

## BLUB

**B**lub is a mumbler. There's lots of folks in The Bottom who mumble bad, but Blub is the champion mumbler of The Bottom. He sounds like a bubble machine when he talks, "blub blub . . ." That's how he got his name.

Blub's a big boy for his age. He's two years younger than me—I'm fourteen and he's only twelve—but he looks older, being that he's tall and big. Blub don't have no brothers and sisters, and since he only live two doors from me, I used to translate for him when we was little, walking around The Bottom, taking care of our business and such. It was a good deal back in the day, because Blub would split his goods with me. We'd go into Mr. Johnson's grocery store and Blub would say, "Blub blub blub . . ."

Mr. Johnson would say, "What's Blub want?"

"He wants two Sugar Daddies and a pack of Now and Later's."

"All right, Blub."

We rolled like that for years, me and Blub. But when I started The Five-Carat Soul Bottom Bone Band with Goat and Dex and them, Blub couldn't play nothing, so I couldn't translate for him no more. He was on his own. But he still come around my house, mostly on account of my little sister Sissie. He was crazy about her.

One morning he come banging on my front door looking like somebody shot him. He was mumbling so fast I had to make him stop and start all over again three times before I understood him. Then I finally got it: "Thursday is dead!" he said. "Thursday died!"

Thursday is Sissie's cat.

"You lyin'," I said.

"Sho nuff."

"Show me," I said.

I followed him out to the Boulevard. When he got to the bus stop, he stopped there and pointed across the road, and sure enough old Thursday was

dead on the other side of the road, cars and trucks rolling right over him. He was smashed flat, his black and white fur mashed like a checkerboard.

“You see it happen?”

“Naw. I was standing here at the bus stop waiting for Sissie to get off the bus from school, and I seen him.”

Sissie was ten then, and she was animal crazy. She adopted every kind of animal that ever wandered around The Bottom: raccoons, possums, mice, birds, dogs. She even pulled a lizard with red spots and two brown frogs from the canal that runs through The Bottom, and that canal is so dirty even Wooden Joe stopped fishing in it. They say Wooden Joe is Dome’s father—Dome’s a boy, by the way—and Wooden Joe would fish in a toilet bowl if he thought there was catfish in it.

“We got to move him before Sissie gets here,” Blub said. “Her bus’ll be here any minute.”

I seen Thursday there, and he was gone, was my thoughts. I didn’t feel too bad. Thursday didn’t go far to die. He lived in the street and died in the street. He was a bum, really, perfect for The Bottom. He come ’round when he felt like it, then disappeared for weeks. He was about as popular as a can of tomatoes in The Bottom. Nobody liked him, not even other cats. Come to think of it, Thursday didn’t have no friends in The Bottom except Sissie.

Neither did Blub. He was too shy for most people. His mother, Miss Rosa, she was shy, too. You’d see her coming and going to work every day, but that’s about it. No big conversation from her. She ate Chinese takeout from Mr. Woo’s almost every day. It showed too, for when she walked down the street next to Blub, she gived him a lot of shade. I don’t know her exact size, but there was a whole lot of her. One time she got stuck in the bathtub and Blub had to call the fire company to come get her out. Soon as they left you could hear her hollering, “Earl! Earl! Git over here!” That was Blub’s real name. She was always yelling at him. I could hear her through the window two doors away. That’s one reason I think Blub spent so much time at my house.

The other reason was Sissie. They was good friends them two, mostly because Sissie was a tomboy. She liked animals more than people, which made Blub perfect, because Blub wasn’t all the way human neither. He was part animal, in a way. He just wandered around, doing nothing, following anybody that come along, smiling about nothing, he dressed bad and smelled funny. But he would do anything for Sissie.

But I wouldn’t. She was just my dumb sister. So when Blub said we got to move Thursday off the road, I said, “We ain’t got to move him. He’ll be mush by the time she gets off the bus.”

“That ain’t right,” Blub said. “We got to bury him.”

“Go ’head then.”

