

Bullies On The Bus

A Secret Creatures Story

by Marc Archambault

Bo Evangelista always sat in the front seat of the school bus. He sat on the opposite side of the aisle from the bus driver- Carl Carlton Junior- right next to the door where the students got on and off. Even though this was the coldest seat in the winter, Bo had discovered that it was also the least stinky place on the whole bus. Even though Carl Junior's feet smelled like rotten broccoli stew, at least every minute or two the door would open and Bo would get a blast of fresh air. The back of the bus smelled mostly like Billy and Bobby Bush, who Carl Junior called the Farting Twins. Their mother was writing a cookbook about beans and they were expected to test all her recipes. It was more than Bo could stand; he had a very sensitive nose.

There were other reasons Bo sat in the front seat. Carl Junior, whose personal grooming and fashion sense left a lot to be desired, cared deeply about the appearance of the bus. He had yelled at Bo one hundred times about not scratching the ceiling of the bus. Bo had an impressive rack of antlers, like a deer or elk would have, growing from his forehead. It was one of several things that set him apart from the other kids.

The most important reason Bo sat in the front seat however, was to be with his little sister

Lucy. She was in kindergarten and still uncertain about the bus. She was afraid of the big kids who sat towards the back and she didn't like the slippery vinyl seats, especially since the bus didn't have safety belts.

Bo would sit close to Lucy and hold her hand. They would play with the dolls and stuffed animals that she brought to school everyday. He would make her laugh and together they would get through the bus ride.

There was one more reason, though Bo did not like to talk about it. In addition to smelling bad, the boys in the back of the bus were mean to Bo. The bus bullies were led by Carl Carlton the Third, the bus driver's big, not-so-bright son. Carl Three was in the sixth grade for the second time. He was big, smelled like vinegar, and enjoyed picking on people. He was the ringleader of a small group that included the twins, Billy and Bobby Bush, and Dougie Dunbar.

The bullies on the bus had a handful of nicknames for Bo, like Trophy-Boy, PinHead, and Veggie Reggie- because he didn't eat meat. They also called him Hat Rack Tony. Bo understood the hat rack part, since his antlers did look a lot like a hat rack, but he wasn't sure if they thought his name was Tony or they thought the word Tony was some kind of insult. Either way he didn't like being called names. Sometimes they called him Hornhead, even though he had explained the difference between horns and antlers many times. Scientific explanations never seemed to help. Then they would call him Professor Dweeb and Smarty Arty. Sometimes Bo wasn't sure they even knew his name.

The bus bullies weren't that bright, but they were smart enough not to mess with Bo at school. One of Bo's best friends was Duncan who had a monkey's tail sprouting from his backside. He was ape-strong and impulsive. Someone messing with Bo might suddenly find themselves in a ferocious headlock or stuck inside a garbage can. Another of Bo's best friends in the forth grade was Mayor Mike, who had the sheriff and the fire department at his disposal. Though he would never use such authority to deal with bus bullies, it still seemed like a good idea to avoid causing problems with the Mayor around.

Since the bus bullies never bothered him at school, none of Bo's friends knew about the

problem. And Bo was not the sort to complain about the situation. He just accepted it and lived with it. Until that particular Thursday.

Lucy was running out the door headed to the bus stop when she tripped over her shoelace and fell down the front steps of the Evangelista home. She was notoriously lazy about knot-tying and preferred velcro closures. She skinned both her knees and scraped up both her palms when she landed on the cement walkway. Bo was a couple steps ahead of her and turned when he heard her fall. He looked at her and yelled, "Oh no!"

Lucy screamed. There was no sound. She opened her eyes wide and stared at Bo. She got a worried look on her face. She closed her mouth to regroup and then she screamed again. This time the sound that came out of her mouth was so loud and so terrifying that all the dogs in the neighborhood started barking.

