

# The Flunking of Joshua T. Bates



SUSAN SHREVE



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On Labor Day, driving home from the beach, Joshua's mother told him that he was going to have to repeat third grade.

"Nope, I'm not," Joshua said when his mother told him quietly so his miserable older sister, in the back seat of the bright blue van, wouldn't overhear, although of course she did.

"I've already been in third grade once," Joshua said very reasonably.

"Of course you have, darling, but the teachers feel that you're too young for your class. You need another year to mature."

"I am very mature," Joshua said crossly. "What do

they expect at nine years old. A beard?"

"They expect you to be able to read, Josh," Amanda said helpfully from her perch in the back seat. She was reading a fat book with small print just so Joshua's father would say to his mother, "Isn't Amanda a fine student." And his mother would sing back, "Just wonderful, wonderful, wonderful."

"You're a jerk, Amanda," Joshua said to her. "I hope you grow up to be a third-grade teacher and that your hair falls out."

"I'm going to be a surgeon with long hair, which I'll wear in a French twist when I'm operating on people." Amanda crossed her legs like a woman, so she looked to Joshua very much like a forty-year-old reading teacher with buck teeth and sunglasses. He wanted to bop her but resisted.

"I want to be a crook," Joshua said fiercely.

"That's quite enough," his father said crossly, settling into his customary bad humor for long car trips with children. "Get in the back seat, Josh."

Joshua did. He lay in the far back of the van and played with toy soldiers on his stomach. Geor-



gianna, in her baby carseat, took a soldier and put it in her mouth. Then she took her wet pacifier with traces of applesauce from lunch and stuck it in Joshua's mouth.

"Josh baby," she said happily.

"You bet," Amanda said.

"Please," their mother said.

"Will Joshua have to repeat third grade all year?" Amanda, with her usual bad judgment, asked pleasantly.

"Not any of the year," Joshua said, taking matters into his own hands. He leaped on his sister's back and tore one of the pages of her thick book. He was crayoning her face with purple Magic Marker when his mother scrambled between them in the back seat.

"This is an awful time for Josh," she said to Amanda. "Leave him alone."

"He doesn't need to kill me; it's not my fault he can't read."

"He didn't kill you," their mother said.

Very sweetly, she took Joshua in the front seat with her.

**I**t's the worst possible end to a great summer vacation: Joshua Bates finds out he has to repeat the third grade. His teachers say he needs another year "to mature." What do they expect from a nine-year-old? A beard?



The first day of school is a complete nightmare. The fourth graders think he's a freak, the kids in his new class are babies, and his teacher looks like a two-ton tank. Joshua is totally miserable. Will he ever catch up—or is he stuck in the third grade forever?

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