

"Compelling. This book not only captures the feeling of what it is *like* to form a band, but also the reasons *why* you form a band. It took me back to that time of being in a van on my very first tour." —PETER BUCK, R.E.M.

THE SCAR BOYS

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SCAR BOYS
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A NOVEL BY LEN VLAHOS

THE SCAR BOYS

A NOVEL

LEN VLAHOS

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Summary: Written as a college admission essay, eighteen-year-old Harry Jones recounts a childhood defined by the hideous scars he hid behind, and how forming a band brought self-confidence, friendship, and his first kiss.

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Lyrics to “Girl Next Door” and “Assholes Like Us” (c) 1986, used with permission from Joe Loskywitz, Scott Nafz, Chad Strohmayer, and Len Vlahos.

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“These Boots Are Made for Walkin’” written by Lee Hazlewood

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For Kristen, Charlie, and Luke—you are my music.

Please write an essay of 250 words on a topic of your choice. Your personal essay will help us become acquainted with you beyond your courses, grades, and test scores. It will also demonstrate your ability to organize your thoughts and express yourself in writing. You may choose to write about your interest in attending our university, your goals or career plans, a significant community service experience, a person who has influenced your life, a challenge you have had to overcome, or any other special information or circumstances that may assist us in the admissions process. We look forward to getting to know you better.

January 21, 1987

The University of Scranton
Office of Undergraduate Admissions
Scranton, PA 18510-4699

Dear Admissions Professional,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to become a matriculating student at the University of Scranton. I have had many interesting experiences in my life. I will represent the school well. I work hard and am a quick study. I have a wide variety of interests and I am dedicated to--Wait.

Wait, wait, wait.

250 words? Are you kidding? It can't be done. Whoops, just wasted four words, five if you count the contraction, telling you "it can't be done." Another 17 words talking about telling you that "it can't be done." Another 12 . . . never mind. This could go on forever.

Here's the short version of what you need to know:

I'm ugly and shy and my face, head, and neck are covered with hideous scars. (15 words)

Here's the slightly longer version:

I'm ugly and shy and my face, head, and neck are covered with hideous scars.

I was almost struck by lightning.

I wish I had been struck by lightning.

I was a methadone addict before the age of 10.

It's my fault that my best friend almost got killed.

I played guitar in the greatest punk rock band you've never heard of.

And that was all before my 19th birthday, which isn't for another five months. (76 words)

But the most important thing to know about me, what you really need to grok in order to understand what kind of student you'll be getting, is that I, Harbinger Robert Francis Jones, am a coward.

I just counted and "coward" was word number 248, and that doesn't even include the date or your address, so I should stop. But I can't believe you know me any better yet, and that was your goal, right? So with your permission--strike that, with or without your permission--I'm going to exceed that word count, just a little.

Okay, maybe a lot.

I suppose I should start at the beginning, and it begins with a question . . .

THUNDER ROAD

*(written by Bruce Springsteen, and performed by Bruce Springsteen
and the E Street Band)*

“Who the fuck are you?”

An older and much larger boy stood over me, blotting out the sun. “You weren’t god damn here when we chose up the god damn sides.” He was trying on curse words the way a little girl tries on her mother’s shoes.

The boy wasn’t just big, he was cartoon big. He also wasn’t alone. He was one of seven snot-nosed tweens surrounding me like I was in the middle of a football huddle. They had decided to make me a central character in their game of Ringolevio. I had no idea what that word meant, and didn’t have a clue about the rules of the game, but near as I could tell, it was something between hide-and-seek and all-out neighborhood war.

I don’t remember what I was doing just before the “Who the fuck are you?” It’s as if the entire universe came into

being all at once in that exact moment. Earlier memories just don't exist for me. Strike that. They exist, but they're buried in a place where I can't find them. They can only be reconstructed from the outside. (If you're wondering how this can be, give yourself a pat on the back, because you're asking a really good question. Read on.)

"Who the fuck are you?" the boy demanded a second time.

A thick haze hung between the sun and Earth like gauze, trying to choke the life out of everything—even the flies and mosquitoes didn't have any energy. It was the kind of summer afternoon that bred impatience.

"I don't know," I muttered back. With no brothers or sisters to properly weave me to the fabric of kid society, I was, at eight years old, mostly overlooked, and only occasionally tolerated by the other children in our neighborhood. I was so lost in the excitement of an older boy actually talking to me, that it took me a minute to realize it wasn't going so well.

"You don't know who you are? Are you fucking retarded, shit-for-brains?" The other boys laughed.

"I'm Harry Jones," I mumbled at my shoes.