Bo hunched over his sister. Pulling her close, he said, "It's going to be okay." He helped her sit on the step as she started to cry. Her hands were scraped and bloody and there were bits of gravel embedded in her skin. Her knees look even worse.

Bo and Lucy's mom, Elizabeth Evangelista, appeared like magic at the door. "Are you okay, Babycakes?" she asked. She took a quick look at the situation and said, "I'll go get some Band-Aids." She disappeared back into the house.

Bo had a sinking feeling. Lucy hated Band-Aids. It would be easier to give a jaguar a bath in a teacup than it would be to get his little sister to put on a single Band-Aid. And this was looking like a ten Band-Aid day.

When Elizabeth reappeared at the door she was carrying a tub of antibiotic ointment and a box of Band-Aids the size of a loaf of bread. When you have six kids, you buy first aid supplies in bulk. While she did her best to treat Lucy's scuffed up parts, Bo did his best to distract her. He jumped up and down, shaking his butt from side to side and did jazz hands way over his head. Lucy cried and cried and tried to bite her Mom.

Bo's older sister Jacqueline-Jill scolded him, "You're a terrible dancer."

"And you're making her cry," added his older sister Jessica-Joy.

Bo moonwalked on the cement path while juggling crab apples that had fallen from a nearby tree, all the while singing 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.' Lucy cried and cried and threw Band-Aids in the air.

Bo's older sister Jamie-Joyce commented, "You sing out of tune."

"You're making her cry even worse," said his older sister June-July.

Bo did jumping jacks while reciting nursery rhymes in a singsong voice. Lucy cried and cried and squeezed antibiotic ointment all over her favorite sunflower dress. This made her cry more.

Bo sighed and went inside the house to find the party decorations. In the hall closet, in a box filled with scraps of ribbon, wrapping paper, and bows, he found several rolls of crêpe paper streamers. Usually they were hung for birthdays and holidays, but they were also Lucy's favorite thing to play with. Bo selected the brightest pink and orange streamers and brought them out front, where Lucy was still crying and fighting all forms of first aid treatment.

While Elizabeth cleaned and bandaged her wounds, Lucy happily wrapped Bo's antlers in the brightly colored streamers. She tied knots at the tip of each point and stretched colorful strands all around until he looked like a very festive spider web. Before long Lucy had eleven Band-Aids on her and was busy teaching her stuffed panda bear to walk a tight rope between Bo's antlers.

"There, good as new," said Elizabeth Evangelista.

From the street came a loud honking sound, like a flock of angry, constipated geese. The bright yellow bus pulled up to the curb. Carl Carlton Junior pounded on the horn and yelled out the window, "Hustle up, fun-seekers!"

Bo and his sisters started running to catch the bus. Lucy couldn't run at all; she was so wrapped in band-aids that she looked like a mummy. Bo picked her up and carried her to the bus. Lucy laughed and played with the streamers that waved behind Bo's head as he ran.

Bo could hear the laughter before he even set foot on the bus. Carl Three, Billy and Bobby Bush and Dougie Dunbar seemed to think that Bo's situation was the funniest thing ever.

“Hey Pinky Pinhead!” yelled Carl Three.

“Bo has a baby!” shouted Billy Bush.

“And the baby has boo-boos!” laughed Bobby Bush.

“Baby boo-boo and Bobo!” squealed Dougie Dunbar, who was not an original thinker, but always wanted to be involved if someone was being made fun of.

The whole bus erupted in giggles. Bo felt his cheeks get hot with embarrassment.

Bo set Lucy down in the front seat. He squeezed in beside her, scrunching low as if to hide. His brightly festooned antlers poked up high above the seat; the laughter and comments continued.

“You look like a piñata!” yelled Carl Three.

“I like your braids!” shouted Billy Bush.

“He’s wearing camouflage for a clown party!” said Bobby Bush.

“What’s a piñata?” asked Dougie Dunbar.

