to unthread his shoelace.

Sarah looks to her fingers. She has two rings on each hand, studded with gaudy fake stones. She slips the rings off of the left hand and pops them onto two fingers on her right; she punches her hand lightly, leaving small red marks.

Baden tightens his hand around his shiny metal lunchbox.

JEREMIAH

Go up the aisle. Anyone over ten, tell them to get ready to charge. Anyone under ten, tell them to sit tight and hold on.

SARAH  
I don't know if I can hurt Maria.

BADEN  
I can.

JEREMIAH  
We need you, Sarah. We need as many as we can. Maria's sick or something. If we don't stop her now, we're never going home again.

Sarah looks down the bus at Maria.

SARAH  
All right.

BADEN  
Let's do this.

The three stand up and begin to slowly make their way back towards the front of the bus. Sarah stoops down to Andrew, an 8 year old, while Jeremiah leans over to Jessica, 12.

SARAH  
Andrew. We need you to not move or talk for a few minutes. OK?

JEREMIAH  
(to Jessica)  
We're going to stop Maria. Can you help?

JESSICA  
I heard you. I have a pencil.

JEREMIAH  
Wait until we get there, then get to the front as fast as you can.

JESSICA  
I will.

They move up. They continue to whisper to the kids. About a quarter of the way up, Maria begins to speak loudly again to the back of the bus.

MARIA  
Jeremiah? Is everything all right?

JEREMIAH  
We're just making sure nobody's hurt or too upset.

MARIA

Good.

Silence. Then:

MARIA (CONT'D)

Kids. I'm so sorry this had to happen. I know none of you have ever been out of Fayetteville. But I want to tell you why we had to leave today.

No response. Jeremiah and Sarah are halfway up the bus.

MARIA (CONT'D)

I know that your parents had told you that a day would come when we'd all sit down together and drink some chocolate milk. You see, today was that day.

Baden's fist is tightening, knuckles growing white.

MARIA (CONT'D)

I know they told you that it would be magic milk, that would take you somewhere very special. But the truth is, the milk was bad. You'd go to sleep, and you wouldn't wake up.

Jeremiah and Sarah are three quarters of the way to Maria. Abigail sees Sarah and pulls out a bobby pin; Sarah takes it away and shakes her head slightly.

MARIA (CONT'D)

And then your parents were going to drink the milk, and they'd sleep and not wake up. And I'd have to drink it. And I couldn't...

She trails off. Jeremiah is at the last seat before the driver.

BADEN

Would we go to heaven with our parents?

Jeremiah and Sarah freeze. Maria watches them in the mirror, confused and dazed.

BADEN (CONT'D)

Are we ever going to see our  
parents again?

Maria's face crumples.

MARIA

I know it's hard. I know it's a  
lot for children to accept all at  
once. There just wasn't any more  
time.

Jeremiah mulls over Maria's words.

JEREMIAH

It's all right, Maria. We forgive  
you. You did what you had to do.

Maria cries.

MARIA

Thank you, Jeremiah. Thank you,  
kids. I love you all so much.  
Thank you-

Jeremiah deftly slips one hand over Maria's head and tightens the shoelace around her neck. She is thirty pounds heavier than he is, but she is surprised enough that the attack pulls her backwards, off balance. She grunts, trying to breathe.

Sarah punches her in the kidney and pulls with Jeremiah, doubling the pressure.

Baden grabs the lunchbox with both hands and drives it hard into Maria's face.

The older kids leap from their seats, shouting, and charge the front of the bus.

The bus lurches, swerves slightly off the road, but Maria cannot reach the gas, and the bus begins to decelerate.

Seven more children leap into the driver's area, pulling on the makeshift noose, pummeling, stabbing, punching, kicking biting Maria. She makes horrible strained sounds: URRFF, STRRF, WHHRRR.

EXT. BUS

The bus rolls off the road, into a field, and cruises to a stop.

Silence.

INT. BUS

WHUMP. Maria collapses to the floor, lying face first down the loading stairs. The kids all look down at her, as if observing a beetle. Peter continues to wail: UUNNNH.

SARAH

Is she dead?

JEREMIAH

I don't think so. We have to get her back. So we can take care of her.

BADEN

We have to get back so we can get into heaven.

JESSICA

Oh God. Thank God. I want to go to heaven. I want Maria to go to heaven.

She begins to cry.

JEREMIAH

Don't worry. Everything's OK. We're going home.

Jeremiah slides into the driver's seat. He grabs the wheel and points down at the accelerator and brake.

JEREMIAH (CONT'D)

Baden, help me. Grab the gas and push.

Baden bends down and pushes the right pedal.

BADEN

Brake.

He pushes the left pedal down steadily.

EXT. BUS

The bus slowly begins to move, rolling steadily back towards the road, back towards Fayetteville.

INT. BUS

The other kids move back through the bus and take seats. Sarah sits down next to Peter and hugs him. She starts singing loudly, happily, but without any groove:

SARAH  
JEREMIAH WAS A BULLFROG.  
HE WAS A GOOD FRIEND OF MINE.

The children throughout the bus begin half-heartedly singing along, starting to smile a little again, relieved.

CHILDREN  
I NEVER UNDERSTOOD A SINGLE WORD HE  
SAID,  
BUT I HELPED HIM TO DRINK HIS WINE.

Jeremiah checks the children in the rearview mirror and musters a small smile.

JEREMIAH AND CHILDREN  
JOY TO THE WORLD,  
ALL THE BOYS AND GIRLS.

EXT. BUS

The bus rolls slowly back down the road towards Fayetteville. The light singing of children can be heard:

CHILDREN  
JOY TO THE FISHES IN THE DEEP BLUE  
SEA,  
JOY TO YOU AND ME.

FADE TO BLACK.