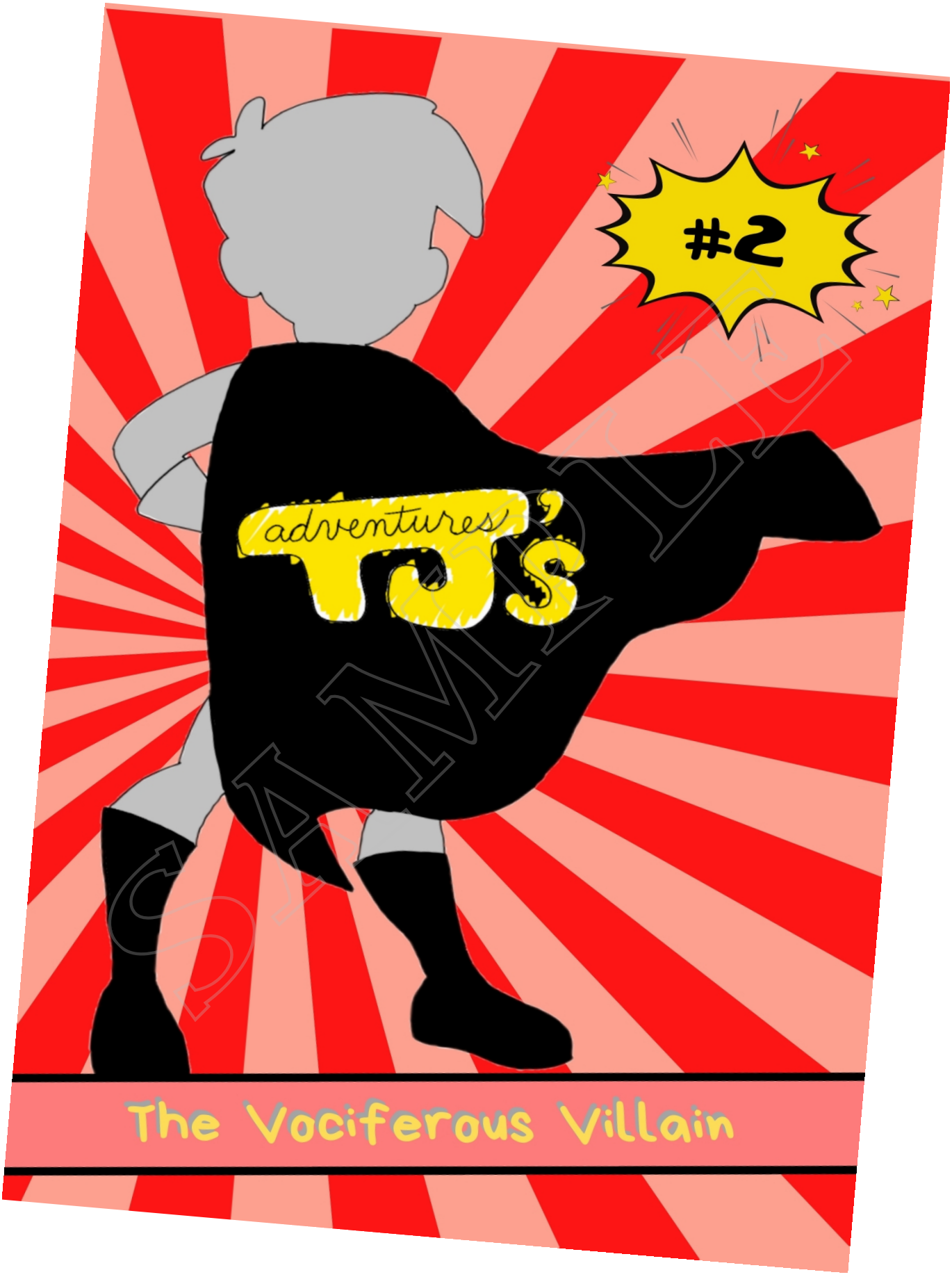
#2
adventures
TJ's
The Vociferous Villain

SAMPLE

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Compassion – our greatest response to this life.

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T.J.’s Adventures
The Vociferous Villain

“Mr. Angel” Ramirez

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1 A Shorter Introduction

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If you've already read my first adventure, then reading on would really be a waste of your time. Useless really. Unless of course it's been a while since you've read it. Or maybe you've just got *lots* of time on your hand. Or maybe you just like to read a lot. Anyway, if you want to read on, read away!

On the other hand, if this is your first time meeting me, then you're probably reading this adventure because the library didn't

have my first adventure available. Like maybe someone had already checked it out or hadn't returned it or something. Or maybe someone gave you this book as a gift or birthday present or something like that. It doesn't really matter what the reason is. All that matters is that you read the rest of this introduction so that everything you read—after this chapter—makes sense.

My name is Tomas (as in Toe-moss) Raymundo Olivera Uribe Barrientos Lopez Espinosa, Jr. But everyone just calls me T.J. I'm in the fifth grade—though I look more like a tall second grader or average sized third grader. I have a little sister—not by choice—in second grade, named Xochitl. She likes to tattle and annoy me.

My best friends are Erick, Justin, Marcus, Paul and Sammy. Erick likes Superman. Justin likes Spiderman. Marcus likes Captain America. Paul likes the Flash. Sammy likes Wonder Woman. And I like Batman. And we're all part of The *T.J.* League! It's a league I made up since some of us like Marvel superheroes and some of us like D.C. superheroes. The T.J. League accepts superheroes from *all* universes!

In our last adventure, we had our *lives* turned upside down! Okay. Maybe not our *lives*. But the most important *aspect* of our lives… recess! Let me explain what I mean. Our school brought in a 'recess coach'—Funmaker John—to help us have a better recess time. I guess? I'm not sure the adults are aware of this, *but*, if there's

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one thing that kids *probably* don't need help with, it's playing outside. That includes recess.

Anyway, Funmaker John changed the rules to nearly *every* game we played at recess. He even got *rid* of some of our *favorite* games! I mean, he *did* bring in some cool, new games. And he even allowed some students to help him run recess. Including Erick. He called them 'Future Funmakers'. But all these changes came *with-out-warning!* And we were *not* excited about it *at all!* Even *Marcus* started acting out of character. But the *worst* change of all, was the fact that we weren't allowed to play T.J. League!

What's T.J. League? It's a game that I made up. This is how it works. I create a scenario with a villain we have to defeat. Sometimes it's easier and sometimes a bit more difficult. The key to successfully defeating the villain is teamwork, problem-solving skills and most importantly, our imagination! It's our *favorite* thing to play at recess. And it was taken away from us. And because of that, Funmaker John became my new villain. And for a short while, Erick, too.

Actually, it was because I threatened Erick that I ended up in Principal Martinez's office. Sort of. Principal Martinez had heard about our continued defiance against Funmaker John's recess rule that ended T.J. League and called me in. I guess he figured that I was the leader and that if he could change my mind, then the rest of the guys would follow me. And *boy* was his decision *effective.* He informed me that he wanted me to create a new recess game. One that I would

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have to name. And come up with the rules for. And parameters. And a goal to achieve. And… you get the idea. Why? So, I would understand how difficult it can be to create, teach and maintain a game that *everyone* in the school can participate in.

He also, in that same meeting, did something *very* underhanded. Sigh. He made me a Future Funmaker. He *knew* I didn't like Funmaker John. He *knew* that I didn't like all of his changes. He *knew* that I wished Funmaker John was gone and that *everything* would just return to the way that it used to be. And knowing all that, he *still* decided that I should be a Future Funmaker.

But then again, he also did something that I don't think even *he* realized. He gave me a *new* challenge to overcome. That *and* a tiny bit of control. And boy did I use that to my advantage. How? Hee hee hee. In a way I don't think he *ever* expected. Oh, I created a new game all right. I made sure to check off all those boxes he had given me. New name? Check. Rules? Check. Parameters? Check. Goal to achieve? Check. What kind of game did I create, you ask? The *perfect* kind of game. The kind that would allow us to play T.J. League at *every* recess. Regular recess *and* lunch recess. I called it, Heroes and Villains.

After teaching it to the school, *everyone* loved it! Kind of. Since I was now a Future Funmaker—and enjoying it a bit, I must admit—I could no longer play with the original T.J. League members. Why?

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Because I had to run my new game. And boy did they *not* enjoy that. Not. At. All.

After having a bit of a tiff with the guys, my mom helped me understand that although I had given everyone *else* something new to enjoy, I had also taken away a favorite thing from my best friends: playing T.J. League with me. After that discussion, I knew that I had to do something. And quick! Thankfully, the idea came to me before the guys could completely mutiny and kick me out of our league.

Due to too many missed homework and classroom assignments, Funmaker John lost a group of his Future Funmakers and was hurting for some more. Knowing this, I scheduled another meeting with Principal Martinez. And after convincing him that my plan was ab-so-lute-ly genius, and necessary, I had to do the same with Funmaker John. I admit, I was a bit leery of his acceptance to my proposal, but he *immediately* approved of my idea and did everything necessary to make sure it was a success.

Now, *all* of us, Erick, Justin, Marcus, Paul Sammy, and I, are Future Funmakers. That fixed Funmaker John's understaffed issue. Now we all help at first recess to make sure everything runs smoothly. But what about us playing T.J. League you ask? Well, I convinced Funmaker John to allow us to get out of class an *extra* ten minutes early so that we can play T.J. League be*fore* setting up all the necessary equipment for the recess games. He even agreed to play the villain for us! Which, I'm surprised to say, made it even *better!*

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Normally, I had to think up ideas, on the spot, whenever one of the guys had an idea on how to defeat the villain. Now Funmaker John does that for me. And *boy* is his imagination *almost* as good as mine.

So, in the end, everyone ended up pretty happy, and the guys and I are enjoying our Future Funmaker experience. But of course, life goes on. And now a *new* challenge has come along. I just hope we're able to find a solution to it before it becomes a bigger problem than Funmaker John used to be!

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2 A New Mission

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“Think fast!”

“Ow!”

Don’t people know by now that I am *not* good at sports involving a ball! And *yes*, that includes *catching* one!

“Sorry, T.J.,” Justin apologized. “You were closest to the basket.”

Our class is playing kickball basketball. If you're not sure what that is, let me explain.

First, the set up. Kickball basketball is played on a basketball court. One team lines up in one corner of the court at 'home plate' and the other team uses the rest of the court as the 'outfield'. First base is the half court corner farthest from home plate. Second base is the basketball pole farthest from home plate. Third base is the half court corner closest to home plate. And home plate is where you started from. It forms a rhombus. Which is pretty much the same shape as a diamond. At least that's how Mrs. Whiston explained it when she taught it to us.