Bo realized that his antlers were still decorated with streamers. Even worse, they were about the girliest colored streamers he could have worn. Angrily he tore the tissue paper out of his antlers and threw it on the floor the bus. There were shreds of colorful paper everywhere.

“You best not make a mess in my beautiful bus,” said Carl Carlton Junior.

Lucy started to cry as Bo reached down to pick up the tattered streamers. It was a different type of cry than from before. It was quiet and snuffling; it was full of sadness and an inside kind of hurt.

Lucy’s sad cries filled Bo with a swirling anger. He felt his face flush red and he ground his teeth back and forth. The bully boys had gone too far. It was time to fight back. He would show them.

He thought about standing up then and rushing to the back. He could be on them before they knew he was coming. He felt his skin jumping. Bo wanted to lash back.

The thought of fighting terrified Bo, but not because he was afraid of losing or of getting hurt. Bo has a distinct advantage in a fight: antlers. They were long, they were sharp, and they

were hard as bone. Bo knew that he could hold his own in a fight, should one start. His big fear was that he would not know when to stop.

When he was in the first grade, Bo fought with a boy named Rollins Mackey over a soccer ball at recess. It started as a tug of war. Bo won and pulled the ball free, but Rollins got angry and shoved him to the ground. When Bo stood back up, he was a different boy. There was an anger in him that was frightening. Bo lowered his head and charged at the boy. Without thinking, he slashed left and right. In ten seconds Rollins' sweatshirt was in tatters and his arms were covered with deep scratches. Bo caught Rollins under the arms with his antlers and lifted him off his feet and threw him to the ground. Teachers on the playground ran over and pulled him off the terrified boy. That was the first time Bo realized that there was a wild animal inside of him.

Bo nearly got expelled from school. He had to see the therapist a million times and apologize to Rollins and the other students at the school. It was weird because he really was sorry, but in some ways he didn't feel like he had done it.

Bo took a deep breath. He took Lucy's hand and said, "I'm sorry."

One day, about a week after the fight with Rollins Mackey, Bo's Dad took him on a walk near the reservoir. Bo liked these rare excursions, because it was just him and his Dad. With five sisters, Bo didn't get a lot on one-on-one time with his father.

Xavier Evangelista was a master bricklayer and traveled all over restoring churches and other historical buildings. He was a quiet man and loved to play with his children when he was home from his work trips. Xavier had never once wondered why he had a son with antlers. If God willed it, then it must be so. He felt blessed to have so much love in his house, with a strong wife and six beautiful children- antlers must be another blessing.

They walked the reservoir trail, admiring the fall leaves, just now turning their vibrant colors. Bo liked the sweet smell of acorns in the cool air.

"It's not fair," Xavier said to Bo, "To have antlers on your head and not know why."

Bo nodded. He agreed that it wasn't fair.

“But life is not fair,” Xavier continued. “And it is not supposed to be. Fair is how you treat other people, not how life treats you.”

“I would bet that antlers are not just a problem with your sheets and pillowcases,” Xavier said, smiling. Bo smiled too. It had taken the family a while to figure out the sleeping arrangement for a child with an impressive rack of razor sharp antlers on his head. The Evangelista family would forever have a surplus of rags for polishing the minivans.

“Maybe the other children make fun or are afraid,” Bo’s Dad said. “Maybe they are heavy and you get tired. I don’t know, but I’m sure there are many things you can tell me about having antlers that I would never have guessed.”

Bo wondered if his father knew about the rage that had come over him when Rollins had shoved him. He wanted to tell him, but couldn’t think of any words to describe it. They stopped walking to watch a ragged line of geese land on the smooth surface of the reservoir.

“Another thing that is not so fair, is how the world judges. People will decide many things about you because of the first things they see or hear about you. There is a word for that- what people think of you before they know you; the word is reputation.

“Reputation?” asked Bo. It was a new word.

“Yes. It takes a lifetime to make a good reputation, and one minute to make a bad one,” Xavier said. “Do you know what my reputation is?”

