

Operation Full Control



#1

T.J.'s Adventures

Change can be difficult...

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“Mr. Angel” Ramirez

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If this is your first time meeting me, then reading the rest of this introduction is *definitely* in your best interest. If you already know who I am, and some of the crazy things that truly, and I mean *truly*, happen to me, and sometimes my friends, then reading on would really be a waste of your time. But then again, maybe you're on a *really* long plane, train or bus ride. Or maybe you just like to read. Whatever the reason, if you feel like reading on, who am *I* to stop you?

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My name is Tomas (as in Toe-moss) Raymundo Olivera Uribe Barrientos Lopez Espinosa, Jr., but everyone calls me T.J. for short. Except when my mom gets upset. I can tell how much trouble I'm in by how many names she calls out. If she makes it all the way through, including 'Junior', I know I'm in for it. But that's only happened once before. And I don't plan on getting into that much trouble again. Ever.

Then again, that's easier said than done. Trouble seems to follow me around like an invisible cape. All I need is an invisible pair of superhero tights, and maybe a superpower, and I could be like a superhero in one of those television series or comic books. But then again, I'm not so sure. Most superheroes I know of don't have an annoying little sister who likes to try and follow them around, so they can tattle on them whenever they get a chance. She would *definitely* be my arch nemesis.

Getting back on target. Sorry, my ADHD tends to supply my brain with enough energy to get it drifting off in enough directions that I could sail around the world before the lunch bell rings. As I said, my name is T.J.,

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and I'm in the fifth grade. Not that you would be able to tell by just looking at me.

Most other boys my age look like they're ready to start middle school. Some even have peach fuzz thickening on their upper lip so it looks like the sun is casting a permanent shadow beneath their nose. One kid even has three whiskers that are a quarter of an inch long growing on his chin! And what do I have? Glasses, no facial hair and a growth hormone deficiency. What exactly does that mean? Basically, I have four eyes, skin as smooth as a baby's bottom, and I'm short!

My mom keeps track of our height by marking a *huge* poster ruler on the back of my door the morning of our birthdays. My sister, who is younger than me by three years, four months and sixteen days, is taller than I was at her age! How pathetic is that? And the fact that I still fit into my favorite pajamas from the third grade doesn't help things.

I once wore them on pajama day, during spirit week, and my sister went around telling everyone how old they were. Nobody cared that they had Batman on them. The best superhero of all, since he has no superpowers,

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but can still kick some villain butt! But once they heard how old they were, some people started poking fun at me. Let's just say, that on day, I felt closer to the ground than I already was.

The only thing I have going for me is my uncharacteristically, light brown, curly hair and light-colored eyes. It doesn't make sense, being that both my parents are Mexican. No seriously, my dad finally became an official American citizen a couple of years ago and is as dark as a chestnut when he's *not* tanned. Having curly hair and light colored eyes that change depending on the weather, or what shirt I'm wearing, I look more like the neighbor's kid than my own parents' son.

My older cousin teases that some poor ugly couple, who couldn't afford to take care of their kid, left me on my parent's door step, praying that my mom wouldn't take one look at me and say, 'Oh my goodness! What an ugly child!' and feed me to Sparky, the next-door neighbor's pit bull. I'll tell you how he got his name later. Although having curly hair and light colored eyes *does* tend to make the girls sweet on a guy. Which comes

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in handy after some of the 'nice' guys in sixth grade decide that dumpster diving is your favorite sport.

Speaking of sports. Let's just say that I don't get along well with *any* sport that involves a ball full of air. I tried basketball. 'Nothing but net' became my immediate nickname, and not for the reason you're probably thinking of. Even when I tried with all my might, all I could hit was the bottom of the net!

Then I tried football. Even though we are only allowed to play two-hand touch, all the guys are *so* much bigger than I am, just 'touching' me sends me on a one way trip to Dirt and Grassville at what seems like a hundred miles an hour! OUCH!!!

So, then I tried handball. No having to toss a ball five feet above your head. No life-threatening meetings with the ground beneath you. All you have to do is hit a red rubber ball against a wall and outwit your opponent. Sounds easy enough. Not! Even the *girls* in my class have mastered this sport. Most of the time my opponent hits the ball so far over my head, by the time I reach it, there's *no* possible way I can help that ball find its way home!

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Tether ball. After the first hit I can't even reach it anymore. Kick ball. 'Easy out'! Soccer has the same outcome as football. Ball related sports and I have an unspoken deal to keep as far away from each other as possible.

Running, on the other hand, seems to come natural to me. It defies the law of physics. Short legs can only cover so much distance, while long legs cover more distance. Somehow, believe it or not if you like, I, T.J., am the fastest runner not only in my class, but in my whole elementary school! It's been that way since I made it to the upper grades. That's fourth grade for those of you who don't know.

We were having our annual Field Day, which is basically made up of athletic and educational challenges. All the upper grade classes compete against each other for the Field Day trophy and bragging rights for an entire year. You see, my school is a little different than most schools. Unless your parents specifically whine that the teacher is unfair, *and* can prove it, you stay with the same teacher and classmates from kindergarten until you graduate sixth grade. Something about the bond of

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friendship proving to increase students' learning abilities, *and* higher test scores, in a study done over *fifteen* years ago.

When it came to the twenty-yard dash I ran as hard as I could, with my eyes closed the whole way. When I opened them, I realized that I had run so fast, and far, that my teacher and the other kids were shouting, 'watch out!', *not* because I was going to crash into another student, but because I was about to collide with the kickball backstop that was over twenty yards *past* the finish line.

And later on, when it was time for the mile run, I left the competition so far behind me, that when I finished, I was able use the restroom, get a drink of water, come back, and only *half* of the kids had crossed the finish line. Some people started calling me 'The Flash' after that day. Besides being able to run really fast, I don't see what's so special about The Flash.

Of course, no one *dared* challenge me to a race after that first Field Day of my upper grade career. Except every once in a while, when a new kid would come to our school. I felt bad dashing their hopes so

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early in their stay at our school. They would always blame it on a cramp. Or say that they slipped and just couldn't get a good start. One kid even faked a twisted ankle just to get out of losing a race!

Everyone made up some sort of excuse. Everyone except for Marcus. When he first came to our school, he heard how fast I was and being that he was the fastest kid at his old school, he challenged me to a race.

'From the fence, to the Big Tree, and back,' was the normal challenge. Most people were barely touching the tree when I was already half way back to the fence. But not this time.

When one of the kids shouted 'go', Marcus and I shot off the fence like we were blasted out of a cannon. He stayed with me until we reached the Big Tree. I could tell he was running his hardest. So was I. Halfway back to the fence, he started to slow down. I noticed and pushed myself harder than I had *ever* pushed when racing anyone else. I beat him by only a couple of feet.

I *immediately* sat down. So did Marcus. Then, he held out his hand and said, 'good race.' No excuses. No, 'you

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cheated'. No cramp. No nothing. Just, 'good race.' I could tell from that small gesture that he was trustworthy.

Marcus and I would soon become best friends. Unfortunately, he was in the other fifth grade class. But that never stopped us from hanging out at recess or lunch time. We even hung out *after* school. Which was pretty easy. When I got home after our race, I found out he had moved into the house directly behind me! Our fence was pretty low, so even *I* could jump over it to hang out with him.

Marcus and I would embark on many adventures, learning lots of valuable lessons along the way. Hopefully, you'll be smart enough and learn from our mistakes. Like the warning before some television shows say, 'Do Not Try This At Home'!

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“You’re frozen!”

Dang! The only way people can catch me when we’re playing freeze tag is to team up on me. Usually, there’s one person chasing me from behind and there’s one person coming straight at me. This time wasn’t like usual.

“I got T.J.! Everyone else should be easy!”

Marcus shouted.

Seeing as how we were the two fastest kids in school, we were never allowed to be on the same team for

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freeze tag or capture the flag, and we were usually paired up for steal the bacon.

I couldn't believe I had fallen for it. *I* was the one who came up with that strategy. Outside of school, Marcus and I were *always* on teams. No matter *what* the game.

It was a game of freeze tag we were playing with the kids on our block this past weekend. Marcus and I decided to team up and catch some of the middle school kids who were bigger, *and* a little faster than we were.

Being the faster one, I would usually be the chaser while Marcus would hide behind a car, looking at the feet approaching from underneath. And when the time was right, he would lunge from behind the car and freeze whoever I was chasing. There were so many trees, bushes and cars on our block, that no one ever knew what Marcus, or I was hiding behind. It was the *perfect* strategy.

"Come on guys! Unfreeze me!" I begged. I can't *stand* having to stay still. I love running away or chasing people in freeze tag.

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I don't know how, but only Bret is left. He is one of the slowest kids in our grade. I guess the other team decided to go after the faster people first so the easy people would be left. Probably a strategy Marcus thought up. You see, the last two people tagged are usually the ones to be 'it' for the next game.

"Okay guys," Bret huffed between words, "I give up!"

Great. See if I ever pick *him* for my team again. Marcus and Michael started cheering. I think that was the quickest game of freeze tag I have *ever* played.

A supervision aide blew her whistle and ordered everyone to freeze.

"Awww man!" I exclaimed, "recess can't be over already."

"See you at lunch time T.J.! I'll save you a spot!" Marcus yelled, as he raced to be line leader for his class.

His class *always* eats lunch before my class. Our lunch schedule is organized by class. *Alphabetically*. I think that is *totally* unfair since my teacher's last name is Whiston.

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By the time our class gets inside the cafeteria, all the good pizza, tater tots and chocolate milk are usually gone. Sometimes Marcus saves me some of his food. When he isn't that hungry.

I decided to *walk* to my line. I'm in *no* mood to be first in line, and I'm *definitely* not in any hurry to start learning again. We're learning about the Civil War. I don't get it. I mean, why would father fight against son? Brother fight against brother? It just doesn't make sense.

By the time I got to where my class normally lines up, my teacher was already leading it back to our classroom. That means it's was only another hour and thirty-five minutes until lunch and another three hours and twenty-seven minutes until school is out. Thursdays are early day, except during June. I've never understood why, but I don't complain.

"So, what do you think of the assignment Mrs. Whiston assigned us?" Justin asked, as we reached the end of our wing and turned the corner.

Just a few moments before the final school bell rang, Mrs. Whiston asked us to write about our favorite

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television show. She wants us to tell her the name of the show. About a minimum of three characters from the show. About one of our favorite episodes, and *why* the show is our favorite.

Everyone in class had started whispering since Mrs. Whiston had finished her first sentence. We couldn't believe that she wasn't making us do a research paper. We've been doing research papers for the last *three* weekends.

First, it was about our favorite African animal. Then, it was about the history of our favorite ethnic food. You know, where did it start and stuff. Then, last weekend, we had to research the history of our family tree, going back at *least* three generations on *both* sides of our family! I mean, do you have *any* idea how many kids Mexicans like to have!

"I want it to be one page long. Back and front," she had instructed.

This last directive had brought groans and whining from most of the class. Luckily, the bell signaling the end of school rang before she could add any additional instructions.

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“And I want this paper on my desk first thing Monday morning!” she had called out, as everyone hurried out of the classroom.

I don’t know about you, but my favorite television show, ever since I was in kindergarten, probably even before that, happens to be Batman. And though most of my friends were into other, more kiddy shows back then, I liked Batman. Always have and probably always will.

He didn’t get as much talk time during recess as some of the other television shows did, but he and I had a few things in common. He liked helping people. I like helping people. He was like a detective. I like figuring out how things work. His biggest secret was that he was Batman. My biggest secret is that I’m... I’m... Well, I’m still working on that one.

Ever since kindergarten I’ve even dressed up as Batman for Halloween. It was kind of weird but also kind of cool. Even though all my other friends had store bought costumes, they all liked mine best. My nana had sewn it for me. She made it so well that it looked *exactly* like the one on television. She even made sure it had a utility belt and cape!

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It was kind of weird. Even though I was the smallest kid in the class, and even though people couldn't always understand what I was saying, since I couldn't talk right yet, I almost *immediately* became the most popular kid in class! *Everyone* wanted to be my friend. That is of course until the new season of Pokémon came out. When Jasmine came to school with a pack of the newest Pokémon cards, most of the kids in my class, and the class next door, wanted to be *her* friend.

Everyone except for Paul, Erick and Justin. We've stayed best friends ever since. Paul likes The Flash, Erick likes Superman, and Justin likes Spiderman.

In fourth grade, Sammy, a new student in our class, brought a new comic book to school. Actually, she was *always* bringing comic books to school. Her dad works at a comic book store. As long as Sammy gets one hundred percent on her spelling test, her dad buys her a new comic book. Which isn't exactly hard for her. You see, Sammy skipped the third grade because 'it was too easy'. Sammy usually knows how to spell most of the words on our spelling list *before* we even *get* them! That means one new comic book every week!

