

Bridge to Terabithia – Chapter 3 Part 1



clabber



slurp



drought



corduroys



shadow



stunned



tease

The children ate lunch at their desks. The county had been promising Lark Creek a lunchroom for twenty years, but there never seemed to be enough money. Jess had been so careful not to lose his recess time that even now he chewed his bologna sandwich with his lips tight shut and his eyes on the initialed heart. Around him conversations buzzed. They were not supposed to talk during lunch, but it was the first day and even Monster-Mouth Myers shot fewer flames on the first day.

“She’s eating clabber.” Two seats up from where he sat, Mary Lou Peoples was at work being the second snottiest girl in the fifth grade.

“Yogurt, stupid. Don’t you watch TV?” This from Wanda Kay Moore, the snottiest, who sat immediately in front of Jess.

“Yuk.”

Lord, why couldn’t they leave people in peace? Why shouldn’t Leslie Burke eat anything she durn pleased?

He forgot that he was trying to eat carefully and took a loud slurp of his milk.

Wanda Moore turned around, all priss-face. “Jesse Aarons. That noise is pure repulsive.”

He glared at her hard and gave another slurp.

“You are disgusting.”

Brrrrring. The recess bell. With a yelp, the boys were pushing for first place at the door.

“The boys will all sit down.” Oh, Lord. “While the girls line up to go out to the playground. Ladies first.”

The boys quivered on the edges of their seats like moths fighting to be freed of cocoons. Would she never let them go?

“All right, now if you boys . . .” They didn’t give her a chance to change her mind. They were halfway to the end of the field before she could finish her sentence.

The first two out began dragging their toes to make the finish line. The ground was rutted from past rains, but had hardened in the late summer drought, so they had to give up on sneaker toes and draw the line with a stick. The fifth-grade boys, bursting with new importance, ordered the fourth graders this way and that, while the smaller boys tried to include themselves without being conspicuous.

“How many you guys gonna run?” Gary Fulcher demanded.

“Me—me—me.” Everyone yelled.

“That’s too many. No first, second, *or* third graders—except maybe the Butcher cousins and Timmy Vaughn. The rest of you will just be in the way.”

Shoulders sagged, but the little boys backed away obediently.

"OK. That leaves twenty-six, twenty-seven—stand still—twenty-eight. You get twenty-eight, Greg?" Fulcher asked Greg Williams, his shadow.

"Right. Twenty-eight."

"OK. Now. We'll have eliminations like always. Count off by fours. Then we'll run all the ones together, then the twos—"

"We know. We know." Everyone was impatient with Gary, who was trying for all the world to sound like this year's Wayne Pettis.

Jess was a four, which suited him well enough. He was impatient to run, but he really didn't mind having a chance to see how the others were doing since spring. Fulcher was a one, of course, having started everything with himself. Jess grinned at Fulcher's back and stuck his hands into the pockets of his corduroys, wriggling his right forefinger through the hole.

Gary won the first heat easily and had plenty of breath left to boss the organizing of the second. A few of the younger boys drifted off to play King of the Mountain on the slope between the upper and lower fields. Out of the corner of his eye, Jess saw someone coming down from

the upper field. He turned his back and pretended to concentrate on Fulcher's high-pitched commands.

"Hi." Leslie Burke had come up beside him.

He shifted slightly away. "Umph."

"Aren't you running?"

"Later." Maybe if he didn't look at her, she would go back to the upper field where she belonged.

Gary told Earle Watson to bang the start. Jess watched. Nobody with much speed in that crowd. He kept his eyes on the shirrtails and bent backs.

A fight broke out at the finish line between Jimmy Mitchell and Clyde Deal. Everyone rushed to see. Jess was aware that Leslie Burke stayed at his elbow, but he was careful not to look her way.

"Clyde." Gary Fulcher made his declaration. "It was Clyde."

"It was a tie, Fulcher," a fourth grader protested. "I was standing right here."

"Clyde Deal."

Jimmy Mitchell's jaw was set. "I won, Fulcher. You couldn't even see from way back there."

"It was Deal." Gary ignored the protests. "We're wasting time. All threes line up. Right now."

Jimmy's fists went up. "Ain't fair, Fulcher."

Gary turned his back and headed for the starting line.

"Oh, let 'em both run in the finals. What's it gonna hurt?" Jess said loudly.