“Best Dad?” guessed Bo.

Xavier laughed. “I hope, someday!”

“I think so.”

“Some people think your father is a very lazy man,” said Xavier.

“No way,” said Bo. This was impossible, nobody worked harder than his father. He was gone all week restoring buildings. But he worked even harder on the weekends tending the house, doing laundry, and cooking. Bo’s favorite job was to help his dad when he cleaned and repaired his tools. He liked how the bench grinder showered him with sparks when he honed a chisel’s edge. If he wasn’t working around the house, Xavier would be writing articles or calling

customers. There was no way anyone could think his dad was lazy.

“Why?” asked Bo.

“Because I am from Mexico,” said Xavier. He was pleased by the confused look on Bo’s face. It was reassuring to think that his son was unaware that this thought lived in the minds of some people.

“Why?” asked Bo.

Xavier laughed. “Maybe they are confused by siesta.”

Bo smiled. Siesta was his favorite part of the week. On Sundays, after church and a huge lunch, the whole family climbed into their parents bed and attempted to take a family nap. It always quickly degenerated into tickle fights and funny jokes. Bo couldn’t understand why anyone would care about family tickle fights, but being a kid with antlers, he was used to nosy people.

“Maybe it is not fair that some people think I am lazy just because of where I am from,” said Xavier. “But it happens. Sometimes I have to work twice as hard to show those people that they are foolish. Maybe it will be like that with your antlers sometimes too.”

“A lot of times they just get in the way,” said Bo.

“I’m sure that sometimes they do. But they are beautiful and strong too. With antlers like those, I bet you could win every fight,” Xavier said. “But you must learn to not fight. You must use that creative mind of yours to solve these problems.”

Bo had taken the conversation to heart and had not been in another fight since then. But now he felt that anger burning in him again.

The bus lurched to a stop at the school. Bo felt he had woken up from a weird dream, like he wasn’t sure where he was.

“C’mon,” Lucy said and she led him by the hand off the bus.

The bullies preoccupied Bo all day. He was so distracted that when the math teacher asked him the square root of sixty-four he replied, “The river Nile.” He wasn’t thinking about math, he was thinking about places he would rather be. The class laughed at his mistake.

“What’s wrong?” asked Ms. Dynamite, the art teacher. She was very in tune to her

students' feelings, and could tell that Bo was having one of those days.

“Nothing,” said Bo. He considered telling her about the bullies and the way it made him feel. He knew for a fact that Ms. Dynamite would not tolerate any bullying. One time when Billy Bush had been singing a rude song right behind Emma – who was deaf – Ms. Dynamite saw him. She put her nose one inch from his nose, so that Billy could smell the kale and flaxseed smoothie she had been drinking. She said in a quiet and terrifying voice, “Never, ever do that again. We treat everyone with respect in this classroom. Also, if I see you doing that again I will forcibly remove your head and send it to Antarctica.”

Bo knew that Ms. Dynamite cared and would step in, if he asked. Maybe if the bullies were a problem in art class, but she wouldn't be much help on the bus.

Bo was an analytical young man and so he thought about his options. He knew that if he told Duncan about the situation, his friend would be only too happy to ride the bus with him and to teach the bullies a lesson. But Bo didn't want his friend fighting his battles for him. Duncan was wild on the inside too.

Bo considered putting his mind for inventions to work. Maybe he could make an invisibility cloaking device – maybe something that bent light waves in such a way to divert the bullies glances around him. The idea of refracting light was intriguing, but it was really just a way to hide from the problem.

It was during biology class that Bo had his great idea. They were talking about animal defenses. Some animals camouflage themselves so their predators cannot see them. They blend into their surroundings so perfectly, they cannot be seen. They hide in plain sight. Bo knew that deer and elk were colored to blend into the dull background of a field.