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Back to the new comic book.

“Hey guys! Come here!” I remember Sammy saying, excitedly, before school started.

“What is it?” Paul asked, looking at the paper bag in Sammy’s hand.

“You guys are *never* going to believe this!” Sammy said, still excited about something that none of us guys knew about.

“Just get on with it already and show us!” Erick said, impatiently.

Just then, Justin came from behind Sammy and snatched the bag from her hand.

“Hey! Give it back!” Sammy said, but it was too late. Justin had already removed the item from the bag.

“It’s just another comic book,” I said.

“Come on Justin, give it back!” Sammy pleaded, as Justin held it high above her head.

Justin is the tallest out of all of us, but Sammy is the toughest. She stomped on his foot, forcing him to shrink in pain, bringing the comic book within arm’s reach. She snatched it back with a ‘you should know better than to mess with me’ look on her face, which

immediately turned back into the 'hey guys, look what I got!' look she had on her face when she first called us.

"This isn't just *any* comic book, T.J.," she corrected me. "This is a very *special* comic book."

She turned it around so we could see the cover. It was a comic book she had never brought to school before. The cover had seven superheroes on it, including Batman, The Flash, Superman and...

"Wonder Woman!" Sammy shouted. "She's my favorite! It's called *The Justice League*."

"Hey! We should call ourselves The Justice League. It has all our favorite superheroes!" Paul pointed out.

"Exactly!" Sammy agreed.

"Except Spiderman," Justin noticed.

"Oh, yeah," Erick said.

"Well, that's okay," Sammy said, "we'll just be a different kind of Justice League."

"Hey, guys!" I shouted, having gotten a great idea. "What if we don't call ourselves 'The Justice League', but we still use the first letter of every word!"

"Huh?"

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“I don’t get it”

“Wha—?”

“Just listen,” I started. “The first letter of every word in ‘The Justice League’ is ‘T’, ‘J’ and ‘L’.”

“Yeah. So?” Paul said, still sounding confused.

“So instead of calling ourselves ‘The Justice League’, we could call ourselves the ‘T.J. League’! That way *anyone* could join!” I said, enthusiastically.

“But wouldn’t that need an extra ‘T’?” Sammy asked, trying to poke a hole in my idea.

“Who cares?” I answered.

“Yeah. Who cares!” Justin backed me up. “I like the idea that *anyone* can join. Even if they’re not in the *real* Justice League.”

“I don’t know,” Sammy continued.

“I say we take a vote,” I offered, before she could come up with another reason that my idea wouldn’t work. “All in favor of creating the T.J. League raise your hand.”

Justin and I raised our hands first, followed closely by Paul and Erick. Sammy didn’t seem too enthusiastic, but she eventually raised her hand. Slowly.

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“It’s official then! The T.J. League is hereby officially in operation,” I said, with a huge grin on my face.

As fourth grade went on, we would add more people to the T.J. League. Although our group always seemed to be shrinking. Sometimes, it was because people moved away. Sometimes, it was because people made new friends and wanted to play with them. And some people would quit because *they* wanted to be in charge. But everyone knew that *I* was in charge. I mean, come on. The league is even *named* after me! Fortunately, the original five always stayed the same. That is, until the fifth grade when *he* came to our school.

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I know. I know. You probably thought I was talking about Marcus. Although Marcus *did* join the T.J. League when I invited him to join after our first race, he's not the '*he*' I was talking about. I'm talking about Funmaker John. You see, before Funmaker John came, we were able to play *whatever* we wanted to at recess time. Now we have to play whatever games Funmaker *John* makes available to us.

Now don't get me wrong. Funmaker John *has* brought some pretty cool games to our school, but he's also *changed* the rules to some of the games we were used

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to playing. He's even limited our use of the play structure to three times a week! Why? I have *no* idea!

Not only that, he's restricted us from 'wandering the field'. We tried to tell him that we weren't 'wandering the field'. We told him that we were 'developing our imagination and thinking skills' by playing the T.J. League, which is something we've done ever since fourth grade. It was never a problem before. And it's not like we do it every day. Only once or twice a week.

Here. Let me give a you rewind so you can understand what I'm saying a little bit better. It all started a couple of weeks ago.

"If you like recess, say *sweet!*"

"*Sweet!*"

"If you like recess, say *sweet sauce!*"

"*Sweet sauce!*"

"If you like recess, say *sweet sauce samba!*"

"*Sweet sauce samba!*"

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“Good morning boys and girls. My name is Funmaker John and I’m part of the Recess Revitalization Foundation. I’m here to make recess more fun!”

Everyone in the multi-purpose room shouted, hooted and hollered to show their enthusiasm.

“Over the next few weeks, I’ll be introducing some new games to your school, and hopefully improving on some of the games you already have. I’ll even be spending half an hour of your normal class time, once a week, so that you can learn some of the new games that we’ll be playing at recess.

“And for some of you, it gets even better. I’m going to need some help introducing these games to the whole school. Some of you will also get the special privilege of getting out of class to help me run recess!”

The cafeteria erupted in cheering and it took Funmaker John and our teachers a little while to calm us down so he could continue.

“Later this week, I’ll have applications available for fourth, fifth and sixth graders to become one of my Future Funmakers. You’ll have to get your parent’s signature giving you permission to miss class of course.

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You'll also have to be approved by your teacher, because remember, this is a *special* privilege.

“Now there are some rules I need to introduce so that we can get as much fun out of recess as possible. Rule number one, repeat after me: Tattle Tales Don't Prevail.”

“Tattle tales don't prevail!” everyone in the cafeteria shouted.

“This means that we don't go around pointing out anyone's mistakes, except our own. It will also help us to learn how to resolve conflicts on our own. And I'm going to teach you how, so that you don't have to go running to a supervision aide or a Future Funmaker. Raise your hand if you know how to play Rock, Paper Scissors.”

Everyone in the cafeteria raised their hand.

“Good. You can put your hands down now. Well, whenever we disagree about something, like who won at handball or who touched the basketball or soccer ball last before it went out of bounds, instead of arguing with each other, we're going to play Zim, Zam, Zoom. It works just like Rock, Paper, Scissors.”

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“Then why not just call it Rock, Paper, Scissors?” someone at the back of the cafeteria shouted.

“Believe it or not, that’s a very common question. If you’ve ever tried to teach a kindergartener how to play Rock, Paper, Scissors, you’ll notice that they *always* end up playing scissors, since that’s the last thing they say. So, we’ve changed the name to Zim, Zam, Zoom. That way they don’t get confused.

“Zim stands for rock. Zam stand for paper. And Zoom is scissors. Anyone care to try their luck at Zim, Zam, Zoom against me?”

Everyone’s hands shot up, including some of the teachers. Funmaker John chose a few people from the front of the cafeteria and a few from the back to play Zim, Zam, Zoom with, including Mr. Eslinger. Somehow Funmaker John managed to beat everyone at Zim, Zam, Zoom!

“Now for rule number two: Try a Game That’s Not the Same.

“Try a game that’s not the same!” everyone repeated.

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“Some games that we’re going to learn need to have the same number of people on both teams. So, if someone comes up to you and asks you to join a game you’ve never played before, or maybe you’re not sure you’re going to be good at, give it a try. You may just find a new favorite game that you never even knew about!

“We will also be rotating games throughout the year, so you may come out to recess only to find out that your favorite game isn’t available. That’s a *great* time to Try a Game That’s Not the Same.

“And the final rule of the Recess Revitalization Foundation is, Don’t Shun My Fun.”

Instead of repeating or shouting the final rule back at Funmaker John, everyone in the cafeteria started whispering. What in the world did ‘Don’t Shun My Fun’ even mean?

“It seems some of us don’t understand what that means,” Funmaker John commented. “No worries. Let me explain. If someone invites you to play a game with them, don’t tell them that their game is dumb or make a comment that is going to hurt their feelings. We have to respect each other on the play structure, the blacktop and

on the field. Respect means that we treat others the same way that we want them to treat us. Raise your hand if you *like* to be kicked.”

A Few people actually raised their hand but Funmaker John ignored them and continued talking.

“Nobody does! So, should we go around kicking other people?” he asked.

“No!” we answered.

“Does anyone like to be made fun of? Or like being called names?” he asked.

“No!” we yelled.

“So, should we make fun of people or call people names?” he continued.

“No!” we shouted.

“So, remember, treat others the way you want them to treat you,” he instructed.

“Going back to Don’t Shun My Fun. We have to remember that it goes both ways. If you go around inviting people to play *your* game, one day, someone is going to come around and ask *you* to play *their* game. Now you might be on your way to play your favorite game, but just like people have played *your* favorite game

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with you, you should be fair and give *their* game a chance.”

Funmaker John took a break to drink some water and quickly continued explaining about the Recess Revitalization Organization.

“Now, I’ve saved the best for last. Who likes to play basketball, volleyball, football or soccer?”

Almost every hand in the cafeteria went up again.

“Well, throughout the year, we’ll be having some recess tournaments, and —”

Funmaker John had to stop because everyone had started talking about the tournaments. It took a few moments to calm everyone down.

“So, as I said,” he continued, “we’ll be having some recess tournaments, *and*, we’ll also be having tryouts throughout the year to create teams so that we can play against other Recess Revitalization Foundation schools.”

And once again, teachers had to try and calm everyone down. Some people are so competitive. I don’t know why. I mean, it’s just a game. Then again, maybe

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I'm not as excited because I'm not good at any of the games Funmaker John was talking about.

“Before we end our assembly, I want to play a game that everyone here could play. And it's a game we can *all* play at the same time!”

What? What kind of game had almost two hundred players? I think maybe Funmaker John should take another drink of water. His brain seems to be getting a little dehydrated.

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Well, without boring you with the details of the game Funmaker John decided to play with us, I'll just tell you that I did *not* win Simon Says. With so many people cheating, we actually ended the game early and Funmaker John gave us a little lesson on honesty. But seriously, did he *actually* think that he was going to be able to play Simon Says with that many people at once?

Getting back to the present day. Let's just say, I'm not too happy with Funmaker John. As I've already explained, he's changed *everything*! Even Marcus, who is

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usually the one who convinces us to 'just give it a try', is starting to like recess less.

"We can't even play defense unless we're inside the three-point line!" was Marcus's latest complaint, as we lined up to come in from recess. "That's like seventy five percent of the court being taken away!"

"I think you're exaggerating," Paul commented.

"Okay. Maybe it's more like, sixty five percent. But still! Once a team makes a shot, the other team has to stop playing so that the next team can play," Marcus continued to rant.

"That's so more people can get a chance to play," Sammy pointed out.

"But that's another annoying thing! Instead of having five people on a team, there's only two! The line ends up getting so long that sometimes you only get one or two chances to actually play before recess is over!"

Marcus is starting to raise his voice now. Actually, he's borderline shouting. And for those of you who don't know him like I do, that's *rare*.

"Well, I've got some complaints of my own," Justin chimed in. "Handball *used* to be my favorite game

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to play at recess. But now it's *so* boring. The ball can only bounce *one* time. If it bounces *twice*, you're out. We can't *catch* the ball. If the ball goes outside the white line, you're out! So that means no more hardies! Hardies was one of reasons I was so *good* at handball!"

"Funmaker John is *ruining* recess!" I shouted.

"I think all of you are making too much this," Sammy said.

"Well I'm enjoying recess just fine," Erick said, blowing hot air on his knuckles and then wiped them up and down the front of his shirt.

"That's because you're a Future Funmaker!" Justin said, raising his hands above his head in frustration.

"Yeah," Paul said, backing Justin up, "you get to miss class and play during the *little* kids' recess."

"Hey! We *all* had an equal chance to become Future Funmakers. It's not *my* fault that none of you decided to turn in an application!" Erick said, in a defensive tone.

"Well I don't care *what* Funmaker John says. At lunch recess, *I'm* going to 'wander the field'," I said,

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holding up quotes with my fingers. “*I’m* going to play a little T.J. League. Who’s with me?”

"I am!" Marcus said, raising his hand.

"Me, too!" Paul joined in.

"Count me in," Justin said, "we haven't played *that* this week."

"Even though I think you guys are overreacting, there aren't many things that are more fun than playing T.J. League," Sammy remarked, stretching her arm out to put her hand in the center of our circle, so we could do our T.J. League motto."

We all placed our hands on top of hers. Except for Erick.

"I don't think I can play with you guys today," Erick said, almost whispering, "I'm scheduled to run the Zim, Zam, Zoom Tunnel Challenge."

"Guess you'll be missing out," I said, rather crossly.