Now to explain how it's played. First, Mrs. Whiston calls out a spelling word, or state capital, or math problem or something like that. Like, say, four times eight. Whoever is up to kick has to answer the question or problem, correctly. If you answer incorrectly, you get a strike. Three strikes and you're out. If you get it right, she'll roll the ball for you to kick.

After kicking the ball, the team in the outfield can catch the ball, but it doesn't get you out. In order to get someone out, the other team has to make a basket in the hoop closest to home base, *before* you're able to run around the bases and make it home. If you make it home before they can make a basket, it's a homerun and your team scores a point. Oh, and there's no singles, doubles or triples. The other team either gets you out or you make it all the way home for a homerun.

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Justin just tried to pass me the kickball, so I could make a shot, since I *was* closest to the hoop.

"C'mon T.J., you should have caught it!" one of my classmates called out.

"I did!" I called back, "with my *face*!"

As the other team laughed, Sarah managed to recover the ball and make a basket *just* before Jasmine reached home plate.

"Booo!" the other team hissed.

"Simmer down," Mrs. Whiston ordered, as Joseph handed her the handball.

"Easy out!" someone from the outfield shouted, as Jefferson approached the plate.

"That's a name," Mrs. Whiston called out.

"I was just kidding," Shanika called back.

If Marcus is the best *boy* athlete in our school, then Shanika is definitely the best *girl* athlete. And even though I'm not good at any sports with a ball, Jefferson is no good at sports. Period. At least I *think* he's not. I've never actually seen him play any. He's usually reading 'a good book' during recess.

"Comments stay in our mind…" Mrs. Whiston started.

"NOT IN OUR MOUTH," we all finished.

"Make good choices," Mrs. Whiston said, for the umpteenth time today. "Okay, Jefferson. What's the capital of New Hampshire."

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Even though we all *knew* he would get it right, we all moved in closer to home plate.

“It’s an automatic homerun if anyone passes me,” Mrs. Whiston reminded us. Jackson took a few steps back just in case.

What happened next caught everyone by surprise. At least I *think* everyone. It all happened so fast that I’m not even sure anyone *moved* until Jefferson reached second base. It was either extreme *talent* or extreme *luck*. I’m not even sure *Shanika* had kicked the ball that far during her last turn at the plate.

By the time Shanika even *reached* the ball, Jefferson had already reached home plate, where his teammates were waiting and cheering. Who knew? I guess a bookworm can kick a ball *just* as well as he can read!

We continued to play kickball basketball until Mrs. Whiston noticed our school secretary, Mrs. Kelley, walking towards us. Following her, about ten feet behind, was a kid I had never seen before.

“Okay, students. Water break!” Mrs. Whiston announced.

Everyone started running across the blacktop towards the drinking fountains. Our school has one at the end of every wing.

“Can you be-*lieve* it!” Justin said, as he waited behind me for a drink of water.

“Believe what?” I asked, wiping water from my chin.

“Really?” he asked, before getting his own drink of water.

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“Really. I have *no* idea what you’re talking about,” I answered, walking towards the basketball court.

“Jefferson, T.J. *Jefferson*!” Justin exclaimed.

I know that Justin is excited about what just happened, but I can’t help wondering about the new kid with Mrs. Kelley. We haven’t gotten a new kid in our grade since Sammy joined our class, back in fourth grade. Which made me wonder. Why isn’t this new kid in Mr. Anderson’s class?

“Maybe it’s because he has more students,” Sammy whispered in my ear, giving me a small fright.

I guess I must have said that last thought out loud. I’ll have to be a bit more careful in the future.

As everyone returned to the basketball court, Mrs. Kelley walked back towards the office.

“Boys and girls,” Mrs. Whiston said, while motioning to the new kid, “this is Victor.”

“Hi, Victor,” the class said, in unison.

“Now, I know that we would normally do introductions first, but our computer lab time starts in a few minutes, so we’ll save that for tomorrow,” Mrs. Whiston explained. “Make sure to grab your sweaters and jackets and let’s head to the computer lab.”

“Number order!” Jefferson announced, with a clipboard in his hand. This week it’s his turn to be Line Monitor. Everyone quickly

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made two lines behind this week's line leaders. Number seven and number twenty-two.

"Shoes!" Jessica called out. Jessica's number seven.

"Behind shoes!" everyone responded.

"Arm's!" Jordan called out. Jordan is number twenty-two.

"Length apart!" everyone called back.

"Victor, you can stand in the back with me," Jefferson said, as he wrote something down on the paper that the clipboard was holding.

"Thank you, Jefferson," Mrs. Whiston said.

"*Thank you, Jefferson*," someone mimicked, a bit too loudly.

"That's a name," Mrs. Whiston said, for the second time since we had come outside.

It was probably a good thing that Jefferson had taken some initiative, because Victor had stayed still while everyone else was lining up. Which makes sense. Since he's new, he doesn't know where he's supposed to stand or what he was supposed to do. Although, by the look on his face, it also seems that he's never seen such a process before. Actually, he even jumped a little when Jessica and Jordan shouted out their commands, whereas no one else in Mrs. Whiston's class seemed affected by the volume of their voices. I guess they don't have the Recess Revitalization Foundation at Victor's old school.

"Leaders?" Jessica called out, but not as loudly this time.

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“May lead,” Jefferson replied.

Jessica and Jordan led our class just outside the computer lab and stopped. Mrs. Whiston came to the front of the lines and used her classroom key to open the door. As she did this, Jefferson walked to the front of the lines and inspected each line, carefully. After a moment of tapping his pencil on his chin, he pointed at Jordan’s line. As Jordan led his line into the computer lab, people from his line cheered quietly while people from Jessica’s line groaned quietly. Both were short lived once everyone saw Jefferson put his pencil to the paper.

Once inside the computer lab, everyone knew which station to go to. Everyone except for Victor, who just stood at the front of the room, silently.

“Okay, everyone, please sign-in to Math Munchers while I set Victor up on a computer,” Mrs. Whiston instructed, motioning for Victor to take a seat at the back of the room, where there were three empty stations.

While Mrs. Whiston was helping Victor, an announcement came through the phone’s speaker: “Mrs. Whiston, please call the office. Mrs. Whiston, please call the office.”

It was Principal Martinez’s voice, which caused everyone to whisper. We usually only hear Mrs. Kelley’s or Mr. Ellis’s voice on the intercom. We only ever hear Principal Martinez’s voice at the end of the day on Fridays, when he's making important announcements,

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like which class has perfect attendance for the week, who's been *Caught Being Healthy* or who's done an *Act of Random Kindness*.

While using the phone at the front of the room, Mrs. Whiston turned and looked at me. I know, I know, I should be practicing my mathematics skills on Math Munchers, but sometimes I can be a bit, what's the right word, nosy.

"T.J.," Mrs. Whiston called, after hanging up the phone, "Mr. Martinez wants to see you in his office."

"Oooo," the whole class chimed. Seems they're a bit nosy, too.

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"T.J.!" Principal Martinez greeted me, enthusiastically, with a handshake.

"Principal Martinez," I said, with a little less enthusiasm, since I had *no* idea why he had called me into his office. I mean, I hadn't even gotten into any trouble. Lately.

"Take a seat, T.J.," he instructed, while gesturing to the round table in front of his desk.

"So," I said, a bit confused, "what's up?"

"I know I called you here out of the blue," he began, "but I need your help, T.J."

My help? Why would the principal of the school need *my* help? I mean, he runs the *entire* school. All he has to do is say that there's a new rule, and *everyone* has to follow it. Even the teachers! He must

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have read the confusion on my face because he sat back in his chair in a more relaxed position and began to explain what he meant.

“It’s like this. Mrs. Kelley just added a new student to your class, right?” he asked.

I nodded my head without saying a word.

“Victor has been transferred to this school after being expelled from his old school,” he continued. “In fact, ours is the fourth school he’s been to in the past three months.”

“Whoa!” I said, reacting without really meaning to.

“‘Whoa’ is right,” he responded, “and I’d like to put a stop to that.”

“Stop to what?” I asked, *still* confused as to why I’m here.

“It seems Victor has had a hard time making good friends at his old schools. He always seems to find friends that lead him in the wrong direction,” he continued.

“And that concerns me, because?” I asked, still not completely clear as to what he was getting at.

“Because this seems like *just* the challenge that the T.J. League would enjoy,” he said, *finally* getting to the point.

“I don’t know,” I responded, not too excited about accepting such a mission. But I guess I *could* talk it over with the rest of the guys and see what they think. Who knows, this may end up being the easiest mission we’ve ever had to complete.

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After discussing details about his expectations and my views on the probable outcomes of the mission, Principal Martinez assured me that whatever the outcome of our attempts, he would be grateful. After finally making the executive decision to accept the mission, I mean I *am* the leader of the T.J. League after all, he and I shook hands, to make it official.

By the time I got back to the computer lab, my class was already lining up to go back to class, which means that there's less than ten minutes of school left.

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3 He Said What?

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"A new mission?" Justin asked, as we walked towards the front of the school.

"A new mission," I repeated.

"What *kind* of new mission," Erick asked.

"Making friends with the new kid," I answered, trying to adjust one of my backpack straps.

“With Victor?” Sammy said, more as a statement than a question, while helping me fix my backpack strap. It seems it got twisted when I put it on.

“Yes, Sammy. With Victor,” I confirmed, doing that little wiggle thing that people do to make sure that their backpack is on just right.

“How is that a mission?” Paul asked, scratching his head.

“Well—” I started before Mrs. Kelley began making an announcement over the school’s speaker system.

“Don’t forget boys and girls, if you haven’t paid for your class pictures, you have until this Friday to turn in your money. Cash or money order only. Your parents can also pay online if that is a better option. And remember, you only have to keep the pictures you want. Just turn in what you don’t want, to the office, by this Friday.

“If your parents have decided that they want you to retake your pictures, you *still* have to turn in your picture packet by this Friday. Make up picture day will be in two weeks and that picture is final.

“If your parents just don’t want to keep the pictures, please turn your picture packet back into the office by *this* Friday. After that, they will have to pay for the entire packet, *in full*.

“If your parents have any questions, they can call the office or come in person. Enjoy the rest of your day!”

By the time she finished her announcement, we were already at the front of the school and our parents were calling for us.

“I’ll tell you guys tomorrow!” I promised.

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"He was the *worst* of all of them?" Sheri asked.

"That's what he called himself in another book of the Bible," Teacher Jeff answered. "Saul basically went out of his way to look for, find, and imprison followers of Jesus. Even if he had to travel miles and *miles* away to do it!"

