

IN THE JUNGLE

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INT. PUBLIC SCHOOL CLASSROOM - DAY

Lights off as a video plays in a typical 1970 sixth grade schoolroom. Whispers and spitballs fly behind the female TEACHER's back as she writes something on the board.

ON PROJECTOR - To a tense DRUMBEAT, a lion stalks and chases a gazelle: then brutally tackles and flips it into the grass. [https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3i2yqu]

Some STUDENTS gasp. Some giggle.

One is oblivious. In the back row without neighbors sits ERIC (12) - cute, big glasses, two hearing aids. He's hunched over a drawing.

Even when the lights flip on, he doesn't seem to notice.

[From here on, this is ERIC'S sound world: all dialoge is captioned. Noises are always muffled, like being underwater, unless OTHERWISE NOTED - but get more audible within two feet of range, as Eric is deaf.]

Muffled classroom sounds wash over Eric as he draws a lush jungle: Tarzan swinging on a vine with Jane. Suddenly the sketch fills with color, becomes an animated, living scene:

- The muffled classroom sounds fade and CLEAR JUNGLE SOUNDS emerge. Tarzan goes for a kiss...

But Eric's drawing returns to normal as footsteps approach.

TEACHER
(very faint)
Eric ... [what] are you doing?! ...
[are you]

She puts a hand on his desk, startling Eric.

TEACHER (CONT'D)
(muffled but audible)
Even listening?

She jabs her finger in the direction of the board, on which is written: "What is Survival of the Fittest?"

The Students giggle. Eric blushes.

She flips over Eric's sketch to reveal a homework chart of the taxonomic rank... but the answer fields are empty.

TEACHER (CONT'D)
You didn't write ANY of them??
(big sigh)
Start at the top.

She turns back toward the blackboard, but two steps later--

ERIC
Kingdom, phylum, class, order,
family, genus, species.

Despite his impediment, Eric's answer is perfectly clear.

The Teacher turns to stare at him.

TEACHER
What did you say?

ERIC
And it's Darwin's theory. Of
natural selection...
(gulps as heads turn)
Survival of the fittest.

Teacher looks unsure what to think. So do the Students. As she stalks back to the board, they study Eric.

He shrinks under their eyes, briefly unsure what to do. Then sticks out his tongue at Teacher's back.

They giggle. The Teacher shushes them.

Eric takes in their giggles with pride, especially LIZZIE (12), in big GLASSES just like his - and clearly the inspiration for 'Jane' in his drawing.

Shyly, she smiles at him.

Eric smiles back. But the moment is ruined when -

A spitball nails Eric's glasses.

The culprit, across the room, is BRAD (12) a bully by the bruises on his arms and the edgy Rambo-style BANDANA across his head.

Brad hides his weapon: a slingshot. Then sneers at Eric.

The Boys laugh.

As the Teacher drones on, Eric wipes his glasses.

He flips over the homework - back to his drawing, which again comes alive:

- But this time, Tarzan is swinging with Jane as they're chased through the jungle by a sinister, mustachioed EXPLORER (clearly Brad).

Eric glances back at Brad, troubled.

Brad holds up his own drawing. Much cruder than Eric's, it's titled 'Survivl of the fittist' - and shows an image of a lion death-gripping a bleeding gazelle.

The gazelle has two hearing aids, just like Eric's.

Eric's eyes narrow.

INT. PUBLIC SCHOOL HALLWAY - LATER

The bell's RING is warped and piercing. Eric winces.

Students clamor around him to get out of the classroom.

He's is the last to leave... almost. Lizzie comes behind and stuffs a note in his hand. Then runs to the end of the hall.

Eric opens it: a SMILEY FACE WITH GLASSES. He looks up to see Lizzie with some Girls - whispering and giggling.

Eric smoothes his hair. He puffs his chest up like Tarzan, takes a deep breath and starts toward Lizzie...

But again, Brad ruins things -

Midway down the hall, Brad blocks Eric's path. And this time, he's with two other BULLIES - one with safety pins in his ears and the other with a finger up his nose. Misfits.

Eric watches their mouths closely as they whisper to each other. He lipreads, catching about half of their words:

BRAD

(captioned only)

We (???) get him after school.

He'll never (???) the freak.

Brad looks up at Eric, who is still squinting hard at him.

BULLY 1

(captioned only)

Wait (???) he looking at?

BULLY 2

(captioned only)

Little (???) freak (???) spying on us!

Eric gasps a little. The hall begins to empty as students filter into classrooms.