"Well then," the older boy said and puffed out his chest like Patton, "you, Harry Shit Jones, have been caught by the Sharks—that's our team—and you're our prisoner." The other boys stomped their feet in approval. I'd wandered

into the final act of *Lord of the Flies* but was too young to know it. “And what’s worse, you little ass head,” he leaned in close, “you’ve been caught cheating.”

“I wasn’t chea—”

“Shut up.”

“Honest, I wasn’t—”

He punched me, hard, in the shoulder. I was already too scared to cry, and somehow I knew crying would only make it worse. *Maybe if I take my lumps*, I thought, *it’ll all turn out okay*.

“Whaddya think we should do with him?” someone asked.

One of the other kids, a freckled little creep named Timmy, who called me “Shrimp Toast” every time he saw me playing in front of my house, was holding a length of rope, maybe a clothesline, maybe something else. “I think we should put him in *jail*,” he said. This was met with laughs and hoots all around.

The jail was a small but sturdy dogwood tree, its thick green leaves providing shade, but no protection from the heat. According to the rules, I was supposed to keep one hand on the tree at all times until a teammate tagged me free. But I didn’t know the rules, didn’t know rope wasn’t supposed to be part of the game.

I let them tie me to the tree without a struggle, never complaining as they pulled the nylon cord too tight,

wrapping it several times around the trunk, binding me from my shoulders to my knees.

Thick gray clouds soon replaced the summer haze, and the painfully still air started to move. The first drops of rain prompted one mother after another to open her ranch house window and bellow for little Jimmy or Johnny or Danny to get inside. The game started to break as the kids sprinted for home. No one seemed to remember I was there, bound to that tree.

“Guys!” I screamed. “GUYS!”

Childhood, for all its good press, is a time when the human animal explores the dark side of the Force, pushing the limit of the pain it’s willing to inflict on bugs, squirrels, and little neighborhood boys. Most kids outgrow the darker impulses by high school. The ones that don’t spend their teenage years playing football, lacrosse, and, dating the prom queen. (It doesn’t seem fair to me, either, but hey, I don’t make the rules.)

Only one boy, Timmy with the freckles and the rope, heard me. He turned around and we locked eyes. I believed, if only for an instant, that I was saved. By the time I understood why his face was twisting itself into something between a smile and sneer, he was already in a dead run, headed for his own house, probably planning to torture his hamster or sister or something. I heard his door slam shut.

The first bolt of lightning wasn’t a bolt at all. It was

a flash, like a camera's flash, bringing every atom of the world into stark relief for a nanosecond. My mother taught me to count "Mississippis" when I saw lightning, so I did. There were nine before I heard the first rumble of thunder. I forgot what that meant, but I knew the heart of the storm was still far away, and as long as there were at least nine in the next group of Mississippis, I'd be safe.

The rain started falling harder, the noise surrounding me like freeway traffic. There was another flash and I started to count again.

One Mississippi. The wind was blowing little pieces of our neighborhood across the lawn: an unsecured lid from a plastic garbage can, a red kickball, a white dress shirt liberated from someone's untended clothesline.

Two Mississippi. A latticework fence supporting tomato plants was bending sideways as the rain, now waving in translucent sheets like see-through shower curtains, pooled into muddy lakes around the yard. My brain turned to jelly and my bladder let loose.

Three Mississi—a sonic BOOM slammed my head against the tree. My skin and clothes were drenched in a cocktail of rainwater, sweat, and urine. The heart of the storm—now a living, breathing thing—had moved closer.

Another flash and I started my count again, this time out loud.

"One Mississippi!" My voice, choked by its own sobs, only carried a few feet forward where it was swallowed by

the torrent of water and wind. I began writhing like a fish on a hook, trying to loosen the nylon cord and slip free.

“Two Mississippi!” I noticed a cat, its tortoiseshell hair matted flat by the deluge, hiding beneath a stack of lawn chairs that was pushed up against the house in front of me. Its legs were pulled tight under its waterlogged body, and its eyes were open wide, darting back and forth and looking for some escape. It spotted me, held my gaze, and wailed like a banshee, loud enough for me to hear through the rain.

“Three Mississippi!” Seeing the cat calmed me down. I wasn’t alone. As long as we were together, me and this cat, we were going to be okay. I regained control of my voice. The wind died down just a little. Even the fence with the tomato plants wasn’t bending so far forward.

“Four Mississippi!” No lightning. No thunder. The storm was moving away.

“Five Mississippi!” I thought I could hear my mom’s voice calling me. She sounded far away and she sounded scared. I tried to call back, but my voice still wasn’t carrying. I shouted again, as loud as I could: “MOM!”

“Six Missi—” Before I could say “ssippi,” before any thunder from that flash reached my ears, and before I had any idea if my mother heard me calling out to her, a new spear of lightning found me. It struck the tree just above my head.

In the instant before everything went black, just before I was sure I’d died, I looked up and saw that the cat was gone.