

*Four friends, abandoned bus, a war game blurring lines between reality/fantasy. The stakes are high. Battlefield is real. The enemy is everywhere.*

## **Cool's Last Stand**

By Clifton Wilcox

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# Cool's Last Stand

The stakes are high. Battlefield is real.  
The enemy is everywhere.

An oil painting of three young boys standing on a dirt path in a field. The boy on the left wears a blue shirt and brown overalls, holding a small rifle. The boy in the center wears a green shirt and tan pants, also holding a rifle. The boy on the right wears a yellow shirt and dark pants. Behind them is a yellow school bus. The scene is set in a field with wildflowers and trees in the background.

Clifton Wilcox

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Print ISBN: 978-1-959623-47-2

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88532-032-0

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia, U.S.A.

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Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Wilcox, Clifton

Cool's Last Stand by Clifton Wilcox

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025907417

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2025

## **The Game Begins**

The air hung thick and still inside the abandoned school bus, the dust motes dancing in the weak light filtering through grimy windows. The scent was a potent cocktail of decay – old textbooks releasing the ghost of their printed ink, the musty smell of damp upholstery, and the faint, metallic tang of rust clinging to the skeletal framework of the vehicle. This was their sanctuary, their battlefield, their escape. For Malcolm, Caleb, Malachi, and Adam, the rotting husk of a forgotten yellow school bus was the gateway to a world far removed from the sleepy, sun-drenched streets of Sandersville.

Malcolm, the eldest, meticulously arranged his makeshift weaponry – a collection of battered wooden sticks, meticulously carved to resemble rifles and pistols. His face, usually etched with the seriousness of a boy burdened by responsibilities beyond his years, held a flicker of gleeful anticipation. His father, a stern and often distant figure, served in the military, and Malcolm, despite never having spoken of it, harbored a fascination

bordering on obsession with military history. Today, he'd fully inhabit that world.

Caleb, the boisterous one, bounced on the worn-out seats, his enthusiasm a contagious wave of energy. He wielded a toy machine gun, its plastic casing chipped and faded from years of enthusiastic play. Caleb, from a well-to-do family, lived a life starkly different from Malcolm's, yet their shared imagination found common ground in the dramatic world of World War II. His boisterous nature often clashed with Malachi's quieter demeanor.

Malachi, the quiet observer, sat hunched in a corner, meticulously checking his maps – crudely drawn sketches detailing the fictional battlefields they would conquer. His meticulous nature was a counterpoint to Caleb's boisterousness; Malachi's family, devoutly religious, instilled in him a sense of careful consideration and deep-seated faith. This contrast in personalities often created friction, but today, their shared game was a temporary balm to these differences.

Adam, the youngest, clutched a small, battered compass, his eyes wide with a mixture of excitement and nervous anticipation. Adam's family was recent

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immigrants, still struggling to find their footing in the town. He was the quietest of the four, yet his sharp intellect and observant nature often surprised the others, providing unexpected insights. He found solace in the structured world of their games, a world where rules were clear and outcomes, however imaginary, were predictable.

The bus itself was a character in their game, a dilapidated vessel bearing silent witness to their imaginary battles. The chipped paint on the exterior mirrored the faded dreams of their youth, the rusted metal mimicking the relentless march of time. Inside, forgotten school supplies lay scattered amongst the debris – tattered notebooks, broken crayons, and the ghosts of forgotten lunches. These artifacts whispered stories of past lives, children who once filled the bus with laughter and dreams that held nothing in common with the grim reality the boys would soon create. The very air seemed to vibrate with a strange mixture of excitement and a subtle, unsettling unease.

Their game had evolved over months, a carefully constructed narrative based on countless hours of poring

over history books, documentaries, and countless hours of whispered discussions. They had meticulously mapped out their roles, assigning themselves the identities of American soldiers parachuting behind enemy lines in Nazi-occupied France. Their imagination became their reality, transforming the cramped space into a war-torn landscape. The preparation was as ritualistic as a sacred ceremony.