Dang! Talk about your Supervillain! At least all of Batman's enemies were basically from the city he lived in. *Basically*. Of course, I guess there *have* been some villains who've traveled to earth from galaxies far away to try and conquer earth. *Try* being the key word in that sentence.

"But he doesn't stay that way, right?" Alex inquired.

"Can you explain what you mean?" Teacher Jeff asked.

"Well, you just said that he called himself the 'worst' in another book of the Bible, and my dad said that all the books of the Bible were written by men who were chosen by God," Alex clarified.

"That's true," Teacher Jeff acknowledged.

"So, I doubt God would have chosen someone who was the 'worst of them all'. Unless he changed, that is," Alex continued his reasoning.

"That's a very *keen* observation and some rather *ingenious* deduction," Teacher Jeff lauded.

Hold on. I just realized something. You Leaguers probably have *no* idea where I am right now. Especially since I haven't been able to

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share with you some of the important things that have happened since my last adventure. Let me try and keep this short and sweet with as much detail as possible.

It all started when Marcus's church was having a World Children's Day celebration. It was open to *everyone*, including people who *don't* go to his church. It was kind of like a carnival, with food, games, and prizes and even entertainment on a stage. And it was all *free!* Marcus invited me to go with his family and after some assistance from mom, dad agreed to let me go. It was *so* much fun!

On our way home, I asked Marcus if church was *always* this fun. He explained that they didn't have huge celebrations like this one all the time, but that Teacher Jeff made Bible class and learning enjoyable. He then asked me if I wanted to go to church with him the following day. The following day was a Sunday. I told him that I would have to ask my mom and dad, but that it sounded like fun.

That was a few weeks ago. When I had my first ever visit to Marcus' church. Actually, it was my first ever visit to any church. Period. It was kind of exciting on the car ride over, since Marcus had been telling me all these stories of all the cool things he'd learned and done at church. He made it sound just like going to normal school—I know, that probably doesn't sound very fun, but hear me out—it sounded like going to normal school except that *everyone* is nice and feels like family. That they support you and want to see you grow and

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do well. That no one makes fun of you or picks on you. Instead, they say nice things and make you feel good about yourself.

Oops. Short is turning into longer than short and sweet is turning into less sweet than is enjoyable. Let's get back to the present. But first, one more key detail. Today is not Sunday. Today is Thursday. My first *Thursday* ever at church.

"In today's lesson, we will read about Saul's journey to another far away city, to capture and imprison followers of Jesus. Except, Saul is going to meet someone special along the way. Someone who is going to bring Saul to his knees and help him see that there is another option. And that he doesn't have to continue in his hurtful ways," Teacher Jeff shared.

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When we started school the next day, Mrs. Whiston sat Victor in the empty chair next to me and was setting him up with all the necessary classroom supplies, including a tablet, while the rest of us worked on our state packet.

"You'll have to read and sign this agreement before you're allowed to use the school tablets," she explained. "Your screen name is your student number, and your password is your birth date."

I've never understood why the school makes it so easy to sign into the school equipment. I mean, all someone has to do is learn your student number and your birth date and they can pretend to be you.

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Not too wise on the part of the technology leaders at the district if you ask me.

“I know how to log on,” Victor said, rudely. “It’s not like this is the first time I’ve done this.”

I can’t believe it! All Mrs. Whiston is trying to do is be helpful. He doesn’t have to say it like that. He doesn’t have to be so mean.

“Very well,” she said, calmly, taking the freshly signed contract from Victor’s desk and placing it in her file cabinet with everyone else’s contracts. “I think that now is a good time to find out which state each of you will be learning about for your state report.”

Mrs. Whiston pulled out the spinner that we use for Bingo, but instead of balls inside, there are papers. This is going to be interesting.

“Okay, class. I’m going to be pulling out papers from inside this ball spinner,” she explained.

“No, duh,” Victor whispered, loudly enough for me to hear.

Seriously, what’s this guy’s *problem*?

“I’ll be going in number order to make things simple,” she continued. “Victor, as the newest addition to our classroom, you will be number thirty-two.”

This time he didn’t say anything. He just slouched silently, spinning his pencil between his fingers.

It took about ten minutes before everyone knew what state they would have to learn about for their project. I got Idaho. Whoop dee

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doo. Besides growing potatoes, I know *nothing* about Idaho. Somehow, Victor got Hawaii. Beginner's luck, I guess.

"Okay everyone," Mrs. Whiston said, placing the ball spinner back on top of one of the bookshelves, "I will now be passing out a paper that tells you everything that you will need to include in your report. You will need to research your state as part of your daily homework. I will also set aside thirty minutes of class time, each day, so that you can work on your presentation, using your tablets.

"In two weeks, you will have to turn in your written report and do an oral presentation, casting your tablet onto the screen, so that we can see all your hard work. Make sure to include your name and your state on the title screen."

While she passed out the papers, a reminder alarmed on Mrs. Whiston's laptop.

"Oh, my goodness," she said in a panicked voice. "I wasn't expecting to set up a new student in class today, so it totally threw me off my schedule!"

"Well, sor-*ry*," Victor commented.

"Oh, sweetie, it's not your fault," Mrs. Whiston corrected herself, "that reminder just lets us know that it's time for P.E. Jefferson, would you be so kind as to—."

"I would be delighted," Jefferson interjected, before she could finish.

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One of the duties of the Line Monitor is to choose which table lines up first. Sometimes people will just choose their friend's table, but not Jefferson. We all know what he's looking for. The same thing that Mrs. Whiston has been teaching us since kindergarten. He's looking for clean desks, with people sitting up, and looking straight ahead, with their hands folded. And *boy* does he usually take his time choosing.

"We're running a little late right now, so let's try and make it quick," Mrs. Whiston instructed.

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"I think that's the quickest that Jefferson's *ever* chosen the line order," Justin commented, as we waited for the P.E. coach to finish setting up the athletic equipment. Mrs. Whiston has learned that she needs to give Jefferson a couple of extra minutes to choose the line order, compared to everyone else in class, that is.

"Mrs. Whiston *did* tell him to make it quick," I pointed out.

"Hey, guys," Marcus said, with Paul and Erick by his side.

"And girl," Sammy corrected.

"You know what he meant," Erick said, annoyed.

"So, are you going to tell us about the new mission or what?" Justin asked, throwing his hands up.

"Okay, okay," I started, "it's not *my* fault that Mrs. Kelley interrupted me last time."

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“I know, I know,” Justin said, apologetically. “I’m sorry. It’s just that I could barely focus in class because I was trying to figure out what it could be!”

“Well, it’s like this.”

Explaining the new mission took a bit longer than I would have liked since I was once again interrupted, only this time by the P.E. coach. Luckily, today is going to be more of a free day for us, since there is only one coach. *Usually*, there are two coaches. And they *normally* split us up into two groups, and teach us a skill, or have us do exercises that will be part of the state examination at the end of the year. *Today*, we get to choose a station, for fifteen minutes. Then, Coach Red will blow his whistle for us to switch stations. I think I like it much better this way.

“So, all we have to do is be friends with the new kid?” Paul asked.

“Victor,” I corrected.

“Right, Victor,” he corrected himself.

“That’s all,” I assured him.

“That doesn’t sound like much of a mission,” Sammy pointed out.

“That’s what I thought at first,” I said. “But Mrs. Whiston sat him next to me in class and I *already* want to punch him!”

“T.J.!” Marcus exclaimed, a bit surprised. “Everyone deserves a chance. It’s like trying a game that’s not the same. He may be new to

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us, but who knows, he may just be *perfect* T.J. League material!"

"I don't know," Erick said, agreeing with me.

"Come on guys," Paul encouraged us, "there's only one way to find out. Let's go ask him if he wants to join!"

There were still a few minutes in our rotation before Coach Red would blow his whistle for us to switch stations. Until then, we had to wait patiently to ask Victor to join the T.J. League. We're currently at the badminton station and he's at the soccer dribbling station.

After blowing his whistle, Coach Red announced a water break. Everyone rushed to the water fountains while I rushed to Victor.

"Hey!" I said, jogging alongside him.

"Hey," he answered back.

"So, my friends and I wanted to invite you to join our league," I said, as we reached the line for the water fountains.

"League?" he asked, scrunching up his face.

"Yeah," I answered.

"Like your soccer league? Or baseball league?" he questioned.

"Oh, no," I laughed, "I'm *no* good at sports."

"Then what do you mean?" the questions continued.

"The T.J. League," I said proudly.

"'The T.J. League?'" he said, with a tone of confusion. "Isn't *your* name T.J.?"

"Yup, yup!" I answered. "The league is named after me."

"I don't get it," he responded.

SAMPLE

“To make a long story short,” I began, “some of the people in the T.J. League like superheroes from Marvel Comics and some like superheroes from D.C. Comics. So, I started the T.J. League, which allows superheroes from *any* comic universe!”

“And,” he said, motioning with his hands for more information.

“And I make up scenarios and villains that we have to defeat,” I explained. “It helps us to work on our teamwork and problem-solving skills while improving our real time responses to real life situations.”

“So, basically, you play pretend,” Victor pointed out.

“Not really,” I countered.

“But it sounds like it’s all make-believe,” he shot back.

“Not really,” I started, but was interrupted for the third time today.

“And superheroes aren’t even real,” he said, adamantly. “They’re dumb and unrealistic.”

“They are not!” I protested.

“What are you? Five? Sure, they are,” he said, “have you ever heard of a real-life superhero?”

“Well—,” once again I was interrupted, and it is *really* starting to irritate me.

“Of course, you haven’t, because they don’t exist,” Victor said, with a finishing tone.

“That doesn’t mean—.”

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“You need to take your head out of the clouds and grow up,” he ordered, as he took a drink of water and headed back to the field.

I knew that it was my turn to drink water, but I was so frustrated about what Victor had just said, that instead of taking my turn, I just stood there, silently glaring at the back of Victor’s head. After realizing that I wasn’t going to get a drink, everyone just walked around me. ‘Dumb and unrealistic’? ‘Nonexistent’? ‘Grow up’? I can’t believe he said all of those things without even giving the League a chance. This mission is *definitely* going to be more difficult than I first thought.

SAMPLE

4 Not Giving Up!

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“He said what?!” Justin shouted, as we arrived at the hula hoop and jump rope station.

“He said that superheroes were ‘dumb and unrealistic’,” I repeated to everyone.

“He told you ‘take your head out of the clouds and grow up’?” Paul asked.

“Yup, yup,” I answered, picking up a hula hoop.

“What’s *with* this guy?” Justin asked, taking a jump rope. Justin is *really* good at jump roping. He can go fast, go backward, and even do that cross over thingy that boxers do in the movies and on television.

