

FIRST TIME AROUND

A photograph of a grey metal locker door. The door has a combination lock in the center, a silver handle below it, and two small screws on the left side. The text "FIRST TIME AROUND" is printed in large, bold, black letters at the top, and "Michael J. Bellito" is printed in bold, black letters at the bottom.

Michael J. Bellito

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A Novel By
Michael J. Bellito



Strategic Book Group

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*To my children, Matt and Joy, whose lives
are a constant inspiration to me.*

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First Time Around is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to any persons (living or dead), situations, or events is completely coincidental.

M. J. Bellito

1

John Belson wasn't the least bit scared. Why should he be? After all, he was an eighth grader—top dog, big cheese, king of the hill. He knew the building, Miller Junior High School, with its endless rows of neat lockers, polished tile floors, and oversized classrooms, built to usher in the 1960s, when baby boomers were coming of age and suburban schools were sprouting up like spring grass, every one of the edifices cleaner and shinier and more expansive than its ancient predecessor. He knew the ins and outs of the maze—the corridors that were passageways to the art and music rooms, the mini-stairway to the boys' locker room, the secret shortcut behind the stage that assured a spot at the front of the lunch line. Despite all this, he felt queasy as the bus screeched to a stop in the circle drive at the main entrance. An empty, hollow ache gnawed at his stomach. But it wasn't fear that assailed him. John Belson was lonely.

Stepping slowly off the bus and shuffling along with his head down, John was soon swept up by the surging stream of hormones and carried like baggage into the building. He followed the restless bodies up the wide staircase and headed toward where he was certain his locker would be—in alphabetical order in the eighth-grade wing.

And there it was, number 865, near the boys' room. John deftly twirled through the set of numbers scrawled on the scrap of paper in his hand. He pulled hard on the handle, and the locker clanked open. He swung it back and forth on its hinges several times and slammed it shut. There was no coat to hang up in early September, and textbooks hadn't been issued yet. To impress the teachers, John would carry his three-subject notebooks, pens, and No. 2 pencils to each of his classes today.

The noise around him grew louder as more kids shot out of the stairwell into the hallway. Standing with his back to his locker, he watched with envy the backslapping boys and squealing girls welcome each other back from the short summer. How long would it be until someone—anyone—acknowledged his presence?

“Hey, Belson, you dork!”

Finally, a friendly face. John knew Bill Dobbs from Little League. A big, likable kid with a dark crew cut, Bill was a workhorse on the mound, and opponents feared his wicked fastball. The two boys had also teamed up in seventh-grade shop class to help each other finish a project. The most difficult part of creating the homemade bongos had been the last task—the stretching and tacking of the wet skins so they fit snugly over the edges of the wood. John recalled Bill’s impassioned pleas to: “Pull hard, Belson, if you want our bongos to look good.”

John zigzagged through the mass of bodies—a mix of cologne and perfume—and approached the large boy’s locker. The last time they had seen each other was at the championship game in July, a 6-5 defeat.

“Hi, Bill. How was your summer?”

“Better than yours, I’m sure. While you were at home picking your nose and watching your pathetic Cubs lose every game, I was at camp in Wisconsin.”

“How was it?”

“Mostly okay, I guess. Some kid drowned though. His parents had to come and get the body, which was lousy. We all had to stay in the next day. I think the counselors were trying to figure out what to do. But we got to finish out the week. Anyway, I made out with Laurie Jenkins on the last night. We snuck away from the campfire when everyone was singing dopey songs and went off into the woods.”

John’s eyes grew large. Laurie Jenkins had the biggest pair in the eighth grade. “You liar.”

Bill looked offended. “I never lie about titty.”

A loud clang, followed by yelling and banging, interrupted their banter. Down the hall, a sixth grader had mistakenly

wandered into the wrong wing and was now fighting for air and sanity within the close confines of a musty locker.

“Serves him right,” Bill remarked. “The little twerp shouldn’t be up here in the first place.”

John felt a twinge of sadness for the prisoner but said nothing. An adult would appear soon enough and release him.

“So, who’s your LASS teacher?” Bill asked.

LASS stood for Language Arts/Social Studies. The class met thrice daily during the nine-period schedule. One’s LASS teacher was also considered to be the homeroom “counselor” and therefore responsible for most parent contact.

“Mr. Schwartz,” John said.

“I’ve heard he’s okay. I’ve got Mrs. Danforth.” Bill’s expressive face scrunched up. “She’s a real witch. They say she’ll whack you one for no good reason, just for lookin’ out the window or something.”