Brad faces Eric and covers his own mouth. He appears to be shouting behind his hand, though Eric can't lip read him. The other Bullies do the same -

But in reality, the Bullies are not yelling. They're pretending to yell to antagonize Eric.

Eric clenches his fists. He looks ready to cry, or attack.

Instead, he sticks his thumb in his mouth and - like blowing up a balloon - slowly inflates his middle finger.

The Bullies drop their hands. Now he can lip read, loud and clear...

BRAD
(captioned only)
GET. HIM.

As the bell rings to signal the end of passing time, Eric takes off running down the empty hall.

And the hunt is on.

INTERCUT: the tense DRUMBEAT of the lion/gazelle pursuit cuts against Eric's silent world:

- Silence: Except for the RINGING in his ears (tinnitus) as Eric flees down the empty hallway.

- Drumbeat: Bullies chase him, still halfway down the hall.

- Silence: Eric looks in his running direction. Sees a dead end. He glances back again...

- Drumbeat: The Bullies are CLOSER. Too Close.

END INTERCUT.

The boys turn the corner and sprint down another empty hall.

Suddenly, the Bullies stop - somewhere, very faint sounds of footsteps and jingling keys can be heard.

But Eric is too focused to notice. He continues running with all his might.

He looks back at the Bullies, confused at first - then triumphant.

But unseen ahead, a door opens. Out rolls out a huge mop bin -

And Eric crashes right into it.

Mop water sloshes across the floor. Eric slips and falls.

Panting on his back, Eric's view of the ceiling is eclipsed by a disappointed JANITOR.

INT. PUBLIC SCHOOL OFFICE - LATER

Eric sits on that classic bench in front of the Principal's closed office door. A RECEPTIONIST drones on her phone.

His pants are soaking wet.

A bell RINGS and Eric winces - it causes his tinnitus to WHINE at a higher, louder frequency than before.

Eric faces the office window, which looks out on the hallway -

Passing time again. Students run by - including Brad and the Bullies. They stop, point at Eric's pants and laugh.

Eric looks down in his lap.

Suddenly, panicked, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out the note from Lizzie. The soggy wad falls apart in his hands. He stares at it: an unspeakable tragedy.

A beat.

He reaches into his book bag. Pulls out his sketchbook.

The muffled secretary drone is replaced with the CLEAR JUNGLE NOISES as the drawing again comes to life:

- Tarzan and Jane escape to a tree. And again, Tarzan goes in for a kiss...

- But the Explorer machetes the air between them...

- Only this time, Tarzan fights back. He disarms the Explorer. Suddenly, Tarzan is flanked by LIONS and looks every bit the king of the jungle...

- The Explorer cowers as Tarzan rears back to punch him...

A hand on Eric's shoulder returns his drawing to normal.

Startled, he looks up to see a kind-faced PRINCIPAL. She glances at his drawing, and enunciates clearly for Eric.

PRINCIPAL
Bradley again?

Eric doesn't say anything, but his face does: he's no narc.

The Principal reaches into the LOST & FOUND box and pulls out a pair of wrinkled pants. She hands them to Eric. Then nods toward the door, to indicate "go on."

Eric sighs at the pants.

INT. PUBLIC SCHOOL LUNCHROOM - LATER

The din of voices and trays is like thunder.

Eric sits alone at a near-empty table. Further down are a BOY with Down's Syndrome and a GIRL hunched so far over her food that her hair falls into it.

Eric tugs up his borrowed pants, which are way too big.

Passing students whisper and giggle at him.

An unseen boy SLAPS a paper on the table. Eric squints to read it, upside-down: RETARD TABLE

Eric yanks it, but the tape holds. He pulls it off in shreds.

He sits back and stares at his untouched bag lunch. A happy cartoon scrawled on its front demands: "Have a good day!"

Eric glances up. Across the room, he sees Lizzie carrying her tray with a group of girls. She looks at him, but he pretends not to see her.

He reaches into his book bag, pulls out his sketchpad and opens it to a different drawing - a finished one:

- SOFT JUNGLE NOISES replace the muffled cafeteria sounds as Eric admires his detailed portrait of Lizzie.

Nearby, Lizzie's voice is faint as she approaches. Eric doesn't notice until she's right behind him.

LIZZIE (O.S.)
... hi um... Eric...

Eric's hearing aid gives off a high-pitched SCREECH. He grabs it, winces.

He turns to see Lizzie holding her tray, startled.

ERIC
Sorry. It... sings sometimes?

He taps his hearing aid, sheepish.