“What kind of mission would it be if it didn’t have a certain level of difficulty?” Sammy asked.

“Yeah,” Marcus agreed, “it would be rather boring if it was too easy.”

“If you say so,” Justin said, sarcastically, as he jumped higher than necessary, spinning his rope three times before landing.

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This may sound strange, but whoever created the P.E., schedule made sure that recess followed immediately afterward. And when I say ‘immediately,’ I mean *immediately*. As soon as fifth grade finishes with P.E., they line up for recess.

Of course, since the T.J. League members are also Future Funmakers, we only get about half of the P.E. time that everyone else gets. It’s because first grade starts recess *during* our P.E. time, and we have to leave early to make sure that we have time to set up the games for the first graders.

When it was finally time for the fifth graders to go to recess, Sammy had made up her mind to try and befriend Victor next. She said that she ‘enjoyed’ a challenge. Well, *good luck* Sammy!

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“Okay,” Erick began, “here are today’s announcements.”

“Announcements! Announcements! Announcements! Yeah!” the fourth, fifth and sixth grade students shouted, while pumping their fists in the air.

“Today, after many requests, we have brought back the Zim-Zam-Zoom Relay,” Paul announced.

“Yay!” many kids cheered.

“Make sure that *all* food is eaten in the snack area and that you clean up after yourselves,” Marcus instructed. “Funmaker John is going to be looking to catch students who are eating healthy.”

About ten kids raised their home prepared snacks, revealing the fruits and vegetables they planned to eat. Funmaker John waved some “Caughtcha Eating Healthy” raffle tickets from behind Marcus.

“Since Coach Red had soccer drills during P.E., we’ve set up a field on the grass with some pennies for anyone interested in playing a game of soccer,” Sammy explained.

“And for our final announcement,” Justin said, loudly, “today, the play structure is for fourth grade only.”

The final announcement brought both cheers and jeers from the fourth, fifth and sixth grade students waiting for their recess to start.

“Tattle tales!” the Future Funmakers called out.

“Don’t prevail!” the students responded.

“Try a game!” the Future Funmakers continued.

“That’s not the same!” the call and response continued.

“Don’t shun!” the Future Funmakers shouted.

“My Fun!” the daily routine finished, as usual.

“Walking feet!” Funmaker John shouted, causing excited students to powerwalk to their areas of interest.

“Hey, Victor,” Sammy called.

“Who’re you?” Victor asked.

“I’m Sammy,” she answered, holding out her right hand. Victor looked down at her hand and then back to her face.

“What’re you doing?” he asked.

“It’s called a handshake,” she explained. “It’s a common gesture extended between two people when meeting for the first time.”

“Must not be *that* common,” Victor commented, beginning to walk towards the soccer field. “No one at my old school did that.”

“Oh,” Sammy said, lowering her hand in disappointment. “Hey Victor!”

“What?” he asked, not stopping to let Sammy catch up with him.

“I noticed that you were pretty good at dribbling a soccer ball,” she pointed out.

“According to you,” he said, seeming uninterested.

“Well, I thought you might want to be a captain for the soccer field,” she explained. “I’m running it, so I can make sure it happens!”

“Eh,” he said, changing his direction, away from the soccer field.

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“Well, if you change your mind,” Sammy started, before Victor waved a dismissive hand as he joined a line at one of the handball courts.

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“Who can give me the answer? Let’s see,” Mrs. Whiston said, taking a deck of cards on her desk.

This deck of cards is no *ordinary* deck of cards. Mrs. Whiston has taken out all of the Jacks, Queens and Kings, so that only the aces, jokers and numbers were left. The jokers stand for zero, and the aces stand for one. We’ve used this deck ever since first grade, when we first started learning to do addition and subtraction.

What Mrs. Whiston does, is she takes the top two cards from the deck and adds, subtracts, or multiplies them. Whatever answer they create, decides who has to answer the question or problem. If the number is too big, she takes the next two cards until the number matches the number of a person in our class.

“Our first card is an eight,” she said, holding up an eight of diamonds. “Next, we have a four. And eight times four is?”

“Thirty-two,” the class replied.

“Right. Now, normally that number would be too high, but since we have a new student,” she explained, gesturing towards Victor, “do you know the answer, Victor?”

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Victor stayed slouched in his chair while looking around the classroom, since everyone's eyes were now on him.

"What're you all *looking* at!" he asked, angrily.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Victor," Mrs. Whiston apologized, "I forgot to ask if you had even learned this yet, at your old school."

"We learned this," he said, now making eye contact with Mrs. Whiston.

"Oh, great!" she said, excitedly.

"That doesn't mean I know the answer," he pointed out.

"Oh," Mrs. Whiston said, in a *completely* different tone.

"My old teacher was trash at teaching math," Victor alleged. "He didn't even *try* to make sure we understood it. As long as the *smart* kids understood it, he was happy."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that," Mrs. Whiston said, with disappointment in her voice. "We do things differently at this school. We even have an after-school homework club every day, except for Wednesdays. Volunteers from the high school next door, and students from the nearby college, offer homework assistance for anyone who needs help with—."

"I never said I *needed* help," Victor interrupted, crossing his arms.

"And I'm not saying that you do," Mrs. Whiston clarified. "I just wanted to let you know, that for every day you go to Homework Club, you get a stamp. And for every stamp card you fill up, you get a

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one-dollar credit for the student store, where you can buy school supplies and other cool things."

"Sounds exciting," he responded, in the most *unexcited* voice I think I've ever heard.

"Very well. Let's see who's next," Mrs. Whiston said, choosing two new cards from her deck to multiply.

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"Anyone sitting here?" Marcus asked.

"Does it *look* like anyone is sitting there?" was Victor's disrespectful response.

"Nope," Marcus answered, placing his lunch tray next to Victor, then gesturing for the rest of us to join him at the table.

"That didn't mean that I *wanted* you to sit there," Victor asserted, visibly irritated that we were all taking a seat at his table.

"So, Victor, what was the coolest thing about your old school?" Marcus asked, taking a tater tot, and dipping it in some ketchup before eating it.

"Well, first of all, the food was better," he answered, pushing his tray away.

"But didn't you go to another school in our district?" Sammy asked.

"Yeah. So?" Victor asked.

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“So, then technically the food would be the same, no matter what school you were at,” she pointed out.

“The *food* might be the same, but at least *our* cafeteria ladies *knew* how to cook it,” he said, harshly. “This chicken sandwich isn’t even *cooked* right. The outside is warm, but the center is still cold!”

“There are multiple reasons that could have happened,” Sammy stated.

“Oh, sure. You *would* say that,” Victor commented.

“What about your favorite subject?” I asked, changing the topic, since Sammy was *visibly* becoming upset at Victor.

“I was the top of my class in everything, except for math,” Victor answered.

“That’s okay. I’m no good at math either,” Paul remarked, holding out his fist across the table.

“What’re you doing?” Victor asked.

“Fist bump. You’re supposed to pound it,” he explained, using his other hand to show the proper way it should be done.

“You guys have some *strange* customs at this school,” Victor observed, opening his chocolate milk.

Marcus took a bite out of his chicken sandwich, then made a face after a couple of chews. “Yo wight. The thenter *ith* thill kind of cold.” Anyone else would have just spit out their food, but not Marcus. Instead of spitting it out, he continued to chew and then swallowed. He has too much manners to spit it out.

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“Must be time to replace the ovens,” Erick said, “who *knows* how old those things are?”

Victor rolled his eyes and then finished his chocolate milk.

“Well, if you ever need any help with math, you can always come to my house after school. I’d be glad to help you!” Marcus offered.

“I think I’ll pass,” Victor said, standing up to toss his leftover food in the trash.

“You have to raise your hand,” Justin said, as a supervision aide blew her whistle at Victor, who just ignored it and threw his trash away, and walked towards the restrooms.

Three Leaguers down. Three more to go.

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5 No Video Games?

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After finishing our lunch, we slowly walked to the Zim-Zam-Zoom Relay, where we could discuss what had just happened and determine what we would do next.

"I can't believe this guy!" Justin said, bothered.

"Seriously!" Erick joined in.

"First he puts down the lunch ladies," Justin said.

"Well, it wasn't the *best* day for lunch," Marcus pointed out.

“And then he shut you down!” Paul commented. “‘I think I’ll pass’. All you were trying to do was offer some help!”

“It’s okay guys. It’s his first day. Change can be difficult,” Marcus said, before running along the painted line on the blacktop, since our team had just lost at Zim-Zam-Zoom.

“He doesn’t seem to like *anything*!” Justin continued to rant.

“He has to like *something*!” Erick said.

“Maybe we just have to keep trying until we find out what that is,” Sammy suggested.

We all stood there, silently thinking, as Marcus continued his way around the painted line, defeating the other team at Zim-Zam-Zoom. He’s even good at *non*-athletic games!

“I’ve got it!” Paul shouted.

“What?!” Justin shouted back.

“Video games! Who doesn’t like video games?” he asked, excitedly.

Just then, Marcus reached the other team’s base, causing Erick to dash along the painted line.

“That’s *perfect*!” Justin shouted, again, thrilled that Paul had thought up such a great idea.

“It’s fool proof,” Paul remarked. “I’ll tell my mom that you guys are coming over on Saturday and we can have a video game tournament.”

“Don’t you have to ask your mom first?” I asked.

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“Nah,” he said, motioning with his hand, “we never do anything on Saturdays.”

“Saturday is *cleaning* day at my house,” Marcus said, rejoining us in line.

“Hey! No cutting!” a fourth grader yelled at Marcus.

“Dude! He just got us a point!” Justin yelled back.

“So! I’m going to tell Funmaker John!” she said, raising her hand.

“Um, why are you raising your hand?” Paul asked. “We’re not in class.”

“Funmaker John!” she called, across the blacktop.

“Okay, okay!” Justin said. “Sheesh!”

Marcus walked to the back of the line.

“So, as I was saying,” Paul continued, as Sammy took her turn at Zim-Zam-Zoom Relay, “my mom won’t care. I’ll just make sure that I get all my chores done before lunch and you guys can come over for video games and pizza!”

“Pizza!” Justin said, enthusiastically doing a fist pump.

“So, when are you going to invite Victor?” I asked, preparing myself to run, in case Sammy lost.

“Tomorrow,” he said, not as confidently as before.

“Why tomorrow?” Justin asked.

“Well, I have to make *sure* that my mom doesn’t have anything planned for this Saturday,” he explained.

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“But you just said that you *never* do anything on Saturdays,” I pointed out.

