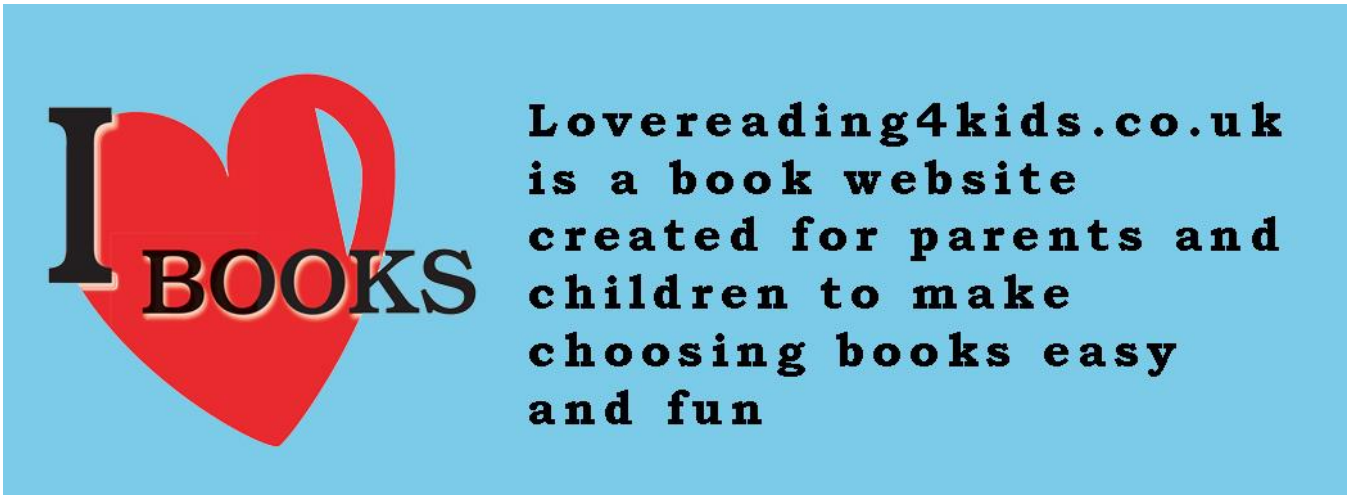


Opening extract from

Middle School: Escape to Australia

Written by

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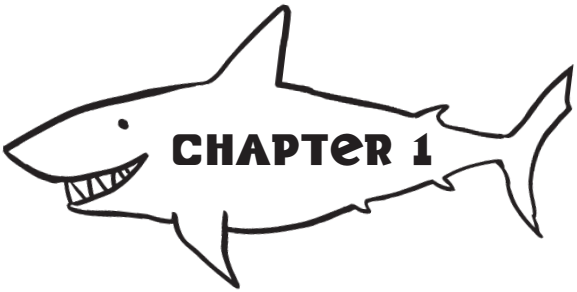
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CHAPTER 1

ZOMBIE INVASION!

You know that icky feeling you get in the pit of your stomach when you look out of your bedroom window at night and see a mob of bloodthirsty Australian zombies heading right at you?

No?

Well, I'm here to tell you that seeing a whole bunch of the walking dead making a beeline for yours truly was definitely NOT one of my better moments. And for any of you who've been keeping up with all things Khatchadorian, you'll know that there has been a *ton* of weirdness in my recent history.

From the look on their dirt-streaked, bug-eyed



faces and the nasty collection of weapons they were waving around—pitchforks, tennis rackets, flaming torches, barbecue tongs, a rusty exhaust pipe from a 2006 Camry—these dudes were serious about claiming the top spot in Rafe Khatchadorian's All-Time Disasters List.

I don't mind admitting I was a teeny-tiny bit FREAKED OUT.

The zombie dudes had made a real effort, too. Do you have any idea how *hard* it would be to find a pitchfork these days? The fact that this mob had come up with THREE of them showed a real level of zombie determination.



Despite the pitchforks, there was, however, one tiny ray of hope that I could cling to: maybe it wasn't *me* they were after. It could be that the zombies had other delicious victims in mind besides the untasty and downright bony Rafe Khatchadorian of Hills Village.

That hope faded quickly when they started chanting: "WE WANT RAFE! WE WANT RAFE!"

I guess that settled it. The seriously messed-up truth was that these guys wanted BLOOD—and lots of it. Very specifically, they wanted *my* blood, which was a real problem. I *like* my blood. Call me selfish, but I want to keep as much of my blood as I possibly can, for as long as I can.

In a weird way, though, a small part of me was kind of proud. It takes a lot to make that many Australian zombies mad, but I, Rafe Khatchadorian, had managed it in just a few short weeks. Ta-da!

Three weeks ago I didn't know a single person in Australia, let alone a zombie, and now I had a baying mob of the undead at the front door. Not bad when you think of it that way.