"Are we gonna do this or not?" Marcus asked, impatiently.

"Let's do this!" I shouted.

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"Flight and speed! Stealth indeed! American pride! Lasso of Truth and webs to fly! We protect and serve all living things. The T.J. League reigns supreme!"

At lunch time, we all gathered at the Big Tree. Everyone except Erick, of course.

"Okay, guys. No matter *what* happens, we keep playing T.J. League. Deal?" I said, confident that everyone would agree.

"Deal," everyone said, unanimously.

"So, here's today's scenario: the evil Dr. Dreamo has just invaded the dreams of the President of the United States. He's convinced the President that *all* the people in the military are really double agents, trying to steal America's greatest technology, so that they can use it to destroy us. The President thinks that the only way to save the U.S.A. is to destroy *all* American military bases. He is currently on his way to his secret bunker in the White House to enable Operation Full Control, which gives him the power to override *all* American missiles *anywhere* in the world.

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"Paul, you and Justin head to the Pentagon and warn the Secretary of Defense about Dr. Dreamo's plans to use the President to wipe out the military and cripple the U.S.'s defenses," I ordered.

"Got it!" they said in unison and ran towards the tetherball court.

"Marcus and Sammy, you head to the White House and try to stop the President," I instructed.

"On our way!" Marcus said, saluting before heading towards the kickball backstop.

"But what are *you* going to do?" Sammy asked, as Marcus reached the backstop.

"I'm going to head to the Bat Cave and see if I can hack into the President's secure network and stop him from putting Operation Full Control into action."

"But shouldn't one of us try to stop Dr. Dreamo?" she asked, folding her arms.

"There's no time!" I answered. "Besides, he's gotten so powerful, that he can take over your mind by just being in the same *room* as you. Our best bet is to try and stop the President. If I can lock him out of his own network, we can try and reverse the control Dr. Dreamo

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has over him. We might even be able to use it to our advantage."

"Okay. If you say so," Sammy commented, not sounding too convinced. Sometimes I think she is too smart for her own good. Which is why I'd rather have her on *my* side in a battle than to be against her!

"Batman. This is Captain America. Come in Batman. Over," Marcus shouted across the field.

Now I'm sure that some of you probably know that Captain America is from Marvel Comics and the Justice League is from DC comics. But you have to remember something. We're *not* the Justice League. We're the *T.J.* League!

"This is Batman. What is it Captain America?" I answered.

"We've made it to the White House, but we're taking on heavy fire. It seems that Dr. Dreamo also convinced the President that *we* are the *enemy*!" He continued to shout, as he and Sammy fought invisible Secret Service men and women.

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"You've got to make it to the secret bunker at all costs," I commanded. "If we don't stop the President, the whole *world* will be in danger."

"But they're innocent," Sammy declared. "They're just following orders."

"Fine. Do your best to stun and not kill," I responded. "I'm having some difficulty getting through the White House's servers. Seems the President beefed up *more* than just his manpower. He's more than *doubled* his firewall security."

"Batman. This is the Flash," Paul called. "We've notified the Secretary of Defense. Seems he and the Secretary of State have overriding powers that can stop the President's orders."

"Great! Get on it!" I commanded.

"There's just one problem," Justin said.

"And that would be," I said, in a 'hurry up and finish' voice

"They have to be in the White House's secret bunker to do it!" he shouted.

"Of *course*, they would," I said, slapping my hand to my forehead. "Flash. Get them to the White House as

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soon as you can. Captain America and Wonder Woman should have broken through the Secret Service's defenses by then."

"But what about Spiderman?" Paul asked. "I can't carry three people at once."

"Don't worry about me!" Justin yelled. "Just get them to the White House!"

Paul ran to the tetherball court as fast as he could.

"I've got the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense," he said out of breath. "Have you guys broken through their defenses?"

"Not yet. We can't seem to get through the security door of the President's secret bunker!" Marcus stated.

"Stand back," Paul ordered. "Maybe I can vibrate fast enough to get through to the other side."

Paul began to 'vibrate' his body. Okay, maybe not so much vibrate. He actually looked like he was having a seizure while standing up.

"Captain America. This is Batman. Come in Captain America," I called.

"This is Captain America," Marcus answered.

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"The President has just activated *every* American nuclear warhead on the planet! The countdown has begun! We only have fifteen seconds to get through the blast doors to stop him!"

"But the Secretary of Defense said it'll take at least *thirty* seconds to deactivate operation Full Control!" Justin shouted. Seems Spiderman is quicker than I thought.

"Al... most... through... aaaaaah!" Paul yelled, still 'vibrating' to get through the blast doors.

I started counting down and everyone joined in.

"Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One!"

Just then, Funmaker John blew his whistle. We were so focused on stopping the President that we didn't notice him walking towards us.

"Guys, we've been over this before," Funmaker John said, with Erick standing by his side.

"We know. We know. No 'wandering the field'," I said, in a mimicking voice while holding up finger quotes.

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"Come on guys," Erick said, taking a step forward. "You know the rules. It's not like Funmaker John is singling you guys out."

"Be quiet, Erick," Justin said, "you're just kissing butt like always."

"That's enough," Funmaker John said. "That's *not* the way we treat friends."

"Friends?" I said. "*He's* probably the one who told you we were going to be playing T.J. League. What happened to Tattle Tales Don't Prevail? You can't pick and choose which rules to follow and which to ignore!"

"T.J.," Marcus began, before I interrupted him.

"No! I don't see the harm in playing T.J. League. We're *not* hurting anyone. We're not even *interrupting* anyone's games."

"T.J., there are lots of fun game choices for you and your friends to participate in during recess," Funmaker John pointed out.

"Fun? FUN?!" I shouted. "*First*, you take away our right to play T.J. League. *Then*, you change the rules to all our favorite games. How can we have fun with you changing everything all the time?!"

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"Calm down, T.J.," Sammy said. "You're going to get in trouble."

"For what? Speaking my mind?" I asked, not breaking eye contact with Funmaker John. "Don't tell me he's going to take away my free speech next!"

Just then, a supervision aide blew their whistle, signifying the end of recess.

"DOWN AND DONE!" Funmaker John shouted. Everyone on the playground dropped to the floor and put their hands on top of their heads. Everyone, except for me, of course.

"Down and done," Erick told me.

"You can't tell me what to *do*," I said, angrily.

"Down and done," Funmaker John said, calmly.

"Or *what*?" I challenged.

"Or I'll tell Principal Martinez," Erick said, in a perfect little tattletale voice.

He's getting on my nerves!

"Shut up Erick!" I shouted, lunging for his throat.

"T.J.!" Marcus yelled, as he threw his arms around my waist, stopping my attack before I could reach Erick's neck.

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Just then, the supervision aides blew their whistles for everyone to line up. Marcus was still holding me tightly to keep me from taking Erick down.

"Relax, T.J.," Paul instructed. "There's nothing you can do."

"Yeah. Let's just get back to class before you get in trouble," Sammy suggested.

"You can let me *go* now," I told Marcus, who released me. Reluctantly. "I can't believe you guys didn't back me up."

"Hey! I called Erick a butt kisser!" Justin reminded me.

"I know Justin," I acknowledged. "I was talking about everyone else!"

Boy am I *livid*.

So much for the T.J. League being a team.

We were in the middle of Sustained Silent Reading when Mrs. Whiston's classroom phone rang.

"Mrs. Whiston's class," she answered. "Yes. Yes, he's here. Uh huh. Really? Okay. I'll send him up

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right away. T.J., you're wanted in the office. Seems Mr. Martinez wants to speak with you."

"Oooo," everyone in the class said in unison.

I put my bookmark in its place and returned my book to the basket on my desk. As I stood up and pushed in my chair, Sammy had an 'I told you so', look on her face. Have I mentioned that she can be too smart for her own good?

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“Go ahead and put this ice pack on your ankle for now,” Mrs. Kelley told a third grader, “your mom is on her way. And next time you decide to do a back flip off the monkey bars, remember how much your ankle hurts right now.”

Some people think that the secretary is kind of mean. I think she’s cool. She doesn’t try and butter you up and make you feel good for the bad choices you’ve made. She tells it like it is. She’s real with you.

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“T.J., Principal Martinez will see you now,” Mrs. Langston, an office worker, told me.

I stood up from the chair I was sitting in and took my time walking past the attendance desk, where Mr. Ellis was giving someone a tardy slip. Boy, are *they* ever late.

I stopped at Principal Martinez's door and took a deep breath. It's been quite a while since I've stepped inside this room.

“You can come in T.J.,” Principal Martinez said, from behind his desk.

“Yes, sir,” I said, sitting in the comfortable chair across from him.

He leaned forward, resting his chin on his folded hands, and looked at me intently, without saying anything. It was making me feel uncomfortable. It was like he was scolding me without words. Oh, how I wish this would be *over* already! I decided to look at the floor so he couldn't look me in the eyes.

“So,” he said, leaning back in his chair, placing his hands in his lap, “I hear the T.J. League nearly saved the

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planet from Dr. Dreamo's plan to use the President of the United States to wipe out all of our American Military."

How did he know? I mean, the only people who were there were members of the T.J. League? Not even *Erick* was there. Or *was* he? He's so *sneaky*. He could have been *hiding* somewhere. Just *thinking* about it makes me want to wring his neck all over again.

I sat quietly as Principal Martinez waited for me to answer.

"Wondering how I knew?" he asked.

"I think I know who told you," I responded, still staring at the floor.

"T.J., you know, since I was your age, my favorite superhero has been Professor Xavier," he commented.

"He was always trying to help people. Even though people didn't always understand him, he took his time to understand other people. And he often gave them second *and* third chances."

Why is he telling me this? What does it have to do with what happened at recess?

"So, I've made it my life's mission to give people a chance to explain themselves, and their actions, before

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deciding if they are a good guy or a bad guy,” he continued.

Is he saying that I’m a bad guy for what I did at recess?

“Funmaker John has told me that on *multiple* occasions, he’s had issues with you, and some of your friends, not participating in the activities provided during recess,” Principal Martinez stated.

“Yeah,” I said, *still* staring at the floor.

“Is there a specific reason you’ve chosen not to Try A Game That’s Not The Same?”

“I have!” I said, finally looking at Principal Martinez in the eyes again. “But Funmaker John’s rules are so *lame*! He’s changed *everything*!”

“I understand your frustration,” Principal Martinez said, placing his folded hands on his table.

“I mean, what’s so wrong about playing T.J. League?” I asked.

“I believe that falls into the category of wandering the field. We’re trying to create an environment where everyone has a chance to participate in activities, while

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learning to think for themselves or learning teamwork,” he explained.

“But that’s just it!” I continued, passionately, “*you* just said ‘*everyone*’ has a chance to learn ‘*teamwork*’. Why can’t that include my friends and me playing T.J. League? Not only do we learn teamwork, but we also learn problem solving skills and we improve our real time responses to real life situations.”

I have *no* idea what that last part means, but I heard some smart sounding guy say it on an infomercial once.

“I guess you *do* have a point there,” Principal Martinez said, finally unfolding his hands to scratch his chin in thought.

“Didn’t some smart guy once say that imagination is more valuable than knowledge?” I asked, not caring that I couldn’t remember who had said it. All *I* care about is that it popped into my head and seems like it’s helping my case. How do I know? Principal Martinez has now shifted backwards in his seat and has placed his free hand under his elbow, while still stroking his chin.

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“Yes,” he began, taking a few moments before continuing his thought, “Albert Einstein *was* a ‘smart guy’.”

Principal Martinez then did something I didn’t expect. He took a writing pad and a pen and placed them before me, all while wearing a huge smile on his face. I sat in my seat, staring at the pad and pen, not understanding what he wanted me to do with them.

“Another ‘smart guy’ said something that I’ve tried my best to share with every sixth grade graduating class, since my first year here: ‘You’ve have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose.’,” he quoted.

I’ve never heard that before, but whoever said that sure likes to rhyme. And I *still* have *no* idea what this pad and pen are for.

“This is what I want you to do. I want you to come up with a game, similar to playing T.J. League with your friends, but I want it to be a game that *everyone* can enjoy. It’s going to need a name. You might want to write this down,” Principal Martinez suggested, handing me the pen. “It’s going to need a name. It’s going to

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need rules for students to follow. You'll have to decide if your game is—."

"My game?" I asked, looking up from the notepad.

"Yes, T.J. *Your* game," he said, looking me straight in the eyes, the huge smile, still stretching across his face. "You'll have to decide the number of participants. You know, whether your game is going to be a small group game or a large group game. Is it going to be a one group game or will you put two or more teams against each other in a challenge style game? You'll have to decide how a person, or a group of people, can win."

"That's a lot of things to come up with," I said, trying to keep up as Principal Martinez spoke.