Gary stopped walking and wheeled to face him. Fulcher glared first at Jess and then at Leslie Burke. "Next thing," he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm, "next thing you're gonna want to let some *girl* run."

Jess's face went hot. "Sure," he said recklessly. "Why not?" He turned deliberately toward Leslie. "Wanna run?" he asked.

"Sure." She was grinning. "Why not?"

"You ain't scared to let a *girl* race are you, Fulcher?"

For a minute he thought Gary was going to sock him, and he stiffened. He mustn't let Fulcher suspect that he was scared of a little belt in the mouth. But instead Gary broke into a trot and started bossing the threes into line for their heat.

"You can run with the fours, Leslie." He said it loudly enough to make sure Fulcher could hear him and then concentrated on the runners. See, he told himself, you can stand up to a creep like Fulcher. No sweat.

Bobby Miller won the threes easily. He was the best of the fourth graders, almost as fast as Fulcher. *But not as good as me*, Jess thought. He was beginning to get really excited now. There wasn't anybody in the fours who could give him much of a race. Still it would be better to give Fulcher a scare by running well in the heat.

Leslie lined up beside him on the right. He moved a tiny bit to the left, but she didn't seem to notice.

At the bang Jess shot forward. It felt good—even the rough ground against the bottom of his worn sneakers. He was pumping good. He could almost smell Gary Fulcher's surprise at his improvement. The crowd was noisier than they'd been during the other heats. Maybe they were all noticing. He wanted to look back and see where the others were, but he resisted the temptation. It would seem conceited to look back. He concentrated on the line ahead. It was nearing with every step. "Oh, Miss Bessie, if you could see me now."

He felt it before he saw it. Someone was moving up. He automatically pumped harder. Then the shape was there in his sideways vision. Then suddenly pulling ahead. He forced himself now. His breath was choking him, and the sweat was in his eyes. But he saw the figure anyhow. The faded cutoffs crossed the line a full three feet ahead of him.

Leslie turned to face him with a wide smile on her tanned face. He stumbled and without a word began half walking, half trotting over to the starting line. This was the day he was going to be champion—the best runner of the fourth and fifth grades, and he hadn't even won his heat. There was no cheering at either end of the field. The rest of the boys seemed as stunned as he. The teasing would

come later, he felt sure, but at least for the moment none of them were talking.

“OK.” Fulcher took over. He tried to appear very much in charge. “OK, you guys. You can line up for the finals.” He walked over to Leslie. “OK, you had your fun. You can run on up to the hopscotch now.”

“But I won the heat,” she said.

Gary lowered his head like a bull. “Girls aren’t supposed to play on the lower field. Better get up there before one of the teachers sees you.”

“I want to run,” she said quietly.

“You already did.”

“Whatsa matter, Fulcher?” All Jess’s anger was bubbling out. He couldn’t seem to stop the flow. “Whatsa matter? Scared to race her?”

Fulcher’s fist went up. But Jess walked away from it. Fulcher would have to let her run now, he knew. And Fulcher did, angrily and grudgingly.

She beat him. She came in first and turned her large shining eyes on a bunch of dumb sweating-mad faces. The bell rang. Jess started across the lower field, his hands still deep in his pockets. She caught up with him. He took his hands out and began to trot toward the hill. She’d got him into enough trouble. She speeded up and refused to be shaken off.

“Thanks,” she said.

“Yeah?” For what? he was thinking.

“You’re the only kid in this whole durned school who’s worth shooting.” He wasn’t sure, he thought her voice was quivering, but he wasn’t going to start feeling sorry for her again.

“So shoot me,” he said.

On the bus that afternoon he did something he had never thought he would do. He sat down beside May Belle. It was the only way he could make sure that he wouldn’t have Leslie plunking herself down beside him. Lord, the girl had no notion of what you did and didn’t do. He stared out the window, but he knew she had come and was sitting across the aisle from them.

He heard her say “Jess” once, but the bus was noisy enough that he could pretend he hadn’t heard. When they came to the stop, he grabbed May Belle’s hand and dragged her off, conscious that Leslie was right behind them. But she didn’t try to speak to him again, nor did she follow them. She just took off running to the old Perkins place. He couldn’t help turning to watch. She ran as though it was her nature. It reminded him of the flight of wild ducks in the autumn. So smooth. The word “beautiful” came to his mind, but he shook it away and hurried up toward the house.