Blub turned around and set out for home, and being that he was younger than me it shamed me a little, so I caught up to him and said, “All right, Blub. But you’re picking him up.”

We went home and got a shovel, came back, and I stood watch while Blub dodged traffic and scooped up Thursday, cars honking and drivers hollering at him. Blub got that thing off the ground about thirty seconds before Sissie’s bus pulled up. We seen it coming a few blocks off and Blub was still holding that shovel full of guts and fur on the sidewalk, so I said, “Quick, let’s throw him in a garbage can up the street.”

“Sissie might see him,” he said, and took off running back towards The Bottom.

I caught up to him after a couple of blocks, and when we turned the corner and now the bus stop was out of sight I said, “Let’s take him behind Mr. Woo’s. There’s a dumpster back there.”

“I ain’t putting Sissie’s cat in no dumpster,” Blub announced. “We can bury him in your yard.”

“You crazy? Sissie already got a graveyard full of dead animals back there. My ma ain’t having that. How ’bout your yard?”

“No way,” he said. “What about Thresher Park?”

“I ain’t going in there,” I said. Thresher Park was off limits. That’s where knuckleheads like Bo, Chink, Lightbulb, Junior, and the rest of The Six gang from Mills Basin played basketball and smoked weed. Thresher Park was at the edge of The Bottom, near Mill Basin, the next town over. It’s wasn’t exactly their park. And it wasn’t exactly our park. But them Sixes was nothing to fool with. We played baseball against them and fought them with eggs at Halloween. But they could get cranky sometimes and a little dangerous.

Blub started walking toward Thresher Park before I could stop him, holding that shovel full of poor old Thursday. I had to go then. I didn’t want him thinking I was chicken-hearted.

Thresher Park used to be a nice park with a bunch of trees and benches back in the days when the steel plants was open. That’s what my mother says. She said after the plants closed and the city didn’t have no money, they came in and cut down all the trees except for one. It’s a big old sycamore tree with peeling bark and big electric wires running through the top branches. There’s a basketball court in the middle of the park, and a fence, and you have to walk past the basketball court to get to that tree.

Blub walked right in there with a shovel full of dead cat. He had grown pretty big by then, going on close to thirteen, and he didn't blink when he walked past the basketball court where The Six boys was playing. They looked over and saw Thursday in that shovel and stayed away.

Blub found a spot underneath the sycamore tree, cleared a bunch of bottles and dog crap, dug a deep hole, and buried what was left of Thursday. Then he took out a little pocketknife and scratched Thursday's name onto the tree trunk. "Now we can tell Sissie," he said.

"I ain't telling her," I said. I didn't want to hear it. But Blub mumbled the whole story to her when she got home. She howled, of course. Then she followed Blub over to Thresher Park and he showed her where he buried Thursday and she howled some more. Blub felt so bad he pulled out his pocketknife again and scratched her name beneath Thursday's in the tree. She said that made her feel better.

Then Blub said, "Can I scratch my name underneath yours?"

She didn't say nothing, which meant no. In them days, if a boy scratched his name under a girl's and wrote the plus sign to it, that meant they was boyfriend and girlfriend. The only thing Sissie liked back then was animals, of which Blub was one, but she more favored this light-skinned boy named Fingers. Fingers was a loser who was in juvenile jail for three months but he wrote Sissie a letter every day. Even though he was a rat, she liked him, which shows you how girls think: If you're nice and boring and bury their cats and all like Blub did, they can't be bothered. But go to jail for three months for stealing and keep 'em interested because you need fixing up and keep writing 'em notes from jail saying you gonna straighten up, why, they'll suffer any wrong.

So she told Blub, "Not right now. I'll think about it."

So Blub said, "Wanna get some ice cream from Mr. Johnson's?"

"Not this time," she said, and went home. That busted his bubble. I won't say it was the beginning of the end for old Blub. But something inside Blub knelt down and died that day. It was the end of something. I just don't know what it was.

. . .

TWO WEEKS LATER I come home from school, and who should I see setting on the front steps? I ran two doors away and fetched Blub. You should've seen his face when I showed him.