"And that's just the basics," he explained. "Creating a fun activity that *everyone* can enjoy isn't an easy task. Is it?"

"I guess it isn't," I agreed, beginning to feel ashamed about the way I had treated Funmaker John and Erick. Especially Erick. I mean, he is one of the original T.J. League members. And I had turned on him quicker than the Joker's silly string turns to cement.

"But you know what?" Principal Martinez asked.

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“What?” I asked, once again confused as to what was going on in that mind of his.

“With your ‘imagination’ being ‘more important than knowledge,’ as well as all that ‘problem solving’ practice and ‘improvement to real time responses to real life situations’, I’m confident you can create a wonderful game,” he said, changing his smile from one of excitement to one of reassurance and confidence.

“Really?” I asked.

“Really,” he replied. “Of course, it *will* have to be approved by Funmaker John and myself.”

Then something came to my mind. How in the world is anyone going *learn* about the game I’m about to create? I mean, who’s going to *teach* it to everyone?

“And just to make sure your game is a success,” Principal Martinez said, opening a drawer in his desk, “let’s make sure that *you* are the one to introduce it to the school.”

He pulled out a blue shirt with the words ‘Future Funmaker’ on the front. It was as if he had read my mind.

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“But wait,” I said, before he could hand me the shirt, “I never turned in an application, and the deadline has already passed.”

“Don’t you worry your little head about that,” he said, handing me the shirt anyways. “I’ve got connections with the guy in charge of this school. He owes me a favor.”

I’m not sure what kind of smile he has on his face this time. All I know is that it’s making me smile along with him.

Imagine that. Me. T.J. A Future Funmaker. Who’d have thought? Wait! Does that mean I get to get out of class early? And stay out at recess late? And *I* get to be in charge of recess. Well, somewhat in charge anyway.

But wait again! Does that also mean *I* have to follow all the playground rules? Even worse! I have to *enforce* all the playground rules. Oh, boy. Some members of the T.J. league are *not* going to like that.

That sneaky Principal Martinez. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think he had planned this all out ahead of time. He had probably even faked the whole ‘I’ve got an

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idea' thing. He probably figured this would be an easy way to keep me from complaining about Funmaker John's rules *and* make me learn to take responsibility for my actions.

Either way, he's just given me a small amount of authority. Let's see if I can teach *him* a thing or two about listening to the ideas of students and involving us in making choices that will affect the entire student body.

Oh, *yes*, Mr. President, we *can* stop you from enacting your plan to take 'Full Control'. And *yes*, you *will* be stopped by a bunch of superheroes. And *yes*, they are *all* members of... the T.J. League!



“He did *what!*” Justin shouted, as we ate our lunch under the canopy, nearly choking on his food. Today is teriyaki chicken day. Boneless, of course.

“Didn’t you hear *anything* I just said?” I asked.

“Oh, I heard *everything*. I just can’t believe he made you a Future Funmaker! I mean, how can he do that?”

“Uh, he *is* the principal,” Sammy pointed out.

“But still!” Justin continued, hotly.

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I'm not sure if he's turning red from anger or not, because he has really dark skin. But I'm sure if it wasn't, he'd be red as a Coca Cola can.

"Calm down, Justin," Marcus said, placing his hands on Justin's shoulders, helping him to sit back down, since people are beginning to stare.

"Isn't there anything we can do?" Paul asked, "like go on strike or make a petition or something?"

"I'm not sure either of those would bode well for us in the end," Sammy responded.

"But if T.J.'s a Future Funmaker, we'll *never* get to play T.J. League again!" Justin yelled.

"Shhh!" a supervision aide ordered, as she passed by our table.

"Technically, we could," Sammy said, "we would just have to find a new leader."

"But it's called the *T.J. League*!" Justin continued to shout.

"If you children can't control yourselves, I'm going to have to put you on clean up duty," the supervision aide warned.

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“Don’t worry ma’am. There won’t be any further outbursts,” Sammy said, giving Justin a ‘sit down and be *quiet!*’ look.

“Calm down Justin. You’re going to get us all in trouble,” Paul ordered.

“Guys. Don’t worry. I have a plan,” I said, nefariously.

“Plan?” Justin said, confused, “what plan?”

“Well,” I began, “Principal Martinez told me to come up with a game like the T.J. League. He told me he wants *everyone* to be able to participate. *I* get to come up with the rules. *I* get to come up with the name of the game. *I* get to decide how many people are able to play. *I* get to be the one to teach the school how to play the game. *I* will be the one in charge of the game. Are you guys catching on to what I’m saying?”

“Not really,” Marcus said.

I motioned for everyone to come in close so that no one around us would be able to hear.

“*I* am going to make sure we get to play T.J. League *every day* of the week!” I whispered intently.

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Everyone exchanged looks of excitement as I held my finger up to my lips.

“So, I heard that you’re the newest addition to our group of Future Funmakers,” Funmaker John said.

He’s standing behind me and looking over my shoulder, as I sit at the Buddy Bench, brainstorming ideas for my new game in my notebook.

“That’s what Principal Martinez tells me,” I answered, writing down another rule for my game.

“I guess we’ll be spending a lot more time together,” he pointed out, walking around to the front side of the bench.

“Just a perk of the job,” I responded, not looking up from my notebook.

“What have we got here?” Funmaker John asked, as he sat down next to me. *Very* next to me.

“Nothing important,” I answered, closing my notebook and walking towards the Lizard Tail circle.

Being the fastest person at school helps when running in a race, but this game had *definitely* proven to be a challenge for me.

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“I can’t wait to learn all about your new game,” Funmaker John said, just as Erick walked up to me.

“So, is it true?” he asked.

“Is what true?” I asked, answering his question with another question.

“Are you going to be a Future Funmaker?” he asked, as he placed himself in front of me so that he was now walking backwards.

“Doesn’t seem like I have a choice,” I said, still not exactly over what happened earlier at recess.

“It may not seem like a fun thing to do,” he said, getting excited, “but just you wait. Being a Future Funmaker is one of the *greatest* things that has ever happened to me!”

I almost want to tune him out, but I think I’ll keep on listening. I mean, he *is* a member of the T.J. League. Although, I’m not sure that’s going to last much longer. I’ve never actually kicked anyone out of the T.J. League, and I’m not sure I want to start now. I think I’ll give him another chance. But I’m *definitely* keeping a close watch over him. That’s exactly what Batman would do if

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another member of the Justice League were acting different or strange.

“So, what have you got?” Marcus asked me, as we walked home from school.

“What have I got for what?” I asked back.

“You know! For the new game. So, we can play T.J. League *every day!*” he said, excitedly.

It seems he’s a bit more excited about all of this than I currently am.

“I don’t have all the details hashed out just yet,” I said, adjusting my backpack. One of my books had shifted and was making my left shoulder start to hurt.

“What if we worked on it together after we finish our homework?” Marcus suggested. “I’m sure if we put our two minds together, we can make this the best game the school’s ever seen!”

“I think you mean the best game the school’s ever *played,*” I corrected.

“You know what I mean!” Marcus said, still excited. “So, what do you say? How about it?”

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“Well, I guess another brain wouldn’t hurt,” I answered.

“Yes!” Marcus shouted, nearly falling over after doing a jumping fist pump.

“But *I* get the final say so!” I finalized.

“Deal,” he said, sticking his hand out to shake on it.

Luckily, we didn’t have too much homework to finish, and we both decided to do our reading logs later, before bed.

“So, here’s what I’ve got so far,” I said, taking my notebook out of my backpack and placing it on the floor between us. “The best way I can think of, to make sure *everyone* gets to play, is to make sure it’s a game that has an unlimited number of teams.”

“Unlimited number of teams?” Marcus said.

“Yes, Marcus, an unlimited number of teams. Anyone can create their own team, that way no one has to be on a team with people they don’t necessarily get along with,” I explained.

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“Oh,” Marcus said, not exactly knowing what I was talking about. I could tell by the confused look his face was making.

“You see, if there’s one thing that I’ve noticed at recess,” I said, “it’s that everyone is pretty much broken up into groups, even if they haven’t noticed it. Although Funmaker John has made lots of different games available for people to play, most people *still* play with their own group of friends. They may Try A Game That’s Not The Same, but they usually do it together.”

“Okay. Now I think I understand what you’re saying,” Marcus said, trying to read some of what I had written in my notebook. Too bad it’s written in a code I had created. I haven’t taught *anyone* how to read it yet, but I’m considering teaching it to Marcus. Just not right now.

“Giving everyone a chance to create their own team, will get more people interested in playing my game,” I continued. “Another great thing I’ve made sure will be a part of my game, is that it *has* to be played on the field.”

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“But only sports are allowed to use the field,” Marcus reminded me. “Like football, soccer and kickball.”

“Oh, trust me, I didn’t forget that,” I said, confidently. “Like I said before, *I* get to come up with the rules of the game. And *that’s* one of the rules. It’s the only place we’ll have enough room to play. Not to mention, we’re not allowed to run on the blacktop. Unless we’re playing basketball of course.”

“T.J., that’s genius!” Marcus said, motioning for a high five, which I happily obliged.

“No need to worship me just yet,” I told him. “There’s more to this game I haven’t even *told* you yet.”

“Like what?” Marcus asked.

“Like the name of the game, for example,” I reminded him.

“Oh, my goodness! I completely forgot that you get to *name* your new game!” Marcus shouted, moving to his knees, while staring at me like an eager puppy.

“What’s the name!”

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“That’s one detail I’m keeping to myself,” I said, crushing his excitement. “At least until it’s time to reveal it to the school.”

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

“Yes,” I said.

“May I come in,” my mom asked.

“Yes,” I said, closing my notebook.

“Um, Marcus. I need to speak with T.J., alone,” she said.

Marcus got up from his ‘eager puppy’ position and started walking to the door.

“We’re about to have dinner. If you and T.J. were working on something, you can wash up and join us,” she told him. “Then perhaps you can finish your project afterward.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Marcus said, politely, as he exited my room.

“But be sure to call your mother and ask permission first!” my mother called after him.

I don’t exactly know why my mother is in my room, or why she has just asked my best friend to leave,

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but I *do* have an idea as to who might be responsible for this unexpected visit.

“So, Tomas, Xochitl just told me that there may be something you’d like to tell me,” my mother said, pretty much telling me that she already knew about what had happened earlier at recess. My sister is such a *tattle* tale!

“Regarding what?” I asked, pretending to have *no* idea what she was talking about.

“So, it’s going to be like that?” she said, with a ‘you know what I’m talking about’ tone in her voice.

“No,” I answered, knowing there is *no* way I’m going to win a battle against my mother.

“So, I’ve heard your sister’s side. Now I want to hear your side,” she said, taking a seat on my bed.

I was tempted to just start shouting about how Funmaker John wasn’t being fair, but I know better. If I start that way, not only will I be in trouble for having to go to the principal’s office, I’ll also be in trouble for yelling at my mom. So, I took a deep breath and started from the beginning.

Thankfully, mom isn’t like dad. Instead of interrupting me every few sentences, so she can point out

what I did wrong, mom sat silently and let me finish my entire story before saying anything.

“It seems your luck with Mr. Martinez hasn’t run out yet,” mom commented.

The last time I was in Principal Martinez’s office was after I had shoved Andrew off the monkey bars, causing him to sprain his ankle. He *knew* I was next in line and had pushed me aside so he could go first. Luckily, Andrew had admitted to pushing me out of the way, so my punishment wasn’t as harsh as it could have been.

“But just because you didn’t get in trouble with Mr. Martinez, doesn’t mean you’re going to make a clean getaway with me,” mom explained.

“Aw,” I said, knowing that there is *no* way I’m going to change her mind.

“You’re going to start with a letter of apology for Funmaker John. And when you’re done with that, you can write one for Erick,” she instructed.

“But mooom!” I whined.

She held up her finger, letting me know she wasn’t finished. I hate when she does that, because it’s never

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just the finger alone. It's always paired with the closed eyes and head turned to the side, so she can't see my puppy dog eyes. And I've been practicing. I'm almost at Puss In Boots level!

"I want them *handwritten* and I want to see them when you're done, so I can proofread them and make sure your handwriting is neat and the spelling is correct," mom continued. "And I don't want them to say exactly the same thing. I want two distinctly written apologies."

Mom *knows* I have horrible penmanship and spelling. This is just another way for her to punish me.

"And when you're done with that," mom said, as if the written apologies weren't enough, "you're going to apologize to the members of the T.J. League."

"For what?" I asked, a bit confused.

"For setting a bad example to those who look up to you," she said. "As the leader of the T.J. League, you have a responsibility to the members of your team. Even *Batman* apologizes when he's made a mistake that could affect the whole team."