Malcolm, as the de facto leader, detailed the mission parameters – a daring raid on a fictional Nazi stronghold, the liberation of innocent civilians, and ultimately, a triumphant return to allied lines. Caleb, ever the impulsive one, eagerly embraced the role of the intrepid scout, his machine gun poised for action. Malachi, with his detailed knowledge of the historical context, provided invaluable strategic insights, creating a believable landscape for their imaginary war. Adam, his small compass held tight, served as the navigation expert, guiding them through their fictional battlefield.

As the game began, the boys' faces transformed. Malcolm's serious demeanor sharpened, his eyes narrowing with the intensity of a seasoned soldier.

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Caleb's boisterous energy morphed into the confident swagger of a hardened combatant. Malachi's quiet intensity deepened, his strategic mind taking charge. Even Adam, usually reserved, exuded a newfound confidence as he meticulously studied his makeshift maps. The air thickened with the palpable tension of their imagined conflict, and the bus itself seemed to shrink around them as they launched into their dramatic roles.

Their imaginary battle commenced with a whispered exchange of coded messages. They navigated the aisles, their movements mimicking the stealth and precision of seasoned soldiers in enemy territory. They utilized the bus's features –the worn seats became fortified bunkers, the grimy windows transformed into strategic observation posts, and the rusted frame served as a protective barrier. Their imaginations brought the war to life in incredible detail; the sounds of gunfire were meticulously recreated by snapping twigs, the rumble of tanks represented by the simulated sounds of rumbling engines made from the combined groans and the shuffling of feet. They used their imaginations, and it



seemed as if they were transported to another place and time.

The imaginary Nazi patrol stumbled upon their “camp” in a flurry of whispered commands and simulated explosions. Caleb, armed with his toy machine gun, unleashed a barrage of imaginary bullets, his excited shouts adding to the authenticity of their game. Malcolm, with a grim determination, took cover behind a pile of discarded textbooks, directing their imaginary defense with military precision. Malachi, his strategy impeccably executed, guided their “retreat” through the claustrophobic confines of the bus with skillful planning. Adam, unfazed by the intensity of the conflict, meticulously guided them to their “escape” route. Each boy was totally immersed, the lines between reality and imagination blurring with each passing moment. The intensity was palpable, their laughter, shouts, and whispers echoing in the confined space of the bus, creating a vibrant world of make-believe.

Their immersive game played out for what felt like hours. They engaged in strategic maneuvers, their actions honed by their research and fueled by their creative

imagination. Each encounter, each success, and each near-miss was acted out with remarkable attention to detail. Their dedication to their chosen roles, their commitment to the immersive realism of their game, created a surreal contrast to the reality that was soon to shatter their make believe world. The air grew heavier, the sounds outside muted yet oddly present. The very ambiance of the bus changed – the sense of fun and excitement began to slowly give way to a chilling premonition, a creeping sense of something wrong, something profoundly and unsettlingly amiss. The shadows seemed to deepen, the air to grow colder, and the playful whispers to be replaced with an uneasy silence. The game, however real it had felt, was about to take a terrifying and unexpected turn.

## **Immersion into the Game**

The afternoon sun, weak and watery, barely penetrated the grime coating the bus windows. Inside, the air hung heavy with the scent of dust and decay, a stark contrast to the vibrant battlefield the boys were creating. Malcolm, his face grimly set, barked orders in a low, practiced whisper, his voice surprisingly authoritative for a twelve-year-old.

"Section Alpha, secure the perimeter!" he commanded, his eyes scanning the "enemy" positions – strategically placed piles of old textbooks and discarded lunchboxes.

Caleb, ever the showman, responded with a burst of theatrical gunfire, his plastic machine gun rattling convincingly as he sprinted along the aisle, his movements exaggerated yet strangely effective in mimicking the urgency of a real soldier under fire. His laughter, punctuated by the simulated bursts of his weapon, filled the bus, a sound oddly at odds with the seriousness etched on Malcolm's face.

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Malachi, ever the strategist, remained hunched in his corner, muttering calculations under his breath. He'd meticulously planned their mission based on a detailed map he'd drawn, painstakingly marking out potential enemy positions and escape routes within the confines of the dilapidated bus. His knowledge of World War II strategy, gleaned from countless hours spent pouring over his grandfather's old war books, was astonishing for his age. He'd even managed to incorporate elements of real-life battle tactics, like using the bus's uneven floor as cover and the seats as makeshift fortifications.