Thursday the cat was setting there, big as day with his evil self, licking his paws and kissing his own butt.

"It's a miracle," Blub mumbled.

“But we just buried him!” I said, and while I was talking Thursday got really deep into eating his own butt the way cats do, and I couldn’t stand him all over again. “It’s too bad we buried the wrong cat,” I said.

“Who cares?” Blub said. “Sissie’ll be so happy.”

He sat on my front steps all afternoon waiting for Sissie to get home from school. Meanwhile Thursday, his old raggedy self, ducked under the front stairs and went to sleep.

Sissie was so happy when she saw Thursday she gived Blub a hug, and this time let him take her to Mr. Johnson’s for ice cream.

The next week Blub got some money someplace and bought a can of real cat food and knocked on the door. He gave it to Sissie saying, “This is for Thursday. Wanna get some more ice cream from Mr. Johnson’s?”

But Sissie had gotten another letter from Fingers by then. Every time she got a letter from that idiot, she got all weepy. She took the food from Blub but didn’t do nothing else with him.

It went on like that all summer, Blub trying to be nice to Sissie’s evil cat, and her ignoring him. Then Fingers got out of juvenile a few weeks early and showed up with a new dungaree jacket and a new Afro, and that was it. Sissie followed him around like a puppy. She cut Blub loose. She told him, “Fingers brought Thursday a new collar.”

That done it. Blub drifted off then. I got busy with The Five-Carat Soul Bottom Bone Band around that time and lost track of him that summer, because we had a gig coming up. Of course, the gig was four months away, but a gig is a gig, so we was rehearsing hard and smoking a little weed and drinking a little Thunderbird wine, and rehearsing some more, ’cause that’s what you do in a street band when you about to go to high school. You get ready for gigs. It don’t matter that gigs mostly never happen. That’s not the point. A gig is a gig. Blub couldn’t hang around when we rehearsed over top of Mr. Woo’s restaurant anyway, because his mother showed up there too much and she wouldn’t do nothing but drag him home. Plus, he was like my little brother. Who wants your mumbling little brother around when you’re jamming with your buddies and being cool? So I’d send him off.

I didn’t see him much then. Sometimes I’d see him going back and forth to Mr. Woo’s to pick up takeout for his ma. Sometimes from my room I’d hear her hollering, “Earl! Git over here!” But I just plain forgot about him, and before I knew it, the summer was over.

That fall I saw him at Mr. Johnson’s store and he was wearing a brand-new leather jacket. I asked him, “Where you get that jacket?”

“Friend at school,” he mumbled. I didn’t know Blub had any other friends.

“What school?” I asked, because he wasn’t in my school. I had just started high school myself.

“I’m actually not in school yet,” he said. “But they’re putting me in a special school. Where they teach you how to speak right and get jobs and stuff.”

“Where’s the school?”

“I dunno. I’m waiting for the papers to come.”

His story sounded funny, but I didn’t think nothing of it. I had my own problems and lost track of him.

I was standing at the bus stop on the way to school one morning not long after when Sissie came up to me with a funny look on her face and said, “You hear about Blub?”

“No.”

She handed me a newspaper. I saw Blub’s picture and another guy’s picture. Underneath his picture I saw his real name and the word “Murder.”

I said, “Blub is dead?”

She didn’t say nothing. The bus came and she got on it while I sat there, reading. I couldn’t believe it.

Blub and another kid had got arrested for killing two people. A black man and his wife. The newspaper said Blub and his buddy broke into the house, clobbered the couple with pipes, bound them, tied them up, robbed them, and killed them both. There was a two-year-old baby girl in the house, too. When the cops got there, they found the baby girl alive, on her dead mother’s chest on the bed. The father had been duct-taped and drowned in the bathtub.

I thought it was a mistake. I couldn’t move for a long time after I read it. I just sat there on the bench. By the time I looked up, the last school bus was long gone, so I got up and walked home.