But some animals use vibrant colors and bold displays to warn predators to steer clear. Bo liked the pictures of poison dart frogs in the textbook. He wondered if his antlers counted as a bold display. They were kind of bland most of the time.

“Oh,” he said accidentally out loud in the middle of class. The teacher looked at him oddly but carried on reading in her flat voice.

Bo knew what to do.

But he needed help; there was only one person who could help him deal with the bullies on the bus. He smiled all day, pleased with his plan.

The next morning at breakfast, Bo set the plan in motion.

“Lucy,” he said. “Will you help me with something today?” Lucy smiled. She was eating a bright purple cereal and her teeth were pink and gruesome.

“Okay,” said Lucy.

Bo wrinkled his face with concern. “There’s just one problem.”

“What?” she asked.

“I won’t be able to sit with you today. On the bus.”

Lucy’s face drooped with disappointment. “But in exchange, you can totally decorate my antlers this morning. I really need your help with that,” Bo said.

Lucy’s face brightened. “Any color?”

“Any color,” he said. “Glitter, dolls, stuffed animals. The crazier the better!”

“Okay,” said Lucy. “Deal.”

They hurried through breakfast and brushing their teeth. They snuck into Lucy’s room. While she gathered her favorite dolls and stuffed animals, Bo went to the closet and found the ribbons, streamers and bows his sister loved best. For fifteen minutes, Bo sat quietly with his eyes closed as Lucy adorned his antlers as if decorating a castle to host a fairy ball. There was a rainbow of crêpe paper and sparkling Christmas bows at the tip of each antler. Lucy tied a small dancing fairy doll to Bo’s left antler. She put a small Pokémon doll on his right antler. Bo glanced in the mirror and smiled with approval. He shook his head from side to side and said, “We need more noisy.”

Lucy added several little tinkle bells and some strings of beads that rattled against each other when Bo would shake his rack.

When he got downstairs, Bo’s older sister Jacqueline-Jill said, “Oh my God! You can’t go to school looking like that! “

This was the effect Bo had been looking for. He gave Lucy a high-five. “Thanks for your help.”

“You look graet, Honey,” said his Mom, blowing him a kiss as he made his way towards the front door.

Just then, from the street came a terrible sound, like a herd of cows snorkeling, “The bus is here!” Bo yelled. He swooped Lucy up in his arms and carried her giggling down the front walk to the bus.

Bo could hear the laughter before he even climbed the steps to the bus. He took a deep breath. His older sisters rushed onto the bus to find their seats. Bo put Lucy in the front seat and made a production of giving her a big kiss on the cheek. “I’ll see you at school, Sweetie,” he said. Lucy gave him the biggest smile in the world.

Bo turned and looked down the aisle of the bus. Some kids were still chuckling, but others had already noticed that the boy with antlers was not sitting down. Bo saw that Carl Three sat alone in the back seat across the aisle from the Bush twins. He started the long walk to the back of the bus.

“Where are you going?” hissed his sister Jamie-Joyce.

Bo gently shook his head, jingling the bells in his antlers. “I’m going to sit in the back with all the cool dudes,” he said, grinning.

The other students on the bus grew quiet and watched with wide eyes as Bo walked slowly down the aisle. His heart was pounding in his chest, but he was pretty sure no one else could hear it. He tried to act casual, as if he made this walk every day.

“Don’t be scratching my ceiling,” said Carl Junior.

“I’ll be real careful, Mr. Bus Driver,” said Bo, in a snaky voice he had practiced the night before.

Carl Three stared angrily at Bo as he approached the back seat. “Where are you going?” he snarled.

“Right there,” said Bo. He pointed to the space next to the bigger boy.

“That’s where my book bag sits,” said Carl.

“You better move it if you don’t want me to sit on your lunch,” said Bo. He sniffed the air. “You put pickles on peanut butter and jelly?”

Carl grab his book bag and flung it on the floor. “I like it.” He crossed his arms and slumped further into his seat.