The pain in John’s stomach struck again. “Too bad we’re not together.”

This was a heartfelt sentiment. John liked Bill’s quick humor and laid-back attitude. Shop class the past year had been a riot, Bill producing dirty jokes with assembly-line speed and precision timing until his captive listeners blew snot from their noses. Mr. Black, who ran his classes like a warden, more than once stifled the boys’ laughter with a glower across the bustling room, seemingly confused that anyone would not take wood seriously. During one memorable stare-down, a jigsaw removed the top half of his left pinkie, which bothered him not at all.

“Are we together for even one class?” John unfolded his schedule and held it out for Bill to see.

Bill pulled his own schedule from his pocket and did a rapid comparison. “Nope. Oh, wait, there’s lunch.” All the eighth graders ate together during fifth period. “Other than that, you’ll just have to play with yourself all day. And now, farewell, my lad, I’m off to greener pastures. Hey, Cindy!”

John was alone again. His eyes followed Bill’s frame as the friendly boy loped down the hall in the direction of Cindy Sandlund, a petite girl with blond hair and green

eyes. Glancing back down toward his hands, he studied his schedule.

First period. Art with Mr. Robinson. John, one of the most uncreative children in God's universe, hated art. He tried hard, but nothing ever looked right when he was finished. Nor did he understand art's basic concepts, such as perspective. He drew the lines for the bowling lanes straight because lanes *were* straight, and no art teacher's explanation of how they had to slant inward closer to the pins would ever prove satisfactory to his practical mind.

The next two periods were LASS, with French thrown in three times a week, followed by gym and lunch. This was good, thought John. At least he didn't have gym *after* lunch when the cafeteria meatloaf hadn't had time to settle. Next came science, then back to LASS, math, and finally, study hall.

The best aspect of study hall was that the eighth graders could sign up during that time period for "special classes" ranging from choir to sports to chess club to biology. In other words, something for everybody.

John looked around one more time at the barely contained chaos, the introvert's noisy nightmare. The thing was that, until last year, John had been more of an extrovert. Sixth grade had witnessed an awakening of his soul and spirit. There had been new friends, and not just guys. Co-ed "mixers" had introduced him to girls, who laughed at his jokes while teaching him to move to the sexually charged dances of the day. John, in turn, became more outgoing; he even dared to envision a future marriage to Debbie, Monica, Carol, or Wendy.

But that had been at Oliver Wendell Holmes Junior High across town, before the meddlers decided a second school needed to be built to keep up with exploding enrollment. They condemned John's block to be included in the revised map area for the new building. Without moving, John was suddenly separated from all the people he liked and trusted. Only a few of his childhood playmates who lived on his street accompanied him to his new school. The rest of the pack was

made up of strangers, none of whom laughed at John's clever imitations of teachers, cared if he liked to play chess or read the works of Edgar Allan Poe and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, or willingly picked him for their team in gym class.

Even his grades, which had always been stellar, dive-bombed. His teachers no longer perceived him as bright and self-motivated, and notices home were no longer "commendations." Rather, they were "failures." Increased weight brought athletic struggles as well, and the cycle of defeat repeated itself as John took comfort in eating whenever it was convenient.

Passing quickly through the crowded halls, John slid noiselessly into the art room and sat down on a stool near the window. He scanned the faces. Why did none of them seem familiar? He had attended Miller Junior High for a full year, hadn't he?

The bell rang.

"Welcome to your first thirteen-week class—art." Mr. Robinson hadn't changed since last year. Horned-rimmed bifocals and a moustache under thinning brown hair. A green cardigan sweater with neat patches on the elbows. A polite smile that made him seem friendly. Until one got to know him, thought John, remembering the "D" the teacher had given his seventh-grade clay project—an alligator who had, unfortunately, been left too long in the kiln, causing one of its legs to fall off.

"After this class, you will all move on to music and then practical arts—shop for the boys and home economics for the girls."

John didn't mind music, but he hated shop class almost as much as art. Truth be told, he would have preferred making scrambled eggs and bundt cakes to tie racks and bongos.

"Our first projects this year will be clay sculptures. You will shape them, bake them in the kiln, and paint them."

Oh, please, not again, thought John.

"After I call roll, you may get up from your seats and look at—but do not touch—some of the excellent pieces from

last year displayed on the shelf to my left. They are truly amazing.”