When I walked in the house my ma said, “What happened?” and I showed her the paper. She was so shocked she had to sit down a minute. She said, “That can’t be right.”

“They got the wrong man,” I said.

Suddenly, sitting at the table, she got mad at me and slammed the paper down on the table. “He ain’t no man!” she said.

“Yes he is,” I said. “Blub’s a young man. The paper says he’s seventeen. I thought he was only fourteen. He musta got left back a few times and didn’t tell me. But he’s a young man.”

“I don’t give a tinker’s damn what the paper says,” she yelled. “He’s no man! He’s a boy! Just a stupid, silly boy! And so are you! Get up! Git to school!”

“What’d I do?”

“Get your ass to school!” she said. “Earl’s in jail. And you’ll go there too if you fool around with the wrong people. Get out! Get to school! Right now! Or I’ll warm your toasters right here with my switch! You think you’re too old for it? You wanna see?”

She was being stupid, so I was glad to cut out.

When Sissie got home from school later, she asked me to find out what happened. I asked around, but nobody knew nothing. I couldn’t call the police because who’s dumb enough to ask them? I went to Blub’s house and knocked on his mother’s door, but Miss Rosa wouldn’t answer.

I told Sissie, “Nobody knows nothing. Forget about it.” She was upset, but she was getting like my ma then, turning thirteen and trying to act cool and grown-up about men and all. She sucked her teeth. “The boys ’round here ain’t worth two cents,” she said, and went outside and sat on the stoop with Thursday in her lap.

There was not one soul from The Bottom who knew what happened. So what I know of it came from what the newspapers said. It was a nice religious couple that got kilt. The man was a minister. He had hired Blub and his friend to do some work in his house and they had an argument about money. What it was exactly about who knows, but the case was pretty bad against Blub and his buddy. The paper said they was both there and the cops had fingerprints and all kinds of proof. I asked all over The Bottom about the other guy that Blub was with, but there wasn’t one soul from The Bottom who knew him. Somebody said Blub met him in that new school he went to.

Fall came, and I forgot about it. Then the case came to court and Blub was in the newspaper all over again. He was more famous now in The Bottom than he ever was when he lived here. All kinds of people came up to me and asked, “What happened to Blub?” I wanted to say, “You wasn’t interested before,” but what was the point? He and his new buddy was gonna cook together.

Well, come time for the trial, I couldn’t stand it. I like to read, but I didn’t read none of it in the paper. Even so, I still heard some of the bad parts, because that kind of news gets around in The Bottom. Folks talked about how the man who died had struggled in his bathtub, and how somebody strong must’ve had to hold him down, and how his wife was suffocated and maybe died after her husband was killed. Whoever did that evil a big strong devil, they said, and didn’t you notice how Blub had got so big and strong?

It was just too much. Blub was a big boy. But evil . . . I couldn’t deal with it, so I blocked it out. Thank God for The Five-Carat Soul Bottom Bone Band, because while we do not have many gigs, we can jam, and music keeps your mind right, especially when Goat plays drums. He’s what you call a basher.

You can't think about nothing once he's finished crashing cymbals in your ears.

All that bashing helped me forget Blub, until my ma got a call from the courthouse from a man who said he was Blub's lawyer. "We need your son to testify," he said.

"Absolutely not," she said. "He ain't had nothing to do with it. He's an organ player in church."

"All the better," the man said. "This is the sentencing phase. Earl's already been found guilty of double murder. He's likely to get the death sentence. He says your son knew him. Maybe something your son says could change things for him a little. So he won't go to the electric chair."

"We can't help," my ma said. She hung up the phone and walked away, cussing and hollering. "Why's he calling here?" she shouted, talking to the whole house now. "This ain't my business! The only thing we can do for Blub is pray for him."

But then that night Mother Miles, who is the mother deacon of Bright Hope Baptist Church, she come by and I heard her talking to my ma in the kitchen. Mother Miles said she knowed Blub's mother, Miss Rosa, and I heard her telling my ma that Miss Rosa never done no wrong, how Miss Rosa worked all her life, and how Miss Rosa didn't know nothing about raising kids. It was the father that did all the raising, Mother Miles said, and when he runned off, why, there it is. So my ma said she'd think about it, and the next morning she got me out of bed and asked me do I wanna go down to court and testify for Blub.