“I know, I know. But I still have to ask *permission*, ya know,” he said.

“I get it,” Justin responded. “Tomorrow it is.”

“Tomorrow it is!” I said, while running along the painted line.

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When we got back in class after lunch, Mrs. Whiston gave us time to work on our tablets for our state projects.

“I want you to work on your title page and prepare at least three slides for your information and pictures,” she instructed. “I will be at my desk for anyone who needs help. Remember, this is not a group project, so I expect zero volume.”

She turned on her overhead screen, which revealed that she had already turned on the Dynamic Distinguisher app. You know, the one that our Music Hall teacher had shown us in class. We knew that anything above double piano meant disciplinary action would be taken.

This week Joseph and Sarah are the Technology Leaders. They both walked to the charging station and began to pass out tablets by table groups. I pulled out the packet that Mrs. Whiston had passed out to us earlier. Page two has example slides from past students. I’ve

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decided to circle the ones I like, so that I can copy them, except with my own information.

I know what you're thinking, 'that's cheating.' Not really. It's called 'working smarter, not harder.' At least that's what my dad says. He's always telling me not to 'reinvent the wheel.' That and a lot of other things. He has a lot of what he calls, 'Papa's Proverbs.'

"Is that a name?" Mrs. Whiston asked, since some people at table five had begun to whisper.

Just then, Joseph handed me my tablet. After unlocking it, I opened the Slide Presentation app that we're using for our state project. As I started to setup my title screen, the classroom phone rang.

"Mrs. Whiston's class, student speaking," Shanika answered. "Yes, one moment please." Shanika placed her hand over the phone's speaker before calling Mrs. Whiston over. "It's Mr. Anderson. He's asking for you."

Mrs. Whiston stood up from her desk and reminded the class that the Dynamics Distinguisher was still on and that she still expected zero volume from everyone.

"Mrs. Whiston," she said, in her 'phone answering' voice. "Yes. Yes. Oh, my goodness! Yes! We'll be right there."

She quickly hung up the phone, hurried to her desk to turn off the Dynamics Distinguisher app, and her overhead screen, all while

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everyone, except Jefferson, stared at her. Once Jefferson begins working, he is *very* difficult to distract.

"Today is *not* my day!" Mrs. Whiston declared. "I forgot that Mr. Anderson had to change our Weekly Challenge to today, since he will have a sub tomorrow."

Mr. Anderson's class and our class usually have our Weekly Challenge on Fridays, just before school gets out. We normally bring our backpacks with us and continue our challenge until the bell rings. This week's challenge is a geography challenge. Since our classes have been studying the state's locations, capitals, and nicknames, it's no surprise.

"This week's challenge will require students to start behind this chalk line," Mr. Anderson explained, pointing at the line to his left. "Mrs. Whiston or I will call out the name of a state, the capital of a state or the nickname of a state. Whoever is at the front of each line, will have to run to the corresponding state, on the map of the United States painted on the blacktop."

Our blacktop boasts a variety of things painted on it. Five different four-square games. Three different volleyball courts. Two full basketball courts and two half courts. Two large circles. One with numbers up to thirty and one with the letters of the alphabet. A snake with different two letter consonant or vowel combinations. But most interesting, is a complete map of the United States, including Alaska and Hawaii.

SAMPLE

“Whatever class gets to the correct state first, gets a point for their team!” Mr. Anderson said, excitedly. “Does anyone have any questions?”

Victor raised his hand.

“Yes, Victor?” Mrs. Whiston said.

“Do I *have* to play?” he asked.

“Oh, I’m sorry, again. Had you learned your states and their capitals at your old school?” she answered his question with another question.

“I know them. This just seems like a waste of time,” he commented, crossing his arms, and looking away.

“‘Class participation makes up ten percent of your overall grade,’” Jefferson quoted Mrs. Whiston, from the beginning of the school year.

“That’s correct, Jefferson,” Mrs. Whiston praised. “I can’t force you to participate, Victor, but it *will* negatively affect your overall grade. The choice is yours.”

Victor shrugged his shoulders and walked to the back of our class’s line. I noticed Paul move from his place in line to the back of *his* class’s line. Seems he’s decided not to wait until tomorrow to invite Victor over for video games and pizza. I hope his mom says yes when he asks her!

“Hey, Victor!” Paul said, holding out his right hand in a fist.

Victor looked at Paul’s hand and then straight into Paul’s eyes.

SAMPLE

“Oh, right, no fist bumps,” Paul said, remembering our earlier encounter with Victor. “So, the guys and I are getting together on Saturday for some video games and pizza. I was wondering if, maybe, you’d want to join us?”

“Video games?” Victor asked.

“Yeah. Some one on one. Some team games and probably a tournament or two,” Paul explained. “And don’t forget the pizza!”

“I don’t think you understand,” Victor said, “I’ve never played video games before.”

“What!” Paul shouted.

“Is everything okay, Paul?” Mr. Anderson asked, as everyone had turned around to see what was going on.

“Yes, Mr. Anderson,” Paul answered. “I just can’t believe that Gerald lost that one!”

“It’s just a game, Paul,” Mr. Anderson reminded him.

“To you maybe!” Justin said, excitedly.

“Is that a name?” Mrs. Whiston asked.

“No, ma’am. Sorry, ma’am,” Justin apologized.

“Thanks, Justin,” Paul whispered, as soon as everyone turned back around. “Now, back to you. You’ve *never* played video games. As in, never *ever*?”

“Nope,” was Victor’s simple answer.

“Not even on your tablet or phone?” Paul asked.

“Don’t have any,” he answered.

SAMPLE

Wow, Paul mouthed, while looking back towards the front of his line. He couldn't believe that *anyone* had *never* played video games before. Video games were a *major* part of Paul's life. He even boasted, for like a week, when he beat the high score on some arcade game, at some random diner, on this deserted highway when his family went on vacation to the Grand Canyon.

"So, what're you going to do now?" I asked, as we grabbed our backpacks to walk home.

"Don't worry, I'll think of something," was Paul's response, as he stared off into the distance.

"Look what I've got!" Paul whisper shouted the next morning, while holding his backpack open for all of us to look inside.

"You brought your handheld?!" Erick said, in disbelief.

"Shhh!" Paul hushed him. "I brought it so that Victor can see how *awesome* video games are!"

"What if you get caught?" Sammy asked.

"I won't!" he answered.

"How do you figure that?" Marcus asked.

"It's Fun Friday in my class," Paul explained.

"So?" I said.

"So, I can just say that I brought it for Fun Friday," Paul said, confidently.

SAMPLE

“There’s one major flaw in your plan, Kemosabe,” Sammy commented.

“What’s that?” Justin asked.

“*You* are not in Victor’s *class*,” she told Paul, with an air of disbelief.

“I *know* that!” Paul said, defensively.

“Then how are you going to get Victor to play it?” Sammy asked.

Paul didn’t say anything this time. He merely pointed at his stomach. I have to admit that even *I* have no idea what he’s doing. When we all looked at him and each other with confused faces, he just pointed more intently.

“I don’t get it,” Justin said, scratching his head.

“My hoodie pocket!” he whisper shouted, then sighed, shaking his head, as if we were supposed to instantly understand what he was trying to say.

“What *about* your hoodie pocket?” Erick asked.

“I’m going to take my handheld to recess and show it to Victor!” Paul said, with a large smile on his face.

“And *where* exactly do you plan to do this without getting caught?” Sammy continued to interrogate.

“Behind the Big Tree,” Paul said, in a ‘duh’ kind of voice.

“Okay. Okay,” Justin said, as if approving his plan.

SAMPLE

“What about our Future Funmaker responsibilities?” Erick asked.

“I’m not scheduled for today,” Paul said, zipping up his backpack.

“Well, good luck,” I said, heading for the breakfast line but not before patting Paul on the back.

SAMPLE

SIX

You're Missing Out!

‘Little minds’? I typed after reading Paul’s message on my school tablet. Paul had spent the time his teacher had given his class to work on *their* state project to explain what happened at recess.

It seems that Paul had convinced Victor to join him at the Big Tree, *after* a little bit of begging. Once they got behind the Big Tree, Paul instantly pulled out his handheld video game, to show it to Victor.

SAMPLE

Please excuse this interruption of your regularly scheduled adventure: I, T.J., am not encouraging anyone to sneak valuables to school in their backpack. Nor am I suggesting that hiding them in your pockets to take out to recess is a good idea. And I am especially not saying that hiding behind a tree to do things that go against school rules is okay. In fact, I am saying the exact opposite of all those things. Just in case you try to tell your parents or teachers that you got the idea from me. There's no way I'm getting in trouble with my mom for something you decided to do. Like make bad choices.

We now return you to your regularly scheduled adventure:
"What's that?" Victor asked.

"A video game. What's it look like? Just give it a try," Paul instructed, after turning it on. "I've loaded one of the easiest games there is. All you have to do is get the frog to the other side of the screen without getting hit by anything or falling into the water. Easy peasy, no need to get wheezy!"

"I don't think so," Victor said, turning around and walking back towards the play structure.

"Why not?" Paul called after him, immediately putting his handheld back into his large hoodie pocket.

"It's nothing," was Victor's response.

"What do you mean?" Paul asked, after catching up with him.

"It's nothing," Victor repeated, but a bit stronger this time.

"If it's nothing, then just say it," Paul ordered.

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“Okay, you asked for it,” he said, stopping in his tracks and looking Paul in the eyes. His next words were spoken slowly and precisely, to make sure that Paul *fully* understood what he was saying. “Vi-de-o game-s are for peo-ple with lit-tle mind-s.”

After making his declaration, he continued to walk towards the play structure, leaving Paul stuck in time, not knowing how to react. ‘Little minds?’ How could he have said that?

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“So, I guess that’s a ‘no’ to video games and pizza tomorrow?” Justin commented, as we played foursquare.

“Aw, say it isn’t so, Paul. Say it isn’t so,” Erick begged. “I already told my mom about it.”

“Oh, we are *definitely* still on for video games and pizza,” Paul said, confidently.

“You’re a life saver!” Erick said, relieved. “My little brother has a birthday party to go to tomorrow and I do *not* feel like hanging out with five-year-olds.”

“Man! Everything we try seems to fail!” I said, strongly.

“This mission is *definitely* harder than we originally thought it would be,” Marcus noted.

We all played foursquare in silence for the next few moments. Until Justin spoke, that is.

“Guess I’m the only one left,” he observed.

SAMPLE

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I’m the only one he hasn’t turned down,” he explained.

“He hasn’t turned *me* down,” Erick pointed out.

“You also haven’t tried,” Sammy pointed out.

