

Last Year—BOT DUCK MAN

We were on the way to Philadelphia with the fifth-grade school trip when Denis and I made up the game BOT DUCK MAN. It stands for *botfly*, *duck*, and *human*.

Botfly on account of Denis's uncle getting one in his arm the last time he went to Costa Rica. *Duck* because we live in a town with a lot of ducks, and ducks eat insects including, we figured, botflies. *Human* on account of the way Denis described the botfly coming out of his uncle's arm—right by the elbow—and how bad his uncle said it hurt.

I am never going to Costa Rica.

Anyway, it's just like ROCK PAPER SCISSORS and I highly recommend it as an alternative to listening to the tour guide at the Liberty Bell.

“Stop it.”

Those were the first two words I ever heard from Ms. Sett. She was a chaperone because the school always had sixth-grade teachers chaperone fifth-grade trips.

“Stop it,” she said again, and then she moved Denis to the other side of the Liberty Bell so we couldn’t finish our BOT DUCK MAN tournament. I was winning.

BOT beats MAN.

DUCK beats BOT.

MAN beats DUCK.

After the Liberty Bell, we went to Independence Hall, where the tour guide was way more boring than the Liberty Bell tour guide.

And no, I don’t have a bad attitude. I’ve seen the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall three other times and each time I wasn’t impressed. It’s not that I don’t respect the founding fathers, but I do have some problems with how they did stuff. Mostly how they bought and sold people. I definitely have a problem with that.

So when it was question time at the end of the tour, and we were standing right in the room where the founding fathers had signed the Declaration of Independence, I raised my hand and asked, “How many of the guys who

signed the Declaration of Independence owned slaves?”

Ms. Sett moved quickly toward me with her hand out.

The tour guide said, “Forty-one out of fifty-six signers owned slaves. That’s a great question.”

“Thanks,” I said.

I’m white, so maybe this seems like a weird question. But just because I’m white doesn’t mean I can’t talk about what white people do wrong. We do a lot wrong. For starters, we don’t talk about how 73 percent of the signers of the Declaration of Independence owned slaves.

Ms. Sett stopped edging toward me once the tour guide answered. But she gave me a disapproving look while she listened to the next question. Marci Thompson asked something about why women weren’t invited to the whole signing party. Predictable. Marci was always talking about women and how they need more rights. I’d been stuck in the same class as her since first grade. The whole time, I thought she was okay . . . as long as you didn’t say anything to her.

Ms. Sett didn’t say anything to Marci then. Or me.

But I could tell she was taking notes in her head.

On the bus home from the Philadelphia trip, the teachers made us sing “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” like we were first

graders. They made us do it in three different groups of singers so we could appreciate “the harmonies!” Denis and I were playing a best-out-of-twenty-one tournament of BOT DUCK MAN. He won both games during “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” because I can’t sing and think at the same time. Then I lost my place in the song and sang out of sync with everyone until I just stopped singing altogether.

Marci Thompson leaned around the seat in front of us and chided, “You two should really pay more attention.”

“Are you a teacher now?” Denis asked.

“Trying to be a good friend,” she said.

Denis looked like he was going to say something mean. So I said, “You’re a great friend, Marci, but you could probably be more chilled out.”

My mom taught me how to do that.