Adam, the youngest, acted as the communications officer, relaying messages between the different "units" with the solemnity of a seasoned veteran. He used his small, battered compass to guide their movements, his eyes scanning the imaginary battlefield with an intensity that belied his age. He'd devised a series of coded signals, tapping on the rusted metal of the bus's frame to relay critical information, his small hands moving with remarkable precision.

Their game wasn't just child's play; it was a meticulously crafted performance, a testament to their

combined creativity and their shared obsession with the history they were reenacting. They weren't just playing soldiers; they were *becoming* soldiers. The roles they had assumed had seeped into their very beings. Malcolm became the battle-hardened leader, his every move conveying the weight of responsibility. Caleb, with his unrestrained energy, embodied the reckless courage of a young soldier eager to prove himself. Malachi, with his strategic brilliance, transformed into a tactical genius. Even Adam, the quiet observer, found his voice, his usually shy nature giving way to the confidence of a man whose task was critical to the survival of his team.

The bus, a relic of forgotten times, became the stage for their grand production. Its worn seats were transformed into strategic defensive positions, its rusty frame became a shield against the enemy, and its grimy windows served as observation posts from which they surveyed their imaginary battlefield. The fading paint on its exterior served as a backdrop for their imagined scenes of war. They used their imagination, but this was no mere game; it was a deeply immersive experience.

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Their imaginary battle raged on, a symphony of whispered commands, simulated gunfire, and the sounds of rushing feet. The sounds they made were remarkably realistic; the snap of twigs represented the crackle of gunfire, the grunts and groans simulated the exhaustion and strain of battle, the shuffling of feet the rumble of tanks. The intensity of their performance grew, each movement, each word, imbued with the seriousness and gravity of the historical events they were reenacting. The sheer dedication to the performance was startling. The boys weren't simply playing; they were inhabiting their roles. They were living the history they studied.

The fictional Nazi patrol, represented by a collection of strategically placed backpacks and discarded school bags, engaged them in a fierce but playful battle. They took cover behind the seats, crawled through the aisles, and even used the broken windowpanes as makeshift sniper nests. Their improvisations were astonishing. They used their minds and the limited resources within the bus to create an elaborate battle scene. The dilapidated bus, once a symbol of decay, was now a symbol of their imagination and their profound

creativity. Their performance was electrifying, their energy, almost tangible.

As the “battle” intensified, the air in the bus became thick with a tangible energy. Their laughter, shouts, and whispers blended together to create a soundscape that was both thrilling and somewhat unnerving. The game had transcended its origins. It was now something more profound, something more visceral. Their intense immersion in their roles had created a palpable tension within the confined space.

The light outside began to fade, casting long, ominous shadows within the bus. The vibrant colors of the afternoon sun were replaced by the muted hues of twilight. The change in light seemed to amplify the intensity of the boys’ game, and yet, a subtle shift in the atmosphere became apparent. The playful banter began to wane, replaced by a more serious, almost grim determination. The sounds of simulated gunfire seemed to take on a different tone, no longer playful, but somehow...real.

The game, once a source of joyous escape, was beginning to take on a more sinister tone. The laughter

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and playful shouts slowly subsided, replaced by a tense silence, broken only by the occasional whisper. The transition was subtle, almost imperceptible, but the boys felt it, a subtle shift in the energy of their game, a sense of anticipation that hinted at something extraordinary and profoundly unsettling about to happen. The playful whispers of earlier were replaced by a haunting silence; the air grew thick with anticipation; and the darkness outside seemed to press against the windows of the bus. The game, it seemed, was about to take a turn no one had ever predicted. The transformation of their game from a joyous escape into a terrifying reality was about to begin, blurring the lines between the imaginary battlefield and the world outside. The bus, their sanctuary, was about to become their prison.



## **The First Ominous Sign**

The silence that followed was heavier than any sound. It wasn't the comfortable silence of shared understanding, the kind that comes after a burst of laughter or a shared joke. This was a silence that pressed down, a tangible weight in the air, thick and suffocating, like a damp wool blanket draped over their shoulders. It was the kind of silence that precedes a storm, a pregnant pause before a thunderclap. Even the rhythmic chirping of crickets, usually a comforting backdrop to their games, seemed muted, distant, almost swallowed by the oppressive quiet within the bus.