“Not for a *lack* of trying!” he corrected, “I just haven’t had the chance!”

“So, what’s your idea?” Marcus asked Justin, who had begun stroking his chin.

“Let’s see. T.J. already tried inviting him to join the T.J. League,” Justin said, counting with his fingers.

“I offered to let him be soccer captain during recess,” Sammy joined in.

“I offered my house for homework help, instead of going to Homework Club,” Marcus said, after getting Sammy out.

“And now we know he doesn’t like video games,” Paul finished up.

“Hmmm,” Justin said, beginning to stroke his chin again. “So, *technically* he never turned down sports. He just rejected your offer. Right?”

“Right,” Sammy answered.

“Maybe it was just that a *girl* asked him. No offense!” he followed up quickly, by holding his hands in front of him, since Sammy seemed visibly offended.

“Yeah, sure,” she said, irritated.

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“It’s just that some people are brought up thinking that girls aren’t any good at sports,” Justin explained himself.

“That *is* true,” Marcus defended. “There was a girl on my old soccer team, and the guys on the other team used to laugh at us as soon as they saw her. They would usually say some mean things, too. But they usually got really quiet as soon as they realized how good she really was.”

“See, I wasn’t *trying* to be rude. I was just saying that maybe if a guy asked him to play some sports, he might be more willing to join,” Justin said, getting out, since he wasn’t paying enough attention.

“If you say so,” Sammy caved.

“Then it’s settled,” I agreed, taking over Justin’s square. “Justin will try next. And hopefully he has more luck than the rest of us have had.”

Justin immediately left the foursquare area to find Victor.

“So, how’s your day going?” Justin asked Victor, when he finally found him.

“I’ve had better,” Victor answered, not giving Justin much attention.

“Well, maybe I can help make it better!” Justin said, excitedly.

“And how do you plan to do that, exactly?” Victor asked, still walking without paying much attention to Justin.

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“Why not join me for a game of basketball? I need a teammate for two on two!” Justin said, placing himself in front of Victor, forcing eye contact.

“Basketball?” he said, disinterested.

“Yeah, basketball,” Justin said, motioning towards the basketball court where two on two was set up.

“I don’t know. I don’t really feel like getting my hands all dirty,” Victor said, walking around Justin.

“What about soccer?” Justin asked, stepping in front of Victor again.

“What *about* soccer?” Victor asked.

“Sammy said that you were good during P.E., yesterday,” he explained.

“So?” Victor continued.

“So, let’s go kick some soccer butt!” Justin said, kicking an invisible soccer ball.

“Can’t. Just got new shoes,” he said, pointing at his pristine shoes, then walked around Justin again.

“Okay. I can understand that,” Justin said, walking alongside Victor. “How about Badminton? It’s the newest game to the school. No dirty hands and no dirty shoes!”

“Badminton?” Victor asked. “What’s that?”

“It’s a mix between tennis and volleyball. Instead of hitting a volleyball with your hands and getting them all dirty, you hit a birdie

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with a small tennis racket," Justin said, miming the motions he was explaining.

"'Birdie?'" he asked.

"Yeah. It's a little foam ball attached to some feathers," Justin explained.

"'Feathers?'" Victor said, in a confused tone.

"Well, not *real* feathers. They're plastic," Justin said.

"Sounds boring," Victor said.

"How about hula hoop tag?" Justin suggested.

"Don't feel like getting sweaty," he responded.

"Handball?" Justin asked.

Victor didn't say anything. He just held up his hands.

"Oh, right. Dirty hands," Justin said. "Zim-Zam-Zoom Relay!"

"Are you even serious?" Victor asked.

"What?" Justin asked.

"That's just a game of chance. I might as well take up gambling!" Victor pointed out.

"Well, I know you like soccer. Is that your favorite sport?" Justin asked.

"I don't have a favorite sport," he answered.

"Oh, I get it. It's hard for me to choose, too. They're all just so much fun!" Justin said.

"That's not what I meant," Victor corrected.

"Oh. What *did* you mean?" Justin asked.

SAMPLE

“Sports are overrated,” Victor began. “Just because you can play some game better than others, you get paid millions of dollars.”

“That’s not exactly—,” Justin started.

“Take baseball for example. If you can hit a ball and get on base once out of every three attempts, you’re considered a great batter. That’s only thirty three percent,” Victor explained.

“You also have to—,” Justin tried to interject.

“Just imagine only getting a thirty three percent on a homework assignment. Or a test. Or a project!” Victor said passionately. “You’d fail!”

“Okay. Okay. What would *you* like to do?” Justin asked, hoping to get an idea of what *Victor* liked to do. He figured that even if it was something that he didn’t really enjoy, it would be worth it to Try A Game That’s Not The Same.

“How much do you know about the Einstein Rosenberg bridge?” Victor asked, finally stopping, and looking Justin in the eyes.

“The what?” Justin asked.

“That’s what I thought,” Victor said, continuing to walk, while Justin stayed behind.

“The Einstein rosebush fridge? What in the world is that?!”

SAMPLE

7 But Why Not?

SAMPLE

“I think you mean the Einstein Rosenberg bridge,” Sammy corrected Justin. “It’s a theory that states—.”

“Whatever!” Justin rebutted. “All I know is that he turned down *every* recess activity the school has to offer! And when I asked him what *he* wanted to do, he asked if I knew about that Einstein rosebush thing.”

“Einstein Rosenberg bridge,” Sammy repeated.

“Whatever!” Justin shouted, throwing his hands up in the air.

“I guess that just leaves me,” Erick said, not sounding too excited.

“Hey, you never know. Maybe you’ll be the one who knows how to get his attention.

“I sure hope so!”

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Normally, we have Music Hall on Thursdays, but our music teacher had to reschedule us because of the upcoming, district wide, earthquake drill. Emergency drills usually only last five to fifteen minutes, depending on what kind of drill it was.

Fire drills are short. Once we hear the fire drill bell, we quietly, and calmly, line up outside of our classroom, while one of the Emergency Drill monitors grabs the doorstop and makes sure that our classroom door is propped open. The other monitor grabs the Emergency Bin – which is basically a trashcan on wheels, filled with emergency supplies – and rolls it to the back of the line. Our class then walks out to our designated spot on the field. Once every class has turned in their attendance report, the ‘All Clear’ bell sounds and we head back to class.

Earthquake drills take a little more time. When we hear the earthquake drill bell, we quietly, and calmly, secure ourselves under our desks or chairs, and wait for the fire drill bell to sound. We

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usually have to wait a minute or two before that happens. Besides that, everything is the same as the fire drill.

Last year's district wide earthquake drill was *completely* different. It was an earthquake drill, but last time we had scenarios that staff, and students, had to play out. Some staff and students were 'injured', or 'stuck' in a classroom, or 'under rubble'. One kid was 'too scared' to leave the classroom. One second grader, at least I *think* she was in second grade, even got to take a ride in the school's wheelchair, because her leg was 'broken.'

Anyways. Because next Thursday's drill will last like forty-five minutes, we have to combine with Mr. Anderson's class for Music Hall. It's not that bad, actually. We've done it before. No biggie.

"Okay, class," Mrs. Whiston said, before heading to Music Hall, "remember, I'm going to be looking for good choices and zero volume during Music Hall. Every time Mrs. Jordan has to say someone's name or redirect our class, that will be a point taken away from our classroom total."

"What if it's the same person over and over?" Jessica asked.

"Every time," Mrs. Whiston repeated.

"That's not fair!" Shanika protested. "The whole class shouldn't be punished for *one* person's bad choices."

"If it's the same person over and over, then they'll get to sit next to me for the remainder of the class," Mrs. Whiston explained. "And remember, if you have to sit next to me, that means that you'll have to

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fill out a Corrected Behavior sheet and get it signed by a parent or guardian."

Corrected Behavior sheets are sheets of red paper stapled together. Your name and date go at the top of each page. On the first page you have to fill in the following blanks: *Inappropriate Behavior I Displayed, What Led Up To My Behavior,* and *3 Choices That Would Have Been Better Than The One I Made.* At the bottom, your parent or guardian has to print their name, sign it and date it. On the second page, you have to write an apology to whomever it was that your 'inappropriate behavior' was directed at.

And that's not the end of it. You lose your recess the following day. And if you don't bring back your Corrected Behavior sheets the next day, *signed*, you lose the next day's recess, too! And the process continues until you bring them back. Signed.

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"Who remembers what we did last week?" Mrs. Jordan asked, scanning the room for raised hands. "Marley."

"We learned about how without math, we couldn't have music," Marley recollected. Marley is the smartest girl in Mr. Anderson's class.

"Correct," Mrs. Jordan praised. "And why is that? Jefferson."

"Because we get our names for musical notes from the fractional name that they represent in mathematics," Jefferson

SAMPLE

explained. I think.

“Correct. But how can we say that more plainly?” Mrs. Jordan asked. “Marcus.”

“It’s like pie,” he began. “A whole note is like a whole pie.”

“That’s right,” Mrs. Jordan commended, while drawing a circle on the board.

“And if I cut that pie in *half*, I now have two *half* pieces,” Marcus continued, as Mrs. Jordan drew a line inside the circle, making two equal halves. “That’s where we get the name *half note*.”

“Who can continue from here?” Mrs. Jordan asked. “Josephine.”

“If we cut those pieces in half, we now have *four* pieces. If we eat *one* piece of the pie, we’ve eaten one fourth, or one *quarter*. Which is where we get the name *quarter note.*” she explained.

“Very well explained,” Mrs. Jordan said, drawing what Josephine had said. “Let’s do one more. Yes, T.J.”

“If we cut each quarter piece in half, we now have *eight* pieces,” I said, waiting for Mrs. Jordan to draw it on the board.

“You may continue,” Mrs. Jordan permitted.

“Thank you. If I eat one piece of the apple pie, I’ve eaten one *eighth* of the pie. One *eighth.* Eighth *note*,” I concluded.

“Great job guys!” Mrs. Jordan said, excitedly. “Now since we don’t have enough instruments for *everyone* to use today, I’ve decided that we’re going to do something different.”

SAMPLE

This caused most of the people in Mr. Anderson's and Mrs. Whiston's class to 'aw.'

"I know. I know. I'm such a terrible person," Mrs. Jordan said, in a pouting voice, as if talking to a baby or little person. "But I guess that means that I brought these for nothing."

What Mrs. Jordan held up for everyone to see *immediately* changed our jeers to cheers!

"Okay. Okay. Let's see. I like the way that Jeremiah is controlling his body," Mrs. Jordan pointed out. Everyone quickly sat up straight, folded their hands in their laps and listened quietly.