"But I didn't do anything that affected the whole *team*," I protested.

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“But you *did*, sweetie,” she said, motioning me to sit next to her. “You’ve taken their *leader* away from them.”

“How did I do *that*?” I asked, facing her as I sat on my bed.

“Now that you’re going to be a part of the Future Funmaker group, you’re not going to have as much time for the T.J. League,” she said, looking me straight in the eyes, but not in an intimidating way.

“But *I* get to make up my own game. And *I* get to teach it to the school. And *I* get to be in charge of the game,” I said, just as I had explained it to my friends earlier, during lunch.

“And that’s just *it*,” mom said, “since *you’re* going to be in charge of the game, *you’re* not exactly going to get to play the game with your friends.”

“I don’t get it,” I said.

“You’re going to be so busy making sure that everyone else is playing by the rules, that you’re not going to have time to play with your friends the way you used to,” she clarified.

Whoa. I hadn’t thought of that before.



Best Friend Ever

After dinner, Marcus and I headed back up to my room to finish working out all the details of the game. I've already come up with most of the ideas in my head, Marcus pretty much just has to help me decide if the ideas are good or bad. *Or* if maybe I just needed to change them up a bit.

Unfortunately, Marcus forgot that he had church, so he had to go home. I have so much excitement built up from creating my own game that I need an outlet to release it into. I know. I think I'll do a bit of drawing. I

T.J.'s Adventures

started a comic strip a while back and I haven't worked on it in a couple of weeks. Maybe I can use all of this energy to create a few blocks.

Batman is currently in the middle of a high-speed chase, trying to catch Joker. Of course, Joker isn't playing fairly. He's just blown up a freeway bridge after passing under it. Batman has to figure out a way to get through the debris without crashing or being crushed by large chunks of concrete.

As I sat at my desk, pondering possible ways for Batman to escape the danger, my mom poked her head through my open doorway.

"So, did you and Marcus finish working out all the details of your new game?" she asked.

"Not yet," I said. "He forgot he had church. But when we do, it's going to be the best game, *ever!*"

"I can't wait to hear all about it," she said. "And, uh, how are those apologies coming?"

"Oh! Uh, they're coming along fine," I lied. "I'm just trying to get all my thoughts in order before I start to write them out. You know, so I don't get writer's block."

Operation Full Control

“Okay,” she said, trying to see the paper I was covering with my arms.

I don’t think she fully believed what I was saying, seeing as how she was wrinkling her eyebrows as she passed on by my room. I’m just glad she reminded me that I had to write those apologies, or I would have been in *lots* of trouble.

I made sure to deliver my handwritten apologies to Erick and Funmaker John first thing in the morning since Xochitl was following me around like hawk stalking its prey. I knew that if I didn’t deliver them right away, she would tell mom as soon as we got home.

Erick took his, after some coaxing. I guess he thought that I was going to lunge at his throat again, because he started walking away from me, backwards, as soon as I started walking towards him. He only stopped when Marcus ensured him that I wasn’t going to hurt him.

Funmaker John, on the other hand, took his with a smile on his face. It seems that yesterday’s confrontation had no lasting effect on him. He even called out to me and held his hand up in a ‘high five’ position as soon I began

T.J.'s Adventures

approaching him. It was like yesterday had never even happened at all!

When it came time for recess, the substitute informed me that not only was I forbidden to play T.J. League, but also that I had lost my recess for *three whole days*! And not just recess, but *lunch* recess, too! Evidently, yelling at Funmaker John, and threatening Erick, has consequences. Needless to say, I am *not* having a good start to my day.

I've decided that since getting my recess back is out of my control, I will now focus on lunch time. If fact, I can't *wait* to get into the cafeteria! Why? Today is Sloppy Joe Day! They're not only my favorite school food, it's one of the only foods the cafeteria serves that no matter when you arrive, in the front of the line or the back, they are all the *same*. All that gooey, meaty, sloppiness. Just thinking about it makes me drool. Mmm. Sloppy Joes. If there is *one* thing that can make this day better, it's Sloppy Joes!

I usually try to be *extra* nice to the cafeteria ladies on Sloppy Joe day. I normally point out how nice they look or ask if they've done something to their hair.

Operation Full Control

Seeing as how Sloppy Joes are only served once a month, they almost never remember. A simple compliment can mean an *extra* scoop of Sloppy Joe messiness! There is *no way* I am *ever* going to give up that chance!

But just like at recess time, today was different. When it was finally my turn, I noticed that there were *no* Sloppy Joes.

“Sorry T.J. I know how much you like Sloppy Joes,” Mrs. Sorroyan apologized. “But Mrs. Lankershaim twisted her ankle and dropped an entire tray of Sloppy Joe meat. We ran out ten minutes ago.”

I could tell by the sound of her voice and the disappointed look on her face that she was truly sorry. Mrs. Sorroyan is the nicest person you can ever meet. Somehow, she even makes *Vegetarian Day* bearable.

“That’s okay Mrs. S,” I lied, as she handed me a bologna and cheese sandwich.

“I’ll be sure to save you one next time,” she promised, handing me a chocolate bar that she had been hiding. You know. The ones we’re selling for our school fundraiser. So, we can go to Science camp. Yeah, one of *those* chocolate bars. See. I *told* you she’s the nicest.

T.J.'s Adventures

“Thanks,” I said, as smiled at me.

Once I got my fruit and vegetables, I hurried into the lunch area. I immediately saw Marcus waving at me from our usual spot. Luckily, his teacher’s name is Mr. Anderson.

“Can you believe it?” I said, as more of a statement than a question. “Bologna and cheese. I don’t even like bologna!”

I dropped my plate onto the table and sat down next to Marcus.

“I know,” Marcus said, hiding something behind his back. “I saw Mrs. Lankershaim drop the tray of Sloppy Joe meat.”

“What are you hiding?” I asked, not in the mood for any surprises.

“Nothing,” he answered, with a mischievous look on his face.

“Marcus,” I said, irritated. “It’s *obvious* that you’re hiding something.”

“It’s like I said. I saw Mrs. Landershaim drop the tray of Sloppy Joe meat”

“So?” I asked, beginning to lose my patience.

Operation Full Control

“So, I decided to save you half of mine!” he announced, revealing what he had been hiding.

“You’re awesome!” I shouted, as he handed me the other half of his Sloppy Joe.

I immediately sank my teeth into that Sloppy Joe goodness, when once again, my day took a turn for the worst. At that *exact* moment, a passing sea gull decided to share what *he* had eaten hours before and it landed *right* on my Sloppy Joe. Some of it even splattered into my eye!

I coughed on the food in my mouth while running to the boys’ restroom, so I could wash my eye out with water. A supervision aide shouted at me to slow down as I ran past her.

See. I told you trouble always seems to find me.

So, it should be no surprise to you that I lost my appetite and couldn’t play at lunch recess anyway. Even though I’m supposed to be sitting at a pole, I’ve decided to sit under the Big Tree, to ponder what I’ve done to deserve such a horrible day.

It didn’t take long before Marcus approached me, asking me if I wanted to play.

T.J.'s Adventures

“You *sure* you don’t want to play?” Marcus offered, trying to lift my spirits. “We can play capture the flag and cream the other team!”

It sounds inviting, but I’m determined to stay on my dark cloud. Besides, I’ve lost my recess for three whole days. Although, I *have* been too embarrassed to tell the guys.

“Okay. I’ll see you after school,” Marcus said, shrugging his shoulders and running to join a game of soccer.

Besides being an awesome friend, Marcus is an average fifth grader. Who am I kidding? The only *average* thing about Marcus is his height. He’s the smartest boy in his class. And *possibly* mine. He’s the teacher’s pet. But in a good way. He knows *everyone* in the office by their *first* name. But he *still* calls them Mr. and Mrs. out of respect. Not to mention, unlike me, he is good at *every* sport. He’s *probably* the most athletic kid in our school. He’s *tried* to give me some tips and pointers to help me get better, but even *he* can’t help someone as pathetically un-athletic as me.

Operation Full Control

After school, Marcus was waiting for me at our usual meeting spot, at the end of the 600 wing. It was the building closest to the side exit gate. He always beats me there since his class is room 603. My class is in the 800 wing, which is the *farthest* from the side exit gate.

Luckily, mom finally trusts me enough to walk home. She still picks up my little sister, Xochitl, since she whines that she doesn't want to walk home with me and Marcus. And I'm *fine* with that. The more time away from her, the better.

I know it sounds mean, but she can be *so* annoying sometimes! She acts all nice and princess-y for everyone else, but when she's around *me*, well that's a whole different story. She could win an acting award for her ability to change character in an instant. If only *you* knew her like *I* do. *Trust* me, you'd agree.

"T.J., you doing anything tonight?" Marcus asked, as we walked. His head looking down.

"No. Why?" I answered.

"Oh. Nothing special," he said, as he kicked an aluminum can.

T.J.'s Adventures

“Then why ask?” I questioned. I hope I don’t sound too irritated. I really *am* still on my dark cloud.

“Well,” he began. He stayed silent for a few moments.

“‘Well’ what?” I asked.

“Well, I was wondering if you wanted to work on finishing your game,” he shared, as the can he was kicking bounced off the tire of a car we were passing by.

“I don’t know,” I retreated.

“Oh. Okay,” Marcus said, sounding disappointed. “Well, if you change your mind, let me know.”

Just then we arrived at Marcus’s house. I waived ‘good-bye’ and decided to walk around the block to my house.

If today was a normal day, which it is *not*, I would go to Marcus’s house to do my homework. His mother always has a snack ready for us. Actually, we usually alternate houses every day. One day we go to my house for homework and snacks. The next day we go to his. Today, I just need a little bit more time to myself.

“I thought you were going to Marcus’s house today,” my mother said, as she entered the living room,

Operation Full Control

where I've decided to continue my day on my dark cloud, laying in my dad's recliner.

"I was. But today has just been *horrible*! So, I decided I wanted to rest at home," I answered, honestly.

"In your favorite place, I see," my mother observed. "Anything I can help with?"

"No," was my short answer.

Normally I would tell her how my day went, and she'd listen without interrupting. I love how she does that. Dad is always interrupting me and trying to tell me how to fix things or saying 'toughen up', or 'men don't cry,' or some other unhelpful thing. But today. Today I want to stay on my dark cloud a little bit longer.

"Well, if you want a snack, your sister's at Thalia's house, so you can have the trail mix I made."

Trail mix is one of my favorite snack foods. But even *trail mix* can't get me out of my foul mood right now. Besides, I'm too busy focusing on Marcus's invitation. Should I let him come over so we can finish the details of my game? What do you think?

While I thought about it, mom just stood there, waiting for my response. I know because I can see her

T.J.'s Adventures

out of my peripheral vision. She's probably waiting for me to jump up and race to the kitchen. After a few moments of silence, I saw her shake her head in disappointment and walk away.

All of the frustration from earlier, and all of the energy it's taken to stay on my dark cloud, has tired me out. I think I'll rest my eyes for a few minutes, before starting on my homework, or asking Marcus to come over. Maybe then I'll have a clearer head.

I don't know how long I had closed my eyes, but the next thing I knew, mom was gently shaking me awake.

"T.J. T.J., wake up," she said.

"Huh? What?" I asked, trying to rub the sleep out of my eyes..

"Marcus is at the back door. Do you want me to tell him you're sleeping?" mom asked.

"Huh?" I groaned, as my eyes began to focus. I looked at the clock on the cable box. It was already five forty-five!

Operation Full Control

“He’s asking if you wanted to eat dinner at his house. He said his mother made Sloppy Joes,” mom informed me.

After everything that’s happened today, how can I say no to Sloppy Joes? Marcus truly is the *best* friend a guy could ever have. I stood up, stretched a bit, and quickly headed for the back door.

“Make sure not to stay too long, you still have homework to do!” mom called after me.

“Don’t worry, I won’t,” I shouted, as I raced out the back door.

“I love you, too!” she yelled.



When I got to the kitchen, Marcus's mother had already set the table and his older brother, Daniel, was just finishing up his homework. Luckily, we had a substitute teacher today and Mrs. Whiston had forgotten to make copies of our homework, so all we have to do is our nightly reading for our reading log.

"Don't forget to wash your hands, Daniel," his mother reminded him, as he was putting his science book into his backpack.

Operation Full Control

“Hello, T.J.,” Marcus’s mother greeted me, as we entered the kitchen.

She reminds me of a mother from a cartoon show. She is *always* sweet and it seems like she’s always doing more than one thing at once. Cooking *and* cleaning. Washing clothes *and* helping us with homework. She’s a pretty neat lady.

“I heard that your day didn’t go too well at school today,” she said, in a ‘is what I heard true?’ kind of voice.