"Yes, I will do it for Blub."

"If you go down there and tell any lies to make it easy on him, you will suck sorrow in this house," she said.

"Why would I lie?"

"You better not. 'Cause two people are dead. And Earl was in that house. That's the truth of it. And don't bring your sister. I already had one convict writing letters here. One's enough."

. . .

THEY HAD PUT BLUB and his new buddy at separate tables in the courtroom. Blub had on a brand-new suit. He looked nervous and scared. When I saw that new buddy of his, I knew then what had happened. He was a squat, thick, mean-looking devil. He never moved in the court. He looked straight ahead. Blub had got hisself into some real deep water, was my thoughts. He looked out of his mind scared.



They was setting before an old black judge, a jury, and three lawyers—one for Blub, one for his friend, and one for the courtroom. That courtroom was full on one side with people who knowed the couple that was dead. On the other side was just me, Miss Rosa, and Rev. Jenkins, who come to speak for Blub. Nobody had come for Blub's new friend.

So they done a little of this and that, a lot of thees and therefores and what all they do in court, and finally called me up to testify. I sat there with my heart banging on my chest 'cause I had never done no wrong to be on nobody's court stand before. But I done my best. First Blub's lawyer talked to me nice. And I told him the story of how I knowed Blub all his life, and how he looked up to me, and how his mother yelled at him a lot. I said no matter what, I couldn't believe Blub could kill nobody.

Then the other lawyer from the court got up and tried to make me into a fool. He told me about how the dead man had been tied up, and his wife tied up, and both of them murdered so bad, and their kid left alone who was two years old, and the poor kid don't have no parents now, and how would I feel if somebody done that to my ma and dad and left my sister to die?

I said, "Mister, I have never known my dad. And Blub would never do that to my ma. Or nobody else."

He got mad and said, "How do you know? Was you in that house when those people was murdered?"

I said, "I was not," and then I told the story of Thursday the cat. And how Blub had found the cat dead on the Boulevard. And how Blub was all upset and came and got me, and made me bury the cat with him over in Thresher Park, and scratched the cat's name in the old sycamore tree. And how he broke the news to Sissie, and how he didn't want Sissie to see her dead cat. And then I told him how happy Blub was when he saw Thursday was alive.

And the lawyer said what does that got to do with anything? And I said well, I don't know what happened in that house, mister, but I guess if there was a little kid left alive in there, it was probably because Blub was there, because Blub wouldn't let nobody hurt no kid. Blub wouldn't hurt a fly. He just follows people around, I said. He ain't got a lot of friends. He just follows people around.

Rev. Jenkins, he testified too. He's a troublemaker but he did speak up for Blub. And Blub's mother, Miss Rosa, testified. She mostly sat in the witness stand and busted into tears. After it was done, I never wanted to see Blub no more, not even that day. But they told me to stick around when the jury left the room. They might need me again. They said it wouldn't take long.

It didn't neither. The jury came back in a couple of hours. First they announced their verdict on the other kid, Blub's new friend. They asked him

to stand up. The judge read the verdict from a piece of paper, which said “death penalty.” He made each juror, one at a time, stand up and actually say the word “death” out loud. He said it was the law. They done it. Each one. Some of them had tears in their eyes when they done it. But not all of ’em. Blub’s friend didn’t make a sound nor sweat it when they called it out on him neither. Didn’t move a muscle till he was told to sit again, which he did.

Then Blub was asked to stand. He got up shaking and sweating. And I remember thinking, *This is all going too fast for me*. Seem like just yesterday me and Blub was at Mr. Johnson’s grocery store ordering Now and Laters with me translating for him, and now Blub’s standing before a judge, about to . . . I couldn’t deal with it. I looked at him shaking and sweating, and seen how big he’d grown in jail, just a tall, good-looking man. And I wished then that Sissie could see him now, see how Blub had grown, how big and tall and slim he got, handsome in his suit, like a movie star. She had begged me to sneak her to the trial, but I kept my word to my ma. “You ain’t never gonna see him again,” I told her, “so you ought best forget him.”