Mr. Robinson paused momentarily during his effusive praise. Most likely, none of the potential Picassos who’d created these modern-art masterpieces would go on to immortality in the nebulous world of art, but that didn’t matter. They were prototypes, and John’s class had better strive to match their perfection.

“Now, to more mundane matters. Please say ‘here’ if you are present. Darlene Adams.”

“Here.”

“Barbara Anderson.”

“Here.”

“John Bel—”

The door crashed open. A tall, dark-haired boy with a wide grin burst into the classroom. The boys looked surprised; the girls looked excited; Mr. Robinson looked bewildered.

“May I help you?”

“Yes, I’m Jeff Womack,” the boy said, “and I’m sorry I’m late to your class. I’m new to this school, and I couldn’t find the art room.”

Mr. Robinson snatched the schedule from the boy’s hand. “Hmm . . . well, you’re in the right place. Please take a seat, and don’t come late again.”

Right, thought John. As if the poor kid came late on purpose so he could be humiliated in front of a group of snobs and bullies. But the funny thing was that the new boy didn’t seem a bit fazed. He smiled politely at the grim-faced teacher, said, “Thank you, sir,” and walked to a seat on the opposite side of the classroom. Two girls giggled as he glided past them, dirty thoughts in their heads. For a flash, the boy’s demeanor reminded John of someone truly dangerous, like Shane in Jack Schaefer’s classic novel.

When the bell rang to dismiss them, the class moved en masse. There was never time for anything more than a quick slurp of water or a pit stop for a pee before the haggard cattle were driven by instinct to their various destinations. John

allowed himself a moment's indecision—should he go out of his way to help the new boy find his next class? No, then he would be late himself, he reasoned. And besides, Jeff—was that his name?—had already disappeared into the herd.

Mr. Schwartz, wearing a white shirt, thin black tie, and the tightest pants John had ever seen, greeted his LASS class warmly as the boys and girls filed into the room and took their seats. His reputation was one of a hard, but fair, instructor who took his job of molding lazy eighth graders into high-school-ready students very seriously. Except when Miss Parras came in three times weekly during third period for a half hour of French, Mr. Schwartz would teach this class fifteen periods a week.

The room, near John's locker, was large and well lit, sun streaming in through the bank of windows that looked down on the street below. Each of the fifteen tables had two chairs, a grand total of thirty seats. As John glanced around at the faces, he recognized some from last year. Again, however, most seemed unfamiliar. He was inwardly delighted to glance across the aisle and see Nancy Olson, an attractive blond with blue eyes and a sweet smile, but she looked through him as if he wasn't there and waved to a girl seated near the door.

John's heart sank. He turned slowly in his chair and gazed blankly at the nearly full classroom behind him. Twenty-nine seats were taken; the only empty one sat beside him. As his peers had entered the classroom, not one had chosen to sit at his table.

A wave of sadness overwhelmed him. He fought back tears, knowing this would only worsen his situation. Unless Mr. Schwartz changed their seats, he would be alone, isolated on an island while an ocean of laughter and warmth swelled up around him. Surrendering to his fate, he turned and listened to his teacher's voice monotonously calling the roll.

Without warning, the door crashed open.

2

“**A**nd why, exactly, did you think it was a good idea to put a pig’s head in Margie Bruce’s locker?”

It had come to this. John Belson and his new friend Jeff Womack were seated in the assistant principal’s carpeted office for their third visit in a month, and Mr. Carver did not look happy.

The first trip had come about because John and Jeff found out they had something in common: they loved to laugh out loud at stupid things. During the first few weeks of school, every time Mr. Schwartz turned to write something on the chalkboard, Jeff pulled out an outrageous caricature that he had drawn of someone they knew. In true Thomas Nast-style satire, no one was spared. Teachers, of course, were the most frequent targets. There was Mr. Robinson, paint-speckled face and clay up to his elbows, saying, “Art is life. Well, *my* boring life anyway.” Mr. Schwartz was shown from behind, bending over to pick up a piece of chalk, the bulge of his wallet looking more like a safe stuck in his back pocket, his skin-tight pants splitting to the sound of “Rrriip.” He was yelling, “I feel a breeze in here! Did someone open a window?” And Mr. Dumpmore, their paunchy gym teacher, was drawn covered in blood, bodies at his feet, holding up a hard rubber ball and sneering, “I just love dodge ball.”

True friendship never happens overnight. Jeff had taken the vacant seat next to John on that first day of school and had been nice to him. That alone had given John hope. As the weeks progressed, the proximity to each other in LASS and a few other classes—their schedules were identical—had

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