Caleb, usually the first to break the silence with a joke or a boisterous comment, sat frozen, his plastic machine gun lying limply across his lap. His usual ebullient energy had vanished, replaced by a palpable unease that mirrored the expressions on the faces of his friends. The theatrical swagger he'd so convincingly adopted moments before was gone, replaced by a wide-eyed apprehension. His breath hitched in his chest, a

silent testament to the fear that was slowly creeping into his heart.

Malcolm, his face pale under the dim light filtering through the grimy windows, gripped the makeshift map – his grandfather's worn war atlas – tighter in his hands. His usually steady gaze darted nervously around the interior of the bus, scanning the shadows as if expecting something to leap out at them from the darkness. The authoritative demeanor he'd cultivated during their game had crumbled, revealing the vulnerability of a twelve-year-old boy facing the unknown. He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing visibly in the dim light, a silent plea for reassurance that went unanswered.

Malachi, usually so calm and collected, fidgeted with his compass, his fingers tracing the worn brass casing with nervous energy. His strategic mind, usually so quick to calculate and analyze, seemed to have faltered, overwhelmed by the palpable sense of dread that permeated the air. His usual meticulous attention to detail, his unwavering confidence in his plans, seemed to have deserted him. He was lost in a sea of uncertainty, unable to grasp the unsettling shift in their reality.

Adam, the youngest, his eyes wide with fear, clutched his small, battered compass, his usually steady hands trembling. His coded signals, usually executed with such precision, had ceased. His small frame seemed to shrink, his body tense, as if anticipating an unseen threat. The brave communications officer had become a frightened child, his bravery replaced by a desperate need for protection. He could only whisper silent prayers under his breath.

The air grew colder, despite the summer heat lingering outside. A chill, unlike any they'd experienced before, settled deep within their bones, a creeping coldness that defied logic and reason. It wasn't the normal chill of evening; it was something else entirely, something unnatural, something deeply disturbing. It felt as if the very air within the bus itself was growing cold, as though a ghostly breath had swept through the decaying interior. The dust motes, usually dancing in the weak light, hung suspended in the air, motionless, as if frozen by an unseen force.

The shadows, long and distorted by the fading light, seemed to writhe and shift, taking on menacing shapes

and forms. The familiar shapes of the bus's interior – the worn seats, the rusted frame, the grimy windows – became distorted and menacing, as if the darkness itself were trying to reach out and consume them. The play of light and shadow created strange and unsettling illusions, twisting and transforming the familiar into the frighteningly unknown. They felt like prisoners in a living nightmare.

Then came the sound.

It wasn't a loud noise, not initially. It was more like a subtle shift in the background hum of the world, a tremor in the fabric of reality itself. A low, guttural growl, almost subsonic in its frequency, resonated from somewhere outside the bus. It was a sound that vibrated through the very floorboards, settling deep in their chests, a primal tremor that shook them to their very core. It was a sound that spoke of something ancient, something powerful, something inherently wrong.

It wasn't human.

The sound deepened, growing in intensity, shifting from a low rumble to a guttural moan, laced with an undercurrent of malice that sent chills. It was a sound

that seemed to burrow into their minds, bypassing their ears, reaching into the deepest recesses of their consciousness, triggering a primal fear that transcended logic and reason. It was a sound that spoke of violence, of death, of utter annihilation. It was the sound of something monstrous, something beyond their understanding, something that wanted them dead.

The boys exchanged terrified glances, their eyes wide with a dawning horror. The playful energy that had filled the bus moments before had been completely extinguished, replaced by a paralyzing fear. The imaginative war games, once a source of excitement and camaraderie, now felt like a foolish, naive pretense in the face of this terrifying reality. They were no longer playing soldiers; they were facing something profoundly real, something monstrously dangerous, something that threatened their very existence.

They huddled together, their bodies trembling, their breaths catching in their throats. The world they knew – the world of school, of friends, of family – seemed to have dissolved, replaced by an alien, hostile landscape ruled by unimaginable terror. The comforting familiarity of the

bus, once their sanctuary, now felt like a claustrophobic cage, a prison from which there seemed to be no escape.