“Thanks,” Bo said as he sat down. He smiled at the Bush twins and said, “What’s up?” They smelled like breakfast tacos and ketchup. It wasn’t pleasant, but he knew it could have been much, much worse.

“What are you doing?” Bobby asked.

“Why are you sitting back here?” Billy added.

“Because I can,” Bo said.

There was an awkward silence. Then Dougie Dunbar said, “I have that same Pokémon.”

“It’s Lucy’s favorite.”

Bo settled into the seat and pulled his backpack into his lap. His plan was to act like he sat there everyday. He opened his pack and removed his notebook. Flipping to a sketch he had been working on, he grabbed a pencil that he kept tucked in his antlers and went to work. Soon he was lost in his drawing and had forgotten that he was sitting amongst the bullies. It turned out, they didn’t have as much to say, when he was sitting right there.

The bus disappeared from Bo’s thoughts, until Carl spoke up, “What’s that?”

Bo looked at the bigger boy with surprise. His antlers jingled ominously He wondered if this was this a set-up or a trap?

“It’s a trebuchet,” Bo replied. “It’s a kind of medieval weapon.”

“I think I seen that on the History Channel,” said Carl Three. “They could throw things over castle walls.”

“Totally,” Bo said. It seemed weird that Carl Three watched the History Channel. He wondered if the bully also liked Mythbusters. Maybe he would ask some other time.

Billy Bush leaned across the aisle. “What are those numbers?”

“Measurements,” Bo said.

“What for?” Dougie asked.

“For when I build it.”

“No way,” said Billy Bush. “Build it?”

“Yeah,” said Bo. “I just got ten bowling balls at the junk store for a dollar. I’m going to try to throw one over the reservoir.”

“The junk store? That place creeps me out,” said Bobby.

“A kid can’t build a trebuchet,” Carl scoffed. He was pretty sure that Bo was bragging.

“Why not?” Bo asked. “I built a catapult last summer. I threw a softball over my house. This will be even bigger.”

“Completely over your house?” asked Dougie.

“Totally over the house- on the third try,” Bo said. “First one went right through my sister’s bedroom window.”

“What did you make a catapult out of?” asked Billy.

“Mostly wood.”

“Where do you get all that wood?” Bobby asked.

“My Dad collects scraps for me at his jobs.”

“What kind of tools do you use?” asked Carl.

“I have a cordless drill and a framing hammer. My Dad lets me borrow a lot of stuff. Tools are expensive so I can’t buy all the ones I want.”

“Me either,” Carl said. “My Dad keeps all of his locked up, so I won’t break them. But I can be careful.”

This conversation hadn’t been in Bo’s plan at all. He had expected an awkward stand off or maybe to rattle his antlers. This was weirder.

“Did you get in trouble for breaking the window?” Dougie asked.

“I had to fix it,” Bo admitted. “My sisters were super angry. They don’t like it when I build stuff.”

“My sister is in high school,” Carl said. “She hates everything.”

“She hates me,” said Dougie.

“You ruined her roller skates.”

“I was trying to fix the rusty parts.”

“He dipped them in old motor oil,” Carl said.

“They looked cooler,” Dougie sniffed.

Bo laughed.

The bus slowed as it approached the school. The students started gathering their books and packs and rising from their seats.

Bo closed his notebook and jammed it into his back pack. He stood up carefully, to avoid spearing anyone. It was a lot more crowded in the back of the bus. He saw Carl eyes go wide as an antler swung close to his nose.

“Those are sharp,” Carl said.

“Yeah,” Bo admitted. “It’s tough on a pillow.”

The other boys laughed.

“Are they heavy?” Dougie asked.

Bo shrugged, “I’ve always had them, so I don’t really know.”

“I bet they’re useful,” Billy asked.

“Sometimes,” Bo said, smiling. He bumped his way slowly down the aisle, towards the front seat, where Lucy sat waiting for him.