The jury sent over a note to the judge, and he called the lawyers over to him, and the lawyers talked with him for a while. Then the jury sent over a second note, and the judge read that. And then the jury sent over a third note, and the judge wrote down something on a piece of paper, and then he read from the piece of paper in his hand.

The judge said this man is gonna get forty years to life.

When I got home, I told my ma what happened and she said, “Don’t tell your sister,” but of course Sissie dragged every bit of it outta me. She was quiet for a few days afterwards, and then we just rolled on. Winter came, and then spring, and high school came, and The Five-Carat Soul Bottom Bone Band kept rehearsing, and just like that Blub was gone from The Bottom.

Myself, I tried to forget him. When I had to walk past his house, I’d circle the block and go the long way. When I seen his mother going back and forth to work and ordering food from Mr. Woo’s, I’d avoid her, or sometimes I’d wave, but she hardly seen me and kept walking. And then after a while things got back to like they always were. And they went along normal again for a while—until Thursday the cat vanished.

He just never came back one day. We was used to that. Sometimes he’d disappear for days, even weeks at a time. That was normal. But this time he just never came back. Sissie put out food for him and called and called and watched out for him through the window, but the food stayed there. A month passed. Two months. Three months. Then the snow came, and after that I figured he was gone for good and forgot all about him, till one afternoon that cold winter I was coming home from rehearsal in the snow and passed by

Thresher Park and seen Sissie in there at the sycamore tree in the middle of the park scratching away at the tree trunk.

I seen her from the sidewalk, at a distance, through the fence, and backed off and waited by the fence out of sight till she was done with whatever she was doing. When she left I went up to the tree and seen where Blub had scratched Thursday's name, then scratched her name underneath Thursday's name to make her feel better.

And now she had scratched Blub's name under hers, with a plus sign on it.

THURSDAY THE CAT

+

SISSIE

+

BLUB

## GOAT

When I was little, I used to look out my window and see a little boy running behind a man on a bicycle every morning. I seen that boy running behind that bike every day before I even knew him, just some crazy boy running behind a man pedaling a bicycle. He'd run behind the man all the way to the corner, and when the man got to the dirt road that runned up the hill and out of The Bottom going towards downtown, that boy would stop running and watch him ride off, then turn and run to school. That's my friend Goat. He plays drums in The Five-Carat Soul Bottom Bone Band. The man on the bicycle is his daddy, who everybody calls Mr. Popcorn.

Goat is a dark-skinned boy who walks pigeon-toed and laughs all the time and likes to make jokes. He's a pretty good drummer for somebody who's twelve, but he plays too fast. Everything Goat does is fast. He talks fast. He eats fast. But mostly he runs fast. He's the fastest kid in all The Bottom. Everybody knows Goat got speed. I think he got it from running after his daddy all the time.

I don't know why they call his daddy Mr. Popcorn, for I have never seen him eat no popcorn. Goat told me his daddy's real name is Irving Evans. He's a little, chocolate-skinned man with shiny eyes and a big smile. Mr. Popcorn works way downtown in a yard where there's big oil trucks that say "Waste Oil" on the side. He rides his bike to work every day, and he works them pedals on that thing good and keeps it moving. It's a dandy bike. It's red and blue with stingray handlebars on it and a banana seat. It's put together from a bunch of different bike parts from Mr. Popcorn's yard. He got a ton of junk in that yard. Bricks, bike parts, tires, and real chickens. He even had a goat in there once—a real goat, which is how Goat got his nickname, for he used to have to feed it—but the city made him get rid of it. That whole family is country.

Mr. Popcorn got three boys: Minnie Jug, Tory, and Goat, and they is all fast. Minnie Jug is the oldest. He's like a bigger, meaner Goat. He stole my