"Great job guys. So, I know we normally use these to play a game with just one class," Mrs. Jordan began, "but today, I'm going to change things up to make it a bit more fun."

You're probably wondering what in the world Mrs. Jordan held up in her hand that made everyone get so excited. And you yourself probably wouldn't normally get excited over such things. But *you* don't know Mrs. Jordan. She knows how to make things that are normally boring, into things you can't *believe* you're enjoying!

Mrs. Jordan held up flash cards in her hand. Usually, she would break our class up into four equal groups. At least as equally as she could. And we would play the Flash Card game. But since we had *two* classes, she *did* change things up a bit. She combined the Flash Card game with Steal the Bacon.

SAMPLE

Each class lined up against opposite sides of the room. With a helper from each class, she lined one set of flash cards for each class, in the center of the room. Then, she called out a Music Symbol, Letter Name, Dynamic or Tempo. Lastly, she called out a number and the person with that number had to run to their set of flash cards, find it, and hold it up as quickly as they could. Whoever held up the *correct* answer first, scored a point for their class.

Before we started, Mrs. Jordan made sure that Victor had music at his old school. After rudely telling her that he 'already knew all of this,' the game began.

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"One point, T.J.! *One point!*" Justin repeated over and over on our way out of school. Our class had lost by 'one point.' Actually, we had to have a tie breaker. Mrs. Jordan let each class choose a representative for the last point. We chose Jefferson, of course, and Mr. Anderson's class chose Marley. Unfortunately, Marley was just a *little* bit quicker at finding the correct flash card for her team.

"Get over it," Sammy ordered.

"I know what I'm going to do," Erick said, out of nowhere.

"Going to do?" I asked.

"To get on Victor's good side," he said, excitedly.

"What're you going to do?" Marcus asked.

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“I noticed at the end of Music Hall, when Mrs. Jordan was playing the High Five Song, Victor was doing a little dance,” he explained.

“A little dance?” Paul asked.

“Yeah,” Erick answered. “It wasn’t much, but I noticed it. And he has *good* rhythm!”

“So… what’re you going to do?” I asked, still not exactly catching on to what Erick was thinking.

“I’m going to ask him to be my partner for the Annual Dance Off!” he said, jumping up and down enthusiastically, then busting a couple of moves.

“I don’t see how a ‘little dance’ and ‘good rhythm’ is going to turn into a pledge to win the Annual Dance Off,” Sammy said, unenthusiastically.

“Why do you have to be such a downer!” Erick said.

“I’m just saying, we’ve already tried the things we *thought* he liked,” Sammy said, defensively. “What makes you think trying something we’re not even *sure* he likes is going to work?”

“Because it has to,” Erick said, confidently.

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“Blind? As in can’t see?”

“Yes, Carson. Blind as in can’t see,” Teacher Jeff answered. “But he wouldn’t stay that way for more than three days.”

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“What do you *mean* he wouldn’t stay that way? You’re either blind or you’re not!” Carson continued.

“He *could* just get Lasik eye surgery,” Trang suggested.

“I don’t think that technology existed back then,” Marcus pointed out.

“I can confirm that,” Teacher Jeff agreed, holding his index finger up.

“So how in the *world* is he supposed to get his *sight* back?” Carson asked.

“Yeah. If Lasik didn’t exist, were there any *other* ways they could heal his eyes?” Marta asked, holding both hands in front of her.

Teacher Jeff stayed silent while leaning forward, causing the room to go silent and all of us to lean toward him. Then he whispered. “To be continued.”

“No!”

“C’mon!”

“Really!”

“Just *tell* us already!”

“If that clock is correct, we still have fifteen minutes of class.”

Teacher Jeff smiled and walked back to his Bible on the music stand. He then lifted his Bible with both hands, which was his universal sign for ‘let’s get a readin’.

As we read on, we learned that although *every* Jew was terrified of Saul, it took just *one* man to make a change. *One* person going

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against *everything* his heart and mind were telling him. Just *one* obedient soul to make a difference. A difference he could *never* expect. And it all started with *one* act of compassion. Toward an enemy.

SAMPLE

8 Not Even Bowling?

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“First comment!” Erick shouted, after writing his name on Paul’s leg cast.

“I think you mean ‘first name’,” Sammy corrected.

“You know what I mean!” Erick clapped back.

“So how mad was your mom?” I asked.

“Let’s just say that we won’t be having any video game and pizza get togethers any time soon,” Paul answered, as Marcus took

the marker from Erick to write his name on Paul's cast.

"So, you still think the whole Dance Off idea is going to work?" I asked Erick, who had shared more details with us, about his plan to get on Victor's good side, while at Paul's house this past Saturday.

"It'll work. Just trust me," he said.

"Planning another way to stalk me?" came Victor's voice, from behind us, as we stood up to walk toward our class lines, causing Erick to scream.

"Stalk you?" Paul asked.

"You don't think that I've noticed?" came Victor's next question.

"What *are* you talking about?" Justin answered his question with another question.

"Ever since T.J. invited me to join your little imaginary team. Tried to be all *friendsy*. Ever since then, you've come to me, one by one, trying to be my friend," Victor called us out. "Everyone, except for you."

"And what's wrong with trying to be your friend?" Erick asked.

"It assumes that I *need* friends," Victor answered.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Sammy asked.

"Like what?" he asked back.

"The fact that *you've* assumed our attempts to be friendly with you were actually attempts to become your friend," Sammy rationalized.

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“Isn’t that what you were *trying* to do?” he continued to interrogate.

“Would that be so bad?” I asked, a bit offended.

“I don’t need anyone feeling sorry for me just because I’m the new kid,” Victor said, rudely.

“It’s sad how often kindness gets interpreted incorrectly,” Marcus said, backing up Sammy.

“What?” Victor asked, seeming genuinely confused, for the first time since he’d come to our school.

“If you saw someone drop their books and decided to help pick them up, would that necessarily mean you were trying to become their friend?” Sammy asked.

“Or if you saw an old lady, carrying a large bag, waiting to cross the street, and you decide to carry the bag for her, are you attempting to become friends with her?” Marcus asked.

“Yeah, and what if—.” Justin was interrupted by the morning bell, giving Victor the perfect chance to walk away.

“Hey! We’re not done!” Paul called to Victor. He didn’t respond.

“Man, I can’t *stand* that guy!” Justin said, through clenched teeth.

“I think he’s on to us,” Sammy commented, sarcastically.

“I don’t care, I’m still going to ask him,” Erick stated, assertively.

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“Don’t forget that we will be visiting the aquarium tomorrow, so if you haven’t already turned in your permission slip, make sure you have it with you tomorrow morning,” Mrs. Whiston reminded the class. “No permission slip equals no field trip.”

I’m just glad our field trip is scheduled for a Tuesday. If the field trip had been planned for today, I wouldn’t be able to go. I’ve been so focused on Operation New Kid that I *completely* forgot to have mom sign my permission slip!

“Now, use the next twenty minutes to continue working on your state project. Your rough draft is due on Friday. Both your written portion and your slide presentation,” Mrs. Whiston said, turning on her Dynamic Distinguisher app, before taking a seat at her desk.

Thankfully, mom’s been helping me make sure that my spelling is correct, so I’m almost done with my written portion. I’m just going to use the index cards we’ve prepared to make my slide presentation.

“*What*?” Victor said, just a moment or two after turning on his tablet.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Seems your friend didn’t get the hint,” he said, shoving his tablet in my face.

It was a message from Erick. It seems he decided to message Victor through his tablet instead of talking with him face to face. It

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was a message with a flyer for the Annual Dance Off as an attachment.

“Saw your moves during the High Five Song on Friday. How about me and you show this school what dancing is supposed to look like?” I whispered.

“Bad judgment *and* bad grammar,” Victor whispered, loudly.

“Huh?” I said, handing him back his tablet.

“‘Me and you’,” he said. “It’s supposed to say, ‘how about you and *I* show this school what dancing is supposed to look like’.”

“So, what do you say?” I asked Victor.

“Say about *what*?” he asked.

“The Dance Off, duh?” I answered.

“Is that a name?” Mrs. Whiston asked, looking up from the pile of papers she was grading.

I pointed at my tablet and then at Victor’s tablet. He gave me a ‘what are you doing?’ look. I opened the messenger app on my tablet.

Let’s talk on our tablets so we don’t get in trouble, I typed, then pressed send. A push notification showed up on Victor’s tablet.

There’s nothing to talk about, he responded.

But what about the Dance Off? Are you going to do it? I messaged back.

I wouldn’t do that idiotic Dance Off if you paid *me!* He typed, then hit send with a ‘this conversation is over,’ finger push and look

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on his face. Too bad I've decided I'm terrible at reading finger pushes and faces.

Why? Are you scared? I messaged him, with an emoji to match.

I'm not going to acknowledge your last message with a response, he answered back.

Um, you sorta just did, I typed with a crying laughter emoji to go with it.

You're such an ignoramus, he typed back, with a gif of a monkey picking its nose and eating what he picked.

Just give me one good reason why you won't do it, I messaged, with an gif of someone scratching their chin.

Dance contests are just like sports. They don't prove your intelligence or how successful you'll be in life, he answered, followed by an image of 'The End' on a theater screen.

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"Of *course,* they don't 'prove your intelligence,' or 'how successful you'll be in life'," Erick said, as we set up the playground equipment for recess. "They're just meant to be fun! Doesn't he understand the concept of fun?!"

"I'm starting to think he doesn't," Marcus said, as he finished placing the cones for dodgeball.

"That makes us oh for six," Sammy pointed out, carrying hula hoops to the Hula Hoop Tag zone. "I've never gotten a zero percent

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before. It feels gross!"

"It doesn't matter how many times you fall," I said, tripping over the jump ropes I was carrying. "What matters is how many times you get up after falling."

"Um, can Kemosabe please explain his '*wisdom*' for us *non*-genius types," Justin said, sarcastically.

"He means that as long as we don't give up, the mission can still be successful," Marcus clarified.

"Ohhh," Justin said, giving me a double thumbs up and a sideways smile.

"Good thing I have another idea," Marcus said, closing the bottom half of the equipment room door.

"What idea?" Erick asked.

"Yesterday, when we got home from church, Daniel said his youth leader announced that they're going to be having a cosmic bowling Fun Friday next Friday," he explained.

"But isn't that only for middle schoolers?" I asked.

"Normally, you would be right," Marcus concurred. "But don't forget, Daniel's in middle school."

"And?" Justin asked.

"And Larry said they could invite family or friends," Marcus answered.

"Who's Larry?" Erick asked.

SAMPLE

“The youth leader,” Marcus said, just as Funmaker John blew his whistle to call us into our pre-recess huddle.