“Eh,” I replied, “I’ve had worse.”

“Oh. So, I should skip the Sloppy Joes for dinner and make a vegetarian dish instead?” she said, returning a can to the cupboard with a smile.

“No, no, no! Today *was* pretty bad. I just meant that I’ve had some pretty bad days in the past, too. And some were worse than today,” I tried my best at a save.

“Oh, there you are,” she said, as Marcus finally came into the kitchen.

“Sorry, I had to use the restroom,” he explained.

“Go ahead and serve T.J.,” she instructed.

It seems that dinner was already prepared and the can she put back was just a distraction to keep me from

T.J.'s Adventures

noticing. Besides being a neat lady, she can also be tricky. Kind of like *my* mom. I wonder if they practice ways to trick us while we're at school.

Marcus took my plate from the table and began to prepare my Sloppy Joe. I've never understood why, but whenever I'm at his house, Marcus's mother makes him serve me. No matter how many times I've protested that I really *am* a big boy, despite my *actual* size, she always counters and says that I am a guest, and that in this house guests are treated as royalty.

I guess it's a good thing that we can hear when someone is coming up the stairs, because she probably wouldn't like it when I help Marcus clean his room. I'm pretty sure kings and princes have servants for that sort of thing. But I can't *stand* a messy room. Sometimes, while we're doing homework, or just hanging out, I'll automatically start picking things up and putting them where they're supposed to be. Except dirty underwear. That's just *gross*!

Operation Full Control

After dinner, Marcus's mother cleaned up, but I made sure to take my plate and cup to the sink before she could finish chewing and tell Marcus to do it.

We headed up to his room to finish working out all the details of the game. I have already come up with most of the ideas in my head, Marcus just pretty much has to help me decide if the ideas are good or bad. Or, if I just need to change them up a bit. Since I left my notes in my backpack, and that's still sitting next to my dad's recliner, all I can do is explain it to him.

Marcus decided to pull out some paper from his backpack and took a pencil from his desk so we could write our thoughts down. As I shared my ideas, he pointed out a flaw in my game and helped me fix it. As I continued to explain the rest of the game, he came up with an idea of his own. A really *good* idea. I am getting *so* excited.

While we were in the middle of an idea, the phone rang, although neither of us heard it. We're too focused on finishing the details of the game.

"Then you could—," Marcus was saying, when there was a knock at his bedroom door.

T.J.'s Adventures

“T.J., your mother just called. She said you still have homework to finish,” Marcus’ mother relayed.

“But *mom*,” Marcus whined.

“And if I’m not mistaken, *you* haven’t finished your spelling sentences. *And* you still have to take a shower,” his mother said, in a ‘and that’s final’ sort of tone.

“It’s okay Marcus,” I said, patting him on the back, “I’m in enough trouble already. If I don’t go home, who *knows* when we’ll get to hang out again.”

I picked up our notes and headed home.

“So, how was dinner?” my mom asked, as I entered the kitchen. She was washing dishes and listening to merengue music.

“Good,” I answered. “I’m just a bit tired.”

“After all that hibernating you did this afternoon?” mom said, rinsing off the last plate and putting it in the dish rack.

“Yeah. I feel a food coma coming on,” I said, patting my stomach and faking the best smile I could muster.

Operation Full Control

Mom laughed.

“Guess someone had a bit too much eat, huh?” she remarked.

“Maybe a little,” I answered.

“Well, go ahead and jump in the shower as soon as your sister gets out,” she ordered.

“Okay,” I said, exiting the kitchen.

“And don’t forget to do your homework!” mom called after me, as I ran up the stairs.

After I got out of the shower, I went straight to my room. A few minutes later, there was a knock on my door.

“Come in,” I said.

“Don’t think you’re out of trouble just because I let you go to Marcus’s house,” Mom started. “His mother called when you didn’t show up and wanted to make sure you were okay. Seems Marcus told her about what happened at recess and lunch. It was *his* idea to make Sloppy Joes.”

Suddenly there was a thump on the wall. It distracted mom, which might be a good thing.

T.J.'s Adventures

“Have you finished your homework?” mom asked, as she refocused on me.

“Not yet,” I answered.

“Then get to it!” she ordered.

“I only have to read for my reading log,” I explained.

“No math or language arts?” mom asked.

“No,” I said. “We had a substitute today, and Mrs. Whiston forgot to leave the homework for the sub.”

“What about your spelling words?” mom reminded me.

“Oh, yeah. I’ll write them five times each before I read,” I said.

“Make it ten since you don’t have any other homework tonight,” mom ordered.

“Okay,” I said, not too happily. I know better than to argue about how many times I have to write my spelling words.

Since I was been diagnosed with dyslexia last year, a special tutor at school and mom have been working with me to recognize letter combinations and sounds.

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You see, sometimes when I look at words on a paper, letters are all jumbled up or backwards. On a bad day, the words on the page aren't even a straight line! They look more like a river full of letters and sometimes even took on the shape of the hills I draw in my desert pictures.

Luckily mom has read this book from the library that showed her how to use underlines and *over*-lines to make me notice certain letter combinations. Like 'th' and 'ch'. She would also use wavy lines to help me with the sounds that vowel combinations make. Like 'ou' and 'ai' and stuff. She also puts boxes around letters or dots on top of letters or under letters. It's *really* helping me to read better.

Not only is it helping me to read better, it's also helping me to write better, too! Now *I* use the lines and boxes and dots when I'm writing, to make sure I spell words correctly. I've come from getting F's on my spelling tests to getting a C⁺ on last week's spelling test!

After writing my spelling words ten times each, reading for twenty minutes and writing in my reading log,

T.J.'s Adventures

I tried to go to sleep. 'Tried' being the key word. All I did was toss and turn.

After what seemed like an hour or so, I decided to get out of bed and put my extra energy to some good use. I walked over to my desk and decided to add another block to the comic I'm working on.

Batman is still battling the Joker, except Joker has just unveiled a *huge* toy gorilla that causes anyone who has metal on, to be *instantly* attracted to it. I designed it look kind of like the one at Chuck E. Cheese. You know. The one where you have to prove how strong you are? That one.

Anyway, Joker has designed his 'toy' to have a special ability. Once you're magnetically attached, the gorilla closes its arms around you and begins to squeeze tighter and tighter. Batman's spine is currently being crushed as he thinks of a way to escape. I'm just not sure how he's going to do that exactly. Maybe I've made this obstacle a bit too hard, this time.

Concentrating on a solution must have exhausted my brain, because I woke up the next day at my desk. As I got up, a line of drool from my desk stretched all the

Operation Full Control

way to my face. Aw man! Now some of my artwork is smeared!

“So, this is how it works,” I said, to the guys and Sammy, before school started.

It seems Marcus couldn’t wait to tell everyone that I had finished the details of the game. Luckily, he kept his promise to let *me* be the one to introduce it to everyone.

“T.J. got in trouble with mom!” Xochitl shouted, before I could explain the game to everyone.

I was so excited that I didn’t even hear her sneak up! Wait. How did she know? It must have been *her* that made that thump sound on the wall. She was probably *listening* through the wall!

“Go away!” I said, angrily.

“You can’t tell me what to do!” she screamed, causing people passing by to look our way.

“Stop *screaming*,” I ordered, “people are *staring*.”

“So, what! If you weren’t so mean, I wouldn’t have to scream,” Xochitl said, stomping off towards the lower grade playground.

T.J.'s Adventures

“She gets on my nerves!” I said, clenching my fists.

“Seems she’s got the ‘annoying sister’ part down,” Paul said.

“Don’t forget the ‘tattle tale’ part, too,” I added.

“So, are you going to tell us about the new game or what?” Justin asked, the look of excitement still on his face. Seems everything that just happened didn’t even faze him.

“Well,” I began, “as I was saying, before I was *rudely*, interrupted–.”

Just then the morning bell rang. Guess I’ll have to tell the guys later.

“Remember, your final draft is due by next Thursday if you want full credit,” Mrs. Whiston reminded us. “Every day after that your grade will drop by ten percent.”

Seems all of those research papers she had us doing was just practice for an even *bigger* research paper. This one had to be *five* pages long! In total. Not front and back. If it was front and back, I would probably have

Operation Full Control

died. I mean, come on. Can you *imagine* how many drafts I would have to do to make sure all the spelling was correct?

“Psst! T.J.!” Justin whispered from behind me.

I pretended not to hear him. I know what he wants. He wants me to tell him about my new game. And normally, I would tell him, too. Except Mrs. Whiston has already given us a final warning. Too many kids have been talking during class and she is *not* in a very good mood. I’ve already gotten in enough trouble for one week. I’m *not* about to add to my punishment.

“Come on, T.J.!” he whisper shouted. “You don’t have to talk. Just write it down for me!”

“Whose name should I add to the board now?”

Mrs. Whiston asked. She already has seven up there. And like I said, I am *not* about to add my name to that list.

I can feel Justin burning a hole in the back of my head with his eyes. I can also imagine the face he’s probably making. It’s the same one he always makes when he doesn’t get his way. But he’s just going to have to wait like everyone else.

T.J.'s Adventures

“Come on, T.J.,” Paul was saying, as we walked towards the office, “you can tell us now. What’s your game called and what’s it all about?”

“I’m sorry guys,” I apologized. “I have a meeting with Principal Martinez.”

“But you can still tell us before you get there!” Paul pleaded.

“I decided that I don’t want to get your guy’s hopes up in case Principal Martinez doesn’t approve the game,” I explained.

“Aw. No fair,” Justin whined.

“Sorry guys,” I said, as I opened the door to the office.

“Not cool, T.J.,” Sammy said, “not cool at all.”

I thought they were going to follow me in but instead they stayed outside. Peeking through the window. As if they are going to be able to hear the meeting between Principal Martinez and me.

“Good morning, T.J.,” Mr. Ellis greeted me. “Principal Martinez is finishing up an unexpected meeting. He’ll be right with you.”

Operation Full Control

“Thank you,” I said, as I took a seat in the waiting area.

I decided to look over my notes and the artwork I had prepared to make sure that I was truly ready for this meeting. Hmmm. It was just two days ago I sat in this very same chair. And I was scared and nervous beyond *anything* I had ever felt. And now here I sit. Just a couple of days later, without any fear or nerves whatsoever. Actually, I’m quite excited. Almost giddy. What a difference just a couple of days can make.

“And don’t forget what we agreed upon,” Principal Martinez told a fourth grader. “I hope I don’t have to see you in my office any time soon or there will *definitely* be consequences.”

“Yes, sir,” the fourth grader responded, through sniffles, as he walked past me.

His eyes were red. From crying, I guess. I’m not sure what he did, but I guess Principal Martinez had scolded him good. But then again, it also seems like he was getting a second chance. Just like I did. I guess Principal Martinez was telling the truth when we spoke the other day. He *is* like Professor Xavier. He had given

T.J.'s Adventures

me a second chance to make things right and it seems like he's giving *this* kid another chance, too.

"Ah, T.J." Principal Martinez said, with a completely different tone in his voice, "I've been looking forward to our meeting. Come in!"

I stood up from my chair and followed him into his office with my notebook clutched to my chest.

"Take a seat," he said, as he motioned to a chair around the circular table in front of his desk. "I wasn't expecting to see you back so soon."

"Me neither," I responded.

"So, you've already finished the task I gave you?" he asked, as we sat down.

"Yes, sir," I answered.

"Guess those 'problem solving skills' and 'real time responses to real life situations' came in handy," he said, as he quoted me from our previous meeting.

How did I remember the *exact* words that I had said? I barely remembered what I said.

"Yes, sir," I responded, as I opened my notebook and removed some artwork that Marcus and I had created yesterday.

Operation Full Control

“So, *this* is it?” Principal Martinez asked.

“Yup,” I said, with a bit of pride.

“Looks interesting,” he said, carefully examining each diagram. “What’s it called and how does it work?”

“Well, it’s called Heroes and Villains and it goes like this—.”

T.J.'s Adventures



Two Whole Weeks?

“Welcome back to Class Game Time!” Funmaker John said, as my class lined up shoulder to shoulder.

“Today, we are going to be learning how to play a new game,” he announced.

The whole class began to cheer. Except for me. This was about to get *really* awkward. For me.

“But *I’m* not going to be the one to teach it to you,” he explained.

The class stopped cheering and gave Funmaker John a confused look with their heads tilted to the side.

T.J.'s Adventures

It was weird. The *entire* class tilted their head to the *same* side. What are the chances of that happening?

“Today, our new game will be led, by none other than our ever creative, T.J.!” he said, more like a sports announcer and less like Funmaker John.