Timidly, Lizzie sets down her tray and sits beside him. Many eyes raise from the nearest table. Eric notices.

Lizzie doesn't. She's too intent on his drawing.

LIZZIE

Is that me?! It's so...

But as she holds up the drawing, her face is obscured. Eric can barely hear as she quietly says nice things about it.

ERIC

Can you--

She looks at him. He looks embarrassed.

ERIC (CONT'D)

(enunciates with effort)

Sorry. It's just... easier if you look at me when you talk.

Suddenly, Brad appears behind Lizzie. He grabs her glasses off her face.

BRAD

Look, it's Lizzie the geek and Eric the freak!

Eric and Lizzie both blush.

BRAD (CONT'D)

What's this?!

Brand snatches the drawing before Eric can pull it away.

His original Tarzan/Jane drawing falls to the floor. Brad spots it, grabs it...

And his face fills with a shit-eating grin. He waves both drawings around, at anyone who will look.

Students laugh.

Eric stares at his lunch bag. A tunnel vision of fury pulls him into its "Have a good day!"

Brad dangles Lizzie's glasses in front of her as he sings, so close that each syllable punches LOUD to Eric -

BRAD (O.S.) (CONT'D)

... Eric and Lizzie, sitting in a tree! F - U - C--

Lizzie makes a grab for her glasses, but Brad pulls them away. She looks about to cry, but Eric is a boiling pot.

Eric bolts up and grabs Lizzie's glasses from Brad - and with one Tarzan-like sweep, he hands them to Lizzie.

Then Eric swings his lunch bag, SMACKING Brad across the face so hard that he falls.

A beat, as the whole cafeteria takes a breath.

Then: a stampede.

The cafeteria erupts with muffled chants for a fight. And Eric is immediately on the floor, pinning Brad.

Eric's glasses fall off and skitter across the floor - one lens pops out.

As Eric pins Brad's arms with his knees, both hearing aids WHINE together with the high-pitched SCREECH of tinnitus -

Until the sounds become overwhelming.

Abruptly, they're replaced with the tense DRUMBEAT as Eric raises his fist back, ready to punch Brad.

Beyond the drumbeat, a CHEER explodes from the lunchroom animals, out for blood... anyone's.

And Eric's trains his vision - blurry without his glasses - on Brad's horrified face. Blood trickles from Brad's nose.

Brad shuts his eyes, ready to take the hit... almost like he's used to it. But as he turns his head, his BANDANA comes off - and reveals a deep bruise across his forehead.

A tear slips down his cheek. Eric frowns.

The DRUMBEAT AND CHEERS REACH A CLIMAX as Eric takes a deep breath, fist clenched and fully cocked -

Then drops his hand. And exhales.

Cafeteria noises evaporate until only the flatline RINGING in Eric's ears remains. Brad's eyes open. Bewildered. Relieved. In disbelief.

Two adult LUNCHROOM AIDES pull Eric off Brad.

Lizzie clutches her glasses, staring in awe as Eric and Brad are hauled away.

She sees Eric's broken glasses on the floor.

INT. PUBLIC SCHOOL OFFICE - LATER

Amidst the muffled drones of the Secretary, Eric again sits on the bench. But now, so does Brad. The end of a tampon protrudes from his bloody nose.

Arms crossed, Eric glares at the window facing the hallway. He regards his blurry reflection with disgust: a sad and angry little boy, wearing the wrong pants.

Lizzie interrupts his reflection by appearing in the hallway outside the window. She opens the door and enters the Office.

Eric and Brad sit up, confused.

Lizzie glares at Brad. She hands a wad of paper to Eric. Then exits, without a word.

Eric unravels the paper. Out tumble his glasses, onto his lap. The broken lens is held in place with a heart-shaped sticker.

Eric looks at Brad like "I dare you to say one effing word."

Brad faces forward.

Eric puts on his glasses and smooths the paper with care. Then, he reads it:

"You're the fittest 8) Lizzie."

CLEAR JUNGLE SOUNDS start again, followed by music. ["Mbube" - public domain version of "The Lion Sleeps Tonight"]

Brad taps Eric's arm and discreetly offers him his slingshot.

A beat.

Eric accepts it, trying to look casual - but thrilled. He hides it in his borrowed pants.

Then he looks back at the window. This time, with the power of the heart-taped glasses, his reflection is TARZAN himself: an adult man. King of the jungle. Powerful and victorious.

Eric smiles at himself.

And as Lizzie passes the window, she pushes her glasses up her nose. And smiles back.

END