The growling intensified, closer now, closer to the bus. The sound vibrated through the metal, rattling the old windows, shaking the seats as if the bus itself were about to shatter. The boys instinctively pressed themselves against the floor, their eyes wide with terror, their bodies frozen by a wave of primitive fear that rendered them immobile. They were small, vulnerable children caught in the jaws of something vast and malevolent.

The chilling growls were accompanied by another sound, a rhythmic scraping, like metal on metal, as if something large and heavy were dragging itself along the ground outside the bus. The sound was closer still, closer than before, and the boys could feel the vibrations in the very floor beneath their hands. It was getting closer and closer with each passing moment. The metallic scraping was joined by a second noise, a low, guttural clicking, like the sounds of heavy boots moving across the hard-packed ground.

The air grew thick with an almost palpable dread. Each breath they took felt heavy, labored, as if the very air itself was resisting their passage. The silence between the growls and the scraping was more terrifying than the sounds themselves; it was a silence charged with anticipation, a significant pause before a cataclysmic event. It was the silence before the storm, the pause before the hammer fell.

Their imaginations, which had once fueled their elaborate game, now worked against them, painting vivid, terrifying pictures of the creature, or creatures, lurking outside, their movements suggesting some kind of immense and malevolent intelligence. They were no longer playing at war; they were trapped in a nightmare that made their childish game seem trivial, harmless, almost sweet by comparison. The contrast was both stark and terrifying. The line between fantasy and reality had not just blurred, it had completely vanished. They were lost, trapped in a reality far more horrific than anything they could ever have imagined.

The rumbling grew louder, the scraping more insistent, the clicking faster and more urgent. The bus

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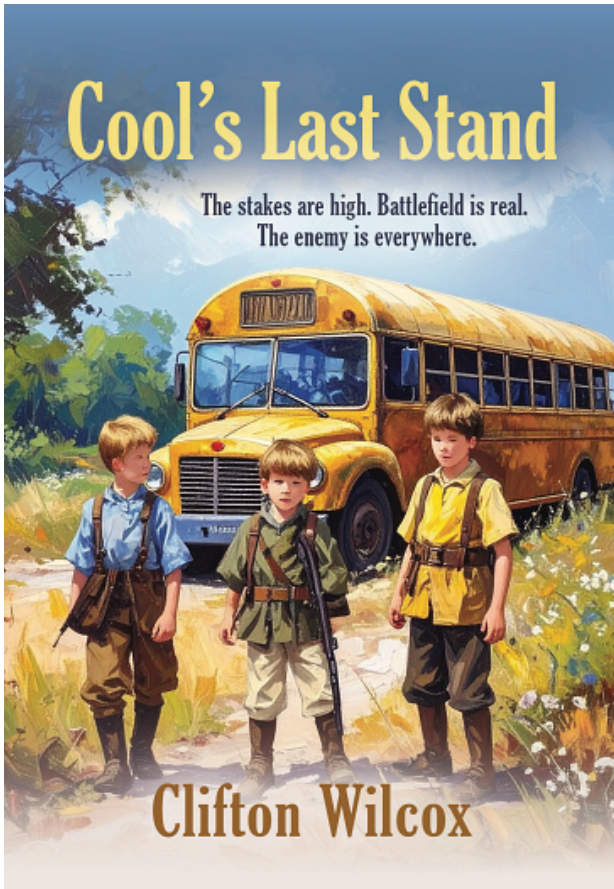
itself seemed to groan under the strain, its ancient frame creaking and shuddering with each tremor of the ground. The boys huddled together, pressing themselves against the floor, their eyes squeezed shut, their bodies rigid with terror. They were waiting. Waiting for the inevitable. Waiting for the darkness outside to finally breach the decaying walls of their prison and consume them. The sound of the approaching entity felt as if it were tearing through the fabric of reality.

And then, a sudden, sharp CRASH.



## **About the Author**

Dr. Clifton Wilcox is a retired federal employee and college professor. Clifton spends his time writing and traveling with his wife Nargiza and two children, Liyana and Ethan. The Wilcox family splits their time living in Spotsylvania, Virginia, the Dominican Republic, and Kyrgyzstan.



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