Everyone’s tilted head stayed tilted, except now, they’re tilted in *my* direction. Even Mrs. Whiston is looking up from her clipboard. And now my insides feel like they’re twisting up.

“Over our next couple of meetings,” Funmaker John continued, as he motioned me to join him, “T.J. will be introducing a game that *he* himself designed and created.”

Now Justin and Sammy are quietly cheering and high fiving each other. Guess they’re excited that they’ll finally get find out the details of my game.

“Now remember,” Funmaker John said, in a serious tone, “T.J. is going to be in charge. So, you are to give him your full attention. And respect him the same way you would respect me. Let me change that. You are to treat him *better* than you would treat me.”

Operation Full Control

He is *not* making this any easier. The more he talks, the more nervous I become. Maybe this whole having me come up with a game of my own wasn't such a great idea. And *me* introduce it to the whole school? Why in the world did I agree to that! This is *way* harder than how I imagined it. There's *got* to be an easier way to do this. Some way that would help me get rid of my nerves.

"Come on, T.J.!" Justin shouted.

"Yeah, T.J.!" Sammy joined in.

Then, the whole classes started to encourage me. I have to admit, it made me smile. Suddenly, I started to feel better.

"What's our mission today?" Sammy shouted, above the cheers.

That's it! I'll get into character! T.J. might be afraid to speak in front of an entire class, but Batman would *never* be afraid. He isn't afraid of *anything*. I took my superhero stance before I finally spoke.

"Okay everyone. Here's today's mission."

Little did I know that after I introduced and taught my class how to play Heroes and Villains that I would

T.J.'s Adventures

have to do the same thing for *every other* upper grade class. That meant that I had to miss *lots* of class. I know, I know. You're probably saying things like, 'lucky' and 'I wish I were you.' But trust me, it's not as good as it sounds.

Every time I missed class, I also missed what the teacher was teaching everyone else. That meant that I had to do *lots* of make up work! Luckily, Sammy has offered to help me during recess and lunch recess, when I'm *not* performing Future Funmaker duties, as well as after school. Guess it helps to have the smartest girl in our class as a close friend.

Although, it *was* a little awkward the first time she came over my house after school. Xochitl started poking fun at us, saying things like, 'Oooh,' and 'T.J.'s got a girlfriend'. If mom wasn't home, I would have given her *such* a pounding. Sammy said to just ignore her, but she doesn't know that after she leaves that Xochitl gets even worse. *Especially* when she starts singing 'T.J. and Sammy sitting in a tree'. I won't go on. I'm pretty sure you know how the rest of that song goes.

Operation Full Control

Luckily, it didn't last forever, but still longer than I would have liked. Due to the way Class Game Time is scheduled, it took two full weeks before I finished teaching all the different classes my new game. Some classes caught on quicker than others, but in general, they were all excited about my game.

Some people even tried to play it at recess, but it was still considered 'wandering the field,' since we hadn't reached the official start date yet. Everyone kept asking me when we would be able to play it at recess. I told them that Funmaker John said that *everyone* had to learn it before we could play it. That way it was fair. I just hope that it works out in real life the way I imagined it. If not, instead of the *best* game the school's ever played, this may be the *shortest* game in our school's *history*.

T.J.'s Adventures



“I froze you with my freeze ray!” said a fourth grader, as she held out her hands in front of her.

“Nooo! Flame Thrower! Save me!” said a fifth grader, with her hands flailing in the air.

“Fwooooosh!” said another fifth grader, as he sprayed his fire at the frozen fourth grader.

“Thanks!” said the now unfrozen fifth grader.

“Paralysis!” said a sixth grader, placing his hands on the shoulders of the two fifth graders.

T.J.'s Adventures

“We win!” said the fourth grader, jumping up and down with her hands in the air.

“Awww!” whined the two fifth graders.

So, it’s been two weeks since I’ve introduced my game to the school and over *half* of the school plays it during recess and lunch recess. So much so, that Funmaker John has stopped brining out other games that people used to play.

“T.J., this is the best game ever!” said the fourth grader, as she raced toward the water fountain.

“Yeah, T.J.! You should’ve been a Future Funmaker sooner!” said the sixth grader, as he followed close behind the fourth grader.

“What other games are you going to come up with?” asked the fifth grader, as he passed by, running backwards.

Everyone is enjoying my game! Well, *almost* everyone.

“Hey guys,” I said to Justin, Paul, Sammy and Marcus, who were all sitting under a tree.

“Hey,” Justin answered back, unenthusiastically.

Operation Full Control

“I’m sorry, but Funmaker John says that we can’t loiter during recess,” I said, squatting down in front of the group.

“Loiter?” Paul said, annoyed.

“Yeah, we can’t just sit down during recess,” I explained, “we have to be ‘engaged in an athletic activity.’”

“We’re discussing which ‘athletic activity’ we should join in, since our favorite game has been taken over by *half* of the school,” Sammy said, while using a stick to doodle in the dirt.

“Come on guys,” I pleaded. “That’s not fair!”

Justin stood up, which made me stand up.

“You’re right!” he shouted in my face. “It isn’t fair!”

“I was just trying to make sure that we would be able to play T.J. League anytime we wanted to, without getting hassled by Funmaker John!” I said, taking a few steps backward.

“Well, congratulations!” Paul said, standing beside Justin. “You succeeded!”

T.J.'s Adventures

“So, then why are you guys so mad at me?” I asked, taking a step forward.

“Because we can’t, play, T.J. League, anymore!” Marcus said, strongly, joining Justin and Paul.

“But you said—.”

“It’s called, ‘T.J. League’!” shouted Justin, interrupting me.

“Aw, c’mon you guys!” I said, putting my hands on my hips and taking a few steps in a circle.

“You might want to pay attention to *your* game,” Sammy said, standing and pointing behind me, “seems like some people are getting a little too serious.”

As I turned around, I saw two fourth graders flailing their arms at each other, so I ran over to separate them. Just as I reached them, Funmaker John blew his whistle, signaling the end of recess.

“Down and done!” Funmaker John called out.

“Down and done!” Future Funmakers echoed.

Every student took a knee and placed their hands on their head. Every student except for Justin, Paul, Sammy and Marcus, who had only taken a knee.

Operation Full Control

“Down and done, guys,” I said, as I jogged over to the guys.

“We *are* down,” Sammy pointed out.

“But you guys have to put your hands on your head,” I reminded her.

“And what’s *that* going to accomplish?” Justin asked, with some sass in his voice.

“Come on guys,” Paul said, as he put his hands on top of his head, “that was a rule *before* T.J. betrayed us.”

“Betrayed!” I shouted.

Funmaker John blew his whistle again, signaling for everyone to walk to line up.

“Walking feet!” Funmaker John called out.

“Walking feet!” Future Funmakers repeated.

“Walking feet! Walking feet! Squawk!” Justin mimicked, like a parrot, as he walked to his line.

Paul and Sammy joined in the mimicry while Marcus walked a short distance behind them. I gave Justin a dirty look as he looked back to stick his tongue out at me.

As everyone lined up, some Future Funmakers made sure that all the game equipment was returned to

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their proper places. Erick and I were in charge of making sure that lines were straight and quiet.

“Shoes!” Erick shouted.

“Behind shoes!” students in line responded, as they quickly straightened up their lines by putting their shoes directly behind the shoes of the person in front of them.

“Arms!” I shouted.

“Length apart!” students in line responded as they placed their right hand on the shoulder of the person in front of them to space themselves equally, then dropping them when they were done.

Since there were no teachers visible in the hallway on their way to retrieve their classes, Erick and I led the students in a chant. Usually, we would say it in our inside voices, followed by our outside voices and finish it up with our whisper voices.

“Flight and speed!” Erick shouted.

“Flight and speed!” the students echoed.

“Stealth indeed!” I shouted.

“Stealth indeed!” they responded.

“American pride!” Erick shouted.

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“American pride!” the students replied.

“Lasso of Truth and webs to fly!” I shouted.

“Lasso of Truth and webs to fly!” they called out.

“We protect and serve all living things!” Erick shouted louder than before.

“We protect and serve all living thing!” they copied in volume.

“The T.J. League reigns supreme!” I finished louder than Erick.

“The T.J. League reigns supreme!” the students cried out with fists in the air.

Erick and I walked up and down the lines as students did their best to stand up straight and look straight ahead. Anyone out of line, not paying attention, or talking, was sent to the back of line. Students quickly adjusted their feet and the spaces in front of them if this happened in their line.

In no time, teachers were walking slowly down the hallway, laughing at something none of us had heard. After taking their students back to their classrooms Erick and I began walking down the hallway towards our own classrooms.

T.J.'s Adventures

“T.J.,” Funmaker John called to me. Erick and I turned around to face Funmaker John.

“Just T.J.,” Funmaker John specified.

“Yes?” I responded, as Erick continued walking.

“I’ve gotta hand it to you, T.J. Your game seems to be a success!” he said, enthusiastically.

“I guess,” I said, shyly, staring at the ground.

“Don’t be so modest,” Funmaker John said, as he placed his hand under my chin, to raise my head so that we were making eye contact. “I’ll admit, when Principal Martinez first approached me with the idea about adding you to the Future Funmakers, I had my reservations.”

“Reservations?” I said, not knowing what it meant.

“Doubts,” Funmaker John clarified, “I had my doubts.”

I gave Funmaker John a ‘what are you talking about?’ look.

“Don’t get me wrong. I mean, before that, you had only given me trouble. You know,” he said, pointing at his butt, “been a pain in my gluteus maximus.”

Operation Full Control

Is he talking French or something? I have *no* idea what he is saying. He must have seen the confusion on my face because he followed it up quickly.

“Butt,” he said, with a smile, “you were a pain in my butt.”

“*You* were the one who came in and changed *everything* we ever knew!” I said, passionately. “How was I *supposed* to react!”

“Trust me,” he started, “I know how you feel. This isn’t the first school I’ve been assigned to.”

“Wha—.” I started.

“The Recess Revitalization Foundation is a national program,” he explained. “Principals and school districts hire us to make recess more structured and to help students handle situations without the assistance of a supervision aide or an adult. In other words, to help you think for yourselves.”

“But I *already* know how to think for myself,” I assured him.

“I hadn’t noticed,” Funmaker John said, sarcastically.

T.J.'s Adventures

We both laughed at his sarcasm. I never thought I'd do that. Laugh *with* Funmaker John.

"I have to admit," I said, more seriously, "being a Future Funmaker isn't as bad as I thought it would be."

"Seems like you've learned the reasoning behind the second rule of the Recess Revitalization Foundation," Funmaker John commented.

"Try a game that's not the same," I said, matter of factly.

"*And* rule number three," he continued.

"Don't shun my fun," I continued.

"Yeah," he said. "Guess it's a good thing you've got a smart principal."

"Yeah," I agreed.

"Who knows," Funmaker John said, more excitedly, "you might even be selected to be Future Funmaker of the Month!"

Future Funmaker of the Month was voted on by all Future Funmakers. If there was a tie, Funmaker John was the deciding vote.

"Really?" I asked, truly interested.

Operation Full Control

“Hey,” he began, “if there’s anything I’ve learned from this experience, it’s that *anything* can happen!”

This last comment made me chuckle.

“Well, I better let you go before you get in trouble with your teacher,” Funmaker John said, holding his right hand up.

“Okay,” I responded, jumping to give him a high five before I hurried back towards my classroom. “See you later!”

T.J.'s Adventures



As I was walking home with Marcus, in silence, I realized something. My mom had been right. She warned me that things would not be the same. That I wouldn't be able to play T.J. League with my friends. She also suggested that Funmaker John wasn't as bad as I had made him out to be. Dang! How is it that moms are so smart?

After dinner and a shower, I stealthily approached my mother who was in the living room patching a hole in

T.J.'s Adventures

a pair of my pants. I sat down next to her and laid my head on her lap, causing her to raise my pants high enough to allow me to do so and then lowering them to cover my face. Instead of stopping, she just continued to sew. I shifted my body left and right and even returned to my original position, but she just kept on sewing. I shifted again, and again I received no response.

“Mooom!” I whined.

Mom stopped sewing, lifted the pants off my face and gave me a surprised look.

“Oh, T.J., when did you get here?” she asked, feigning surprise.

“Mooom!” I said, annoyed.

“What?” she asked, with an equal amount of annoyance in her voice.

“My life is over,” I pouted.

“That’s a bit dramatic,” she pointed out, “even for you. Would you care to elaborate?”

“No,” I continued to pout.

Mom took my response, lowered my pants over my face, and began to sew again. I shifted my body again, and again mom ignored it.

Operation Full Control

“Mooom!” I whined, same as before.

Mom stopped sewing and lifted the pants off my face again.

“Oh, are you still there?” she asked, feigning surprise again.