“So, when were you going to invite *us*?” I asked, as we walked towards Funmaker John.

“Yeah. I’m pretty sure we fall under the ‘*friends’* category,” Sammy said, sarcastically.

“I was going to invite you!” Marcus protested.

“Uh huh, sure,” Justin commented.

“Why do you think I mentioned it!” Marcus said, throwing his hands up.

“I don’t know,” Erick said, mockingly.

“Really! I was!” Marcus continued, not realizing that we were all messing with him.

“Okay, Future Funmakers. Let’s remember that we have to keep our eyes extra open today, since Paul’s injured his leg,” Funmaker John instructed.

“*Injured*?” I asked.

“I think you mean *broke*,” Justin said.

“Either way, we all have to be on top of our game, today,” Funmaker John said, as the first class began lining up for recess.

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“Ever been bowling?” Marcus tried to ask casually, when fourth, fifth and sixth grade finally came out for recess.

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“Yeah, but not by choice,” was Victor’s response.

“What about cosmic bowling?” Marcus followed up.

“What *about* cosmic bowling?” Victor asked, trying to increase his distance from Marcus.

“Have you ever been *cosmic* bowling?” Marcus clarified.

“No. What’s ‘cosmic bowling’?” Victor asked.

“It’s just like regular bowling, except they turn down the house lights, and turn on the dance style lights, and play fun music,” Marcus explained.

“Whoopie,” Victor said, indifferently, while shaking his hands in the air.

“I didn’t get to the best part,” Marcus continued, “unlimited pizza, wings and potato wedges!”

“What? No soda?” Victor asked mockingly.

“Actually, it’s soda, sweet tea or lemonade,” Marcus clarified, “your choice.”

“And how much does this cost,” Victor asked, feigning interest, but Marcus didn’t notice.

“No cost!” he said, excitedly. “Guests are free!”

“Interesting,” Victor responded.

“So, what time should I tell my mom to pick you up?” Marcus said, feeling a great deal of excitement. Victor had turned everyone else down and he was *so* close to succeeding!

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“Never,” Victor answered, in a tone that sent Marcus’ feelings of elation straight into the ground.

“But—,” Marcus started.

“You didn’t think that I was *actually* interested, did you?” Victor said, with a slight chuckle.

“Well, if you change your mind—,” Marcus began.

“I won’t,” Victor said, callously.

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NINE

You're Not Nice

SAMPLE

“Whoa. That’s cold,” Paul said, as we ate our lunch.

“Yo, put me down!” Justin said, excitedly, “I’m about to set an all-time record for the most free wings eaten during a cosmic bowling session!”

“Actually, it would be ‘the most wings eaten during a cosmic bowling session’ for ten dollars,” Marcus corrected Justin.

“But you said that guests were *free*!” Justin reminded him.

“I kinda made that part up,” Marcus admitted, rubbing the back of his neck while looking down.

“Not, cool, dude. Not, cool,” Justin commented.

“Wait, I thought you didn’t believe in lying?” Sammy pointed out.

“I don’t. I just figured that if I said it would cost ten dollars, it would give him an easy way to shut me down,” Marcus clarified. “I hoped that saying guests were free would pique his interest and lead to him saying yes!”

“I would say that we should quit while we’re ahead,” I interjected, “but we’ve been behind the entire time!”

“Oh for seven,” said Sammy, still keeping track.

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“Have you finished your rough draft for your state project?” mom asked, as I worked on another cell of my most recent Batman comic.

“Yup, yup!” I answered, without turning away from my work.

“Then I guess I can give you this, now,” mom said, placing a signed permission slip on top of my unfinished artwork.

“Oh, yeah!” I said, excitedly. “Wait, how did you get that? I *completely* forgot to give it to you!”

“Mrs. Whiston sent it through the Classroom Communication app, *with* a reminder about tomorrow’s field trip,” mom answered. “I

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printed it out earlier and signed it."

"Thank you. Thank you. Thank you!" I said, getting up from my seat to give my mom the *huge* hug that she deserved.

"You're welcome," she said, shuffling my hair. "You know, I *had* decided to make you earn it."

"Huh?" I said, releasing my arms from around my mother.

"I *was* going to make you do something to earn it," she said, mischievously. "According to Mrs. Whiston's message, she handed out permission slips over a week ago."

"Ohhh," I said, sheepishly. "Yeah. She kinda did."

"But you've been doing so well, working on your project without being told, I decided to let it slip," she explained.

"Thank you. Thank you. Thank you!" I repeated, including hug and all.

"*This* time," she clarified.

"Don't worry. It won't happen again," I said confidently, looking up to meet her eyes. She smiled and let out a soft chuckle.

"Of course, it will," she said, kissing my forehead. "Now get in the shower if you want a scrumptious lunch for tomorrow." She turned me around, gently nudged me toward my bureau and lightly tapped me on the behind before leaving my room.

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“What’d your mom pack for your lunch,” Justin asked, reaching for my lunch bag, as we waited for the school bell to ring.

“Food for *me*,” I answered, pulling it away before he could grab it.

“At least you *got* a special lunch,” Paul said, slowly approaching us with his crutches.

“Well, it isn’t *our* fault you decided to try and do a flip on your couch,” Erick said, reaching to take Paul’s backpack.

We all agreed to take turns helping Paul around school. Luckily, his mom picked him up after school. You see, Paul lives farther away from school than anyone in the T.J. League.

“So, what’re you going to be doing since you can’t go on the field trip?” I asked.

“Mr. Anderson said that I’ll be put in another class,” Paul answered.

“Lucky!” Justin shouted.

“Not really,” Marcus remarked.

“What do you mean?” Erick asked.

“Review packet,” Sammy retorted.

“Huh?” Justin said.

“I’ll have to do a review packet,” Paul clarified. “You know, that way I’m not just sitting around, bored.”

“Bummer,” Justin commented, lowering his head.

“You’re telling *me*!” Paul agreed.

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“Have you ever *been* to the aquarium before?” Justin asked.

“Yeah,” Paul answered. “That’s why I told my mom that I was okay missing this field trip.”

“But why aren’t you going?” Marcus asked.

“I just figured it would be too tiring, you know, trying to keep up with the group and all. And since I’ve already seen it, I won’t be missing out on much anyways,” Paul answered.

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“Okay, let’s line up outside, in our two lines,” Mrs. Whiston ordered.

Everyone grabbed their things for the field trip and lined up outside.

“What about me?” Victor asked.

“You and Paul will be going to Mrs. French’s class,” she said, going back into the classroom, grabbing two review packets from her desk, and handing them to Victor.

“You gave me two,” Victor said, pointing out the obvious.

“Yes. Could you please carry Paul’s for him since it will be difficult for him to carry his with his crutches,” Mrs. Whiston asked.

“He *could* just put it in his backpack,” Victor commented, handing it towards Paul.

“*Or*, you *could* just carry it for him,” Mrs. Whiston said, while gently pushing the packet back towards Victor, with a smile I had

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never seen her use before. And it wasn't a happy one, I can tell you that! Victor rolled his eyes and shook his head, obviously not happy with Mrs. Whiston's response.

"Have fun guys," Paul said, as we walked down the hallway. "Oh, and don't forget to get me a shark tooth necklace!"

"Okay boys, Mrs. French is expecting you guys, so no playing or stops along the way," Mrs. Whiston instructed.

"Have fun!" Justin said, in a sing song voice.

"Don't get eaten by any sharks!" Paul returned, in a sing song voice of his own.

As Paul turned around to go to Mrs. French's class, Victor was already turning the corner. Seems he really *was* upset that Mrs. Whiston had him carry Paul's review packet. Paul never had Mrs. French as a teacher, since our school has you stay with the same teacher from kindergarten through sixth grade, but he had heard that she was tough.

By the time Paul made it to the three hundred wing, which is where Mrs. French's class was, Victor was nowhere in sight. When Paul pulled on the door, it was locked, so he knocked lightly. After just one second, Mrs. French opened the door, almost hitting Paul.

"That's what the yella lines on the floor 're for," she commented, "to keep ya from getting *whacked* by the door when some'n's openin' it."

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She was talking about the yellow semi-circle in front of *every* door in the school. Classroom doors. Bathroom doors. Office doors. You get the idea. We were taught in kindergarten that the yellow line showed where the door would go when someone opened it. Then we were instructed to walk *around* the yellow line in case someone was coming out of a room.

In this case, Paul *couldn't* walk around the line because he was *knocking* on the door. And since he's on crutches, it took a little bit of time to move *away* from the door. Therefore, he almost got *hit* by the door.

"Took ya long enough to git here," Mrs. French said, dryly. "Your friend's been here for a few minutes already!"

"Sorry, ma'am, but my crutches slow me down a bit," Paul commented.

"I don't want no excuses. Just hurry on in, I got a class to teach," she said, releasing the door and returning back to the board. Paul hurried as fast as he could, to get inside before the door hit him.

Victor was sitting at a kidney table, in the back of the classroom, so Paul decided that he should sit next to him. When he got there, he noticed that Victor had already started his review packet and left Paul's on the seat next to him.

"Thank you," Paul whispered, as he put his backpack down. Victor didn't respond. He simply kept working on his packet.

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Paul leaned his crutches up against the back wall, hopped the couple of feet back to his seat and sat down. After taking a pencil from his backpack and writing his name on his packet, he noticed that Victor's review packet looked different from his.

"Hey," Paul whispered, "your packet's different from mine."

"Probably to keep you from copying me," Victor said, icily.

"I don't copy people," Paul said, defensively. Once again, Victor didn't respond. He just turned the page and kept working on his packet.

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By the time lunchtime came, Paul and Victor had finished their packets. When they came back from lunch, Paul asked Mrs. French what they should do.

"If ya finished early, ya could work on your state packet. *Or,* ya *could* help some of muh third graders with their work," she hinted. "Wally over here's fallen behind and could use some help. Why don't I have him sit with you guys and ya'll could help him."

"That sounds easy enough," Paul said.

"That sounds boring," Victor said.

"Say ag'in?" Mrs. French ordered.

"That's not our job," Victor said, looking her right in the eyes.

"I *know* that's not yer job," Mrs. French responded, "I was merely giving ya a chance ta do some'in' *nice*. Ya know, be a good

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citizen."

"You're *trying* to get us to do *your* job," Victor shot back.

"You're not a nice one, are ya?" Mrs. French asked.

"Look, I'm just here to do my work," Victor said, crossing his arms.

"Well, if work's whatcha want, how 'bout ya write down all the states and their capitals," Mrs. French said.

"That's *easy*," Victor said, reaching for his backpack.