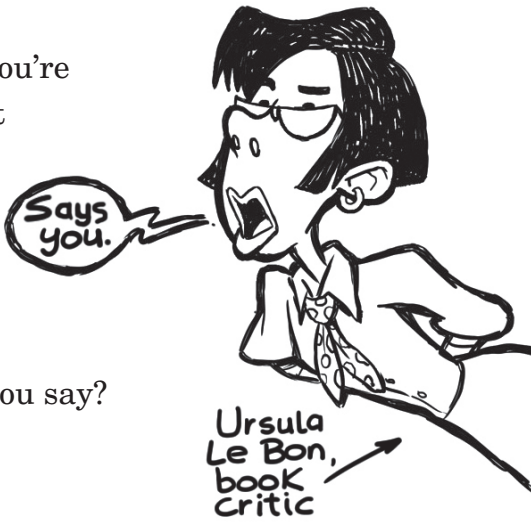
I'm Rafe, by the way. On a good day—like, a *really* good day—I look like this:



But usually it's more like this:



Okay, I know what you're probably thinking about all this zombie stuff: that it sounds super exciting and majorly awesome, but why should we listen to a single word you say?





Which is totally valid. But to explain everything, we'll have to go back, back through the mists of time, back to the very beginning of the story of how I ended up in this predicament.

Yep, we're going to middle school.





THE GREAT HERNANDEZ MUSTACHE THEORY

We'll get to the zombies later because the BIG news to start off with isn't mutant brain-eaters, it's that (drumroll, please!) I, Rafe Khatchadorian, have managed to stay enrolled at Hills Village Middle School for more than a minute.

That's right, you heard me. Since we last spoke, I have NOT been expelled. Not even suspended! Detention, well…let's not go that far. I'm not perfect.

But for me, not getting kicked out of school is *seriously* awesome, bordering on miraculous and hunkering down right next door to flat-out impossible.

For example, it seems like only yesterday that the seriously scary new vice principal at Hills Village, the knuckle-crunching Charlotte P. Stonecase (a.k.a. the Terror from Room 666, a.k.a. the Skull Keeper), forced me to take part in The Program, a kind of prison camp in the woods for "wayward students."

Wayward is just another way of saying *troublemaking,* and before I could say, "No, wait, I think there's been some kind of mistake," I was shipped off to the Rocky Mountains for a week of *total* attitude realignment.

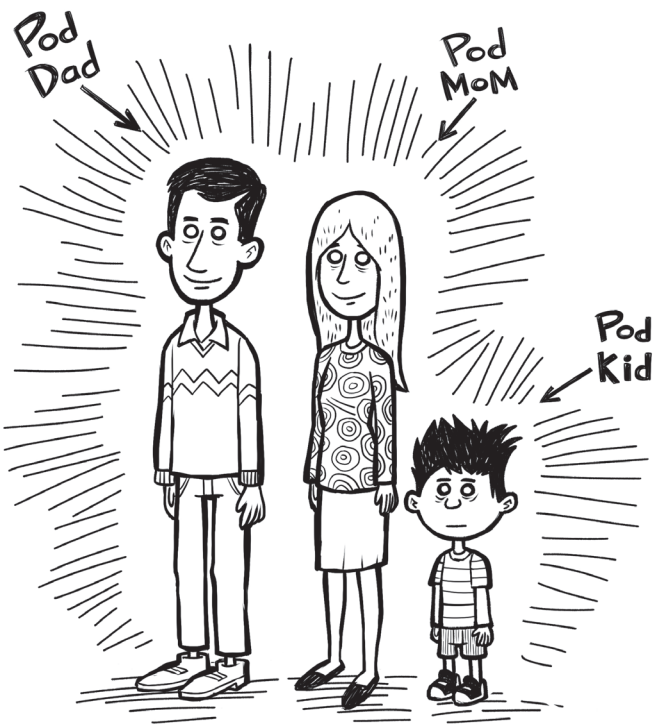


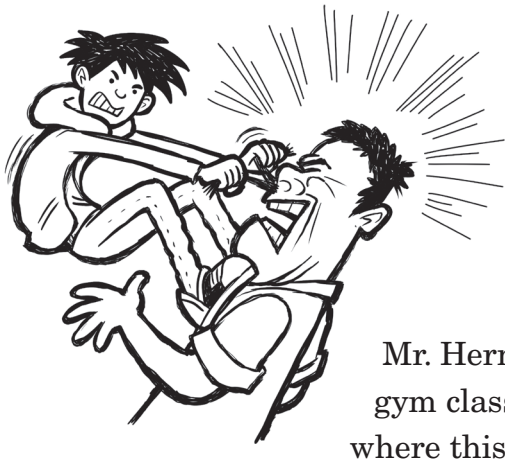
For a while there it was touch and go, but somehow I survived and made it back from Colorado alive.

Who knows, maybe the bottom line is that VP Stonecase wasn't so far off the mark about what I needed. Maybe she's some sort of cosmic fortune-teller.