“Mooom!” I said, more annoyed this time.

“What?” she answered.

“Didn’t you hear me?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said.

“And!” I said, staring straight into her eyes.

“And you said you didn’t want to elaborate,” she reminded me.

I crossed my arms and wrinkled my eyebrows, not breaking eye contact.

“Still don’t?” mom asked. “Okay.”

With that said, she ignored me and continued to sew. Which is *really* getting annoying.

“Okay, fine!” I caved.

Mom placed my pants beside her and gave me her full attention.

“Remember how Principal Martinez made me a Future Funmaker?” I asked.

T.J.'s Adventures

“Yes,” mom responded.

“And remember how he made me come up with a new game for the school?” I continued.

“Yes,” she said.

“Well, everyone loves my game,” I told her.

“Then why don’t you sound happy?” she asked.

“Because everyone loves my game!” I said loudly.

I was so loud that Mom closed her eyes and covered her ears. I know what that means. That’s means I’m yelling at her when it’s not her fault. I placed my hands on top of hers and gently pulled them away from her face.

“Everyone loves my game,” I repeated, correcting my volume. “Everyone except my friends.”

“Oh,” she said, in an understanding tone.

“Right!” I said in a ‘you get it, right?’ voice.

After my last statement, mom began to gently shuffle my hair. I don’t know why, but that always seems to comfort me. Maybe that’s why dogs and cats like it so much when we scratch *their* head.

“And why do you think it is that your friends don’t like your new game?” she asked.

Operation Full Control

“I don’t know!” I answered. “I mean, we get to play T.J. League *every day!*”

““We?”” mom asked.

“The *whole* school!” I said, almost yelling at her.

““The *whole* school?”” she asked, in a calm voice, which subconsciously made me lower mine.

“No,” I answered, “not the *whole* school.”

“I don’t understand,” she said, although I think she already knew what I meant.

“*I* don’t get to play,” I explained.

“I see,” she continued, in a calm voice.

“You do?” I asked, truly confused.

“Yes,” she said.

“So, what should I do, then?” I wondered.

“I’m not sure that telling you what to do is going to help,” she answered

“But isn’t that what mothers are for?” I asked, “telling kids what to do?”

Mom stopped shuffling my hair, put her hands on both sides of my head and made sure we were making eye contact before responding.

T.J.'s Adventures

“Don’t forget the cooking and the cleaning and the Ubering and the shoe finding and the embarrassing and the tickling,” mom reminded me, as she removed her hands from the sides of my head and began to run her fingers up and down the sides of my ribcage instead.

“Mooom!” I shouted, between giggles.

“*What?*” she asked, as she stopped. “You left some things out.”

To keep her from tickling me more, I sat up.

“You know what I meant,” I said, covering my ribcage with crossed arms, just in case.

“Did I?” mom asked, as she held her chin in her hand and staring off into space.

“Mooom!” I said, truly annoyed.

“Do you want me to tell you the truth?” she asked, making her way back to earth where our conversation was still taking place, “or do you want me to tell you what you want to hear?”

I hate it when she does that. She *knows* what I want. She *knows* that I want to hear something that will make me feel better. She *knows* that she can easily make it all better. She knows the *exact* words I want to hear –

Operation Full Control

‘everything’s going to be okay.’ Why does she have to make things so difficult?

“The truth, I guess. But be nice about it,” I paused, “please?”

“Well,” she began, “since you said ‘please.’”

Mom and I talked for about fifteen minutes, sometimes getting a little heated, sometimes speaking so softly that only a mouse would be able to hear what we were saying. In the end, we both had smiles on our faces as we hugged it out.

T.J.'s Adventures



“Good morning, Principal Martinez,” I said, as I entered his office before school started.

“Good morning, T.J. Take a seat,” he greeted.

“Thank you for meeting with me,” I said, as I placed my backpack on the floor beside my seat.

“Mrs. Kelley said you had something important to tell me,” Principal Martinez explained, as we shook hands.

“Yes,” I responded.

T.J.'s Adventures

“Very well. Tell away,” he said, as we both sat down.

“I’ve been thinking,” I started, “about the new game I made up.”

“Heroes and Villains? Yes. I hear it’s the hit of the playground!” he said excitedly, with a large smile on his face.

“True as that may be,” I said, “there’s just one thing wrong with it.”

“A flaw?” Principal Martinez inquired.

“You could call it that,” I confirmed.

“Okay,” he said, placing his chin on his folded hands, focusing his full attention on my face.

“You see—how do I put this?” I said, as I looked around the room trying to find the right words, “it’s a great game and all.”

“Yes?” Principal Martinez said, shifting in his seat.

“And lots of people are enjoying it,” I continued, still trying to find those words.

“Mmhmm,” he said.

“But—how *do* I put this,” I thought aloud.

Operation Full Control

“Feel free to speak your mind,” Principal Martinez offered, as he sat back leisurely in his chair and making a sweeping motion with his hand. “I find that helps me get my thoughts out easier.”

“Okay,” I said, “I’ll try.”

I took a couple of moments to gather my thoughts and then took a deep breath before I spoke.

“I’ll just start at the beginning,” I said.

“Sounds good,” Principal Martinez responded, once again placing his chin on his hands.

“When I first came up with the T.J. League,” I began, “it was a game intended to make me and my friends closer as a group.”

“I like that,” Principal Martinez commented.

“And we did, too,” I continued, “you know, get closer. Ever since last year, when Sammy brought that comic book to school—.”

“Comic book?” Principal Martinez interrupted.

Oops! For a second there, I forgot that we weren’t supposed to bring comic books to school!

“Did I say comic book?” I asked, nervously.

T.J.'s Adventures

“Yes, you did,” Principal Martinez answered, “but that’s in the past. Please continue.”

I took a sigh of relief. Sammy would *never* forgive me if she found out that I accidentally ratted her out.

“Well, after we started the T.J. League, we allowed anyone we thought was worthy to join, the chance to play,” I explained.

“That’s rather kind of you guys,” Principal Martinez praised.

“But of course, some kids moved away, and others stopped playing because they wanted to be in charge. But everyone knows that *I’m* in charge,” I said strongly, “I mean, it’s called *T.J. League*.”

Principal Martinez didn’t comment. He merely nodded his head up and down.

“No matter what happened, the original members of the T.J. League remained the same,” I clarified.

“Every time we played, I had to come up with a new scenario for us to overcome and each time we grew closer and closer and got better and better at coming up with ways to overcome my challenge.”

Operation Full Control

“That’s quite ingenious,” Principal Martinez observed.

“Thank you,” I said. “But once I became a Future Funmaker, and introduced Heroes and Villains to the school, that all stopped. And it completely undid everything we had worked so hard to create.”

“What do you mean?” Principal Martinez asked.

“Well, now that I can’t play with my friends, we’ve actually grown farther and farther apart.”

“Really?” he remarked.

“Yes,” I said. “It didn’t start right away. At first the guys *liked* that they got to play T.J. League every day.”

“Heroes and Villains,” Principal Martinez corrected me.

“Huh?”

“Heroes and Villains. You said T.J. League, but I think you meant Heroes and Villains,” he explained his correction.

“Oh, yeah. Heroes and Villains,” I agreed. “Well, at first the guys were happy that they weren’t getting in trouble for ‘wandering the field’ like they were before.

T.J.'s Adventures

They were happy that they could play the game that they loved!”

“That’s nice,” he commented.

“But that didn’t last very long. After four or five days of asking me to play with them, they realized that it just wasn’t possible,” I said gloomily. “Although *I* am the one that came up with the game, I now have new responsibilities that prevent me from playing with my friends. They’ve actually started to resent me for it!”

“Well that isn’t fair,” Principal Martinez said, firmly.

“Actually,” I paused for a moment, “it is.”

“I don’t understand,” he said, sitting back in his chair and placing his hands on the armrests of his chair.

“You see, if I had just listened to my friends when they were trying to calm me down after we got in trouble for playing T.J. League, I would *never* have gotten in trouble,” I explained in a soft voice as I stared at my feet. “I would *never* have ended up in your office. I would *never* have been asked to come up with a new game for the school. And I would *never* have been made a Future Funmaker.”

Operation Full Control

“Ah,” he said, as he sat up straight and placed his folded hands on the table. “Now I understand.”

“But I think I’ve come up with a solution that will allow me to stay a Future Funmaker *and* allow me to play T.J. League with my friends,” I shared.

“T.J. League or Heroes and Villains?” Principal Martinez asked.

“T.J. League,” I said, confidently with a smirk.

Principal Martinez once again leaned back in his chair and stroked his chin, “go on.”

T.J.'s Adventures



So, mom was right of course. Again. After the meeting with Principal Martinez, followed up by a meeting with Funmaker John, I was able to work out a way that I could be a Future Funmaker but still be able to play T.J. League with my friends. It took a little convincing on my part, but they finally gave in to my proposition.

“10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1!” I shouted.

T.J.'s Adventures

“I did it guys!” Paul shouted back. “I got inside the bunker just in time and stopped the President from destroying all American military bases!”

“But how did you stop him in time?” Sammy asked, still fighting invisible attackers. “I thought that the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State had to be in the bunker to override Operation Full Control?”

“Actually, they just had to be there to input their secret codes in time,” Paul explained. “I was able to enter their codes for them just before time ran out!”

“Mwah ha ha ha ha!” Funmaker John cackled, from behind us. “You think that you’ve defeated me?”

“Dr. Dreamo!” I yelled.

Erick, Justin, Marcus, Paul, and Sammy joined me as I took my superhero stance.

“Yes! It is I, the evil Dr. Dreamo!” Funmaker John announced.

“Give it up, Dr. Dreamo!” Erick commanded, “You’re finished! We’ve thwarted your plan to destroy all American military bases!”

“Yeah!” the rest of the T.J. League chimed in.

Operation Full Control

“Mwah ha ha ha ha!” Funmaker John continued to taunt. “You thought *that* was my final act? *That* was just a distraction I created to keep you from finding out my *real* plan!”

“What?” Marcus asked.

“While *you* guys were busy trying to stop the President of the United States, *I* was entering the dreams of *every other* superhero and convincing them that *you’ve* turned to the dark side and are now *my* sidekicks!” he explained. “Mwah ha ha ha ha!”

“What!” Justin said, in disbelief.

“No way!” I said, just as confused as Justin.

“What are we going to do?” Sammy asked.

“I have an idea!” Marcus said, motioning for us to huddle together.

“What is it!” Paul said, excitedly.

“Yeah! Spit it out!” Erick whisper shouted.

“Batman! Don’t you—.”

Before Marcus was able to finish his sentence, Funmaker John’s phone alarm went off, signaling that recess would be starting soon.

“Aw man!” Justin whined.

T.J.'s Adventures

“Sorry, guys,” Funmaker John apologized. “Guess we’ll have to finish this another time.”

In case you haven’t figured it out, I got the rest of the T.J. League to join the Future Funmakers. That made Funmaker John happy since some Future Funmakers have moved away and others have been put on probation, or have been dropped from the program completely, due to low class and homework assignments.

“Come on Sammy,” Marcus encouraged, “we’re running Switch today. Help me with the cones, please.”

“All right!” Sammy exclaimed, “my favorite Recess Revitalization Foundation game.”

“Justin,” Paul called, “help me with these hula hoops, please.”

“Oh, yeah!” Justin called back, “we’re in charge of Hula Hoop Tag!”

“T.J.,” Erick said to me, with his hands on my shoulders, “I don’t know *how* you convinced Principal Martinez to let us play T.J. League before recess begins or *how* you even came up with that idea, but I can’t *wait* till we can play T.J. League again!”

Operation Full Control

“All right guys,” Funmaker John called out, “Let’s remember to be fair and fun!”

“Then it’s down and done!” we responded.

We set up all the necessary playground equipment for the first round of recess. Then I shouted out.

“T.J. League, front and center!”

Erick, Justin, Marcus, Paul and Sammy all ran towards me and assembled in our meeting huddle.

“Okay, guys, remember the rules of the playground,” I directed.

“Tattle tales don’t prevail!” Sammy cried out.

“Try a game that’s not the same!” Justin continued.

“Don’t shun my fun!” Erick finished.

“Right!” I praised. “It’s our job as Future Funmakers to make sure that recess runs safely and smoothly.”

“Yeah!” Marcus chimed.

“And as T.J. League members,” I continued, “it’s our job to protect the people from evildoers who want to ruin recess!”

“Yeah!” Paul agreed.

T.J.'s Adventures

I put my hand out in the center of our huddle and all the T.J. League members placed their hands on top of it. Next, we shouted the most important words we knew as we raised our hands to the sky.

“We protect and serve all living things! The T.J. League reigns supreme!”