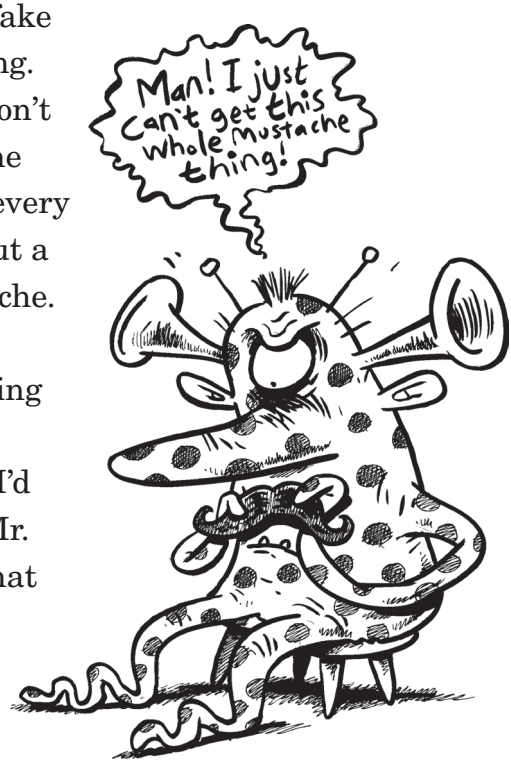


Anyway, this whole not-getting-into-major-trouble-at-Hills-Village-Middle-School situation was so *weird* that I was convinced the school had been taken over by pod creatures. You know, the kind of aliens who sneakily make themselves look like the regular people they've eaten until you're the only human left.





I decided to test my theory. The big mistake I made was to test it by pulling Mr. Hernandez's mustache in gym class. You can already see where this is going, right? Mr. Hernandez was standing in for Mr. Lattimore, our regular gym teacher, and I had some sort of brain-melting idea that pod people might use fake mustaches or something. Looking back on it, I don't know why I thought the aliens could replicate every other single thing about a person except a mustache.

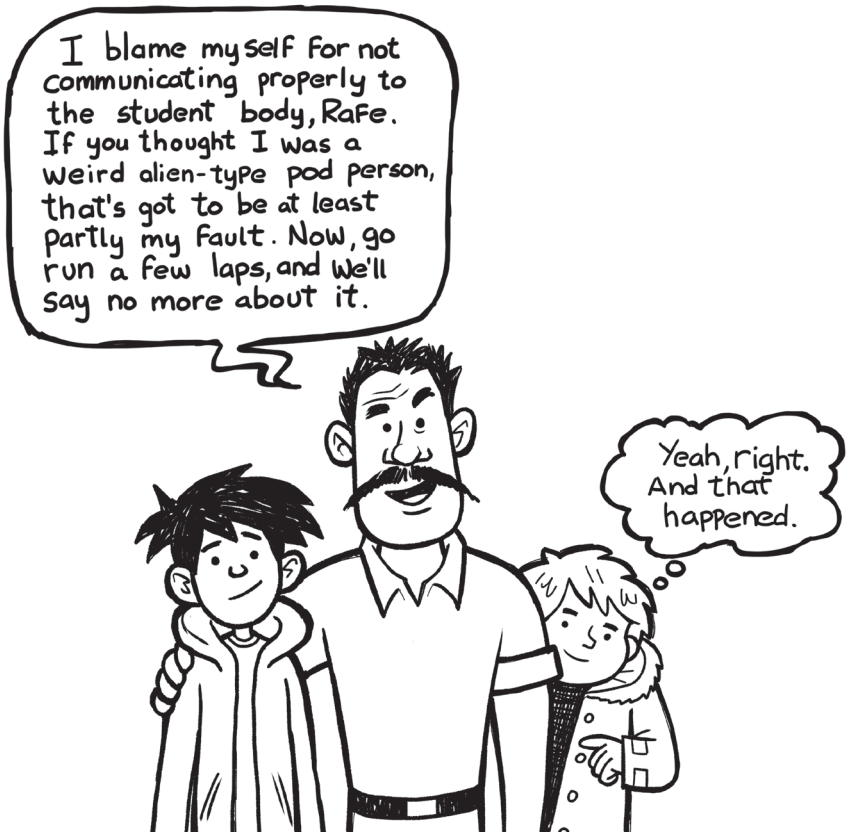


Now, even though he'd just started teaching at Hills Village at the beginning of the year, I'd already learned that Mr. Hernandez was not what

you'd call the forgiving type. In fact, trying to figure out once and for all if Mr. Hernandez was an alien by trying to pull off his mustache would normally have resulted in (at least) a hundred years of detention and Mr. Hernandez mutating into a black hole of vengeance.



But Mr. Hernandez only made me run twenty laps of the football field.



Like I said—*weird.* And I haven't even gotten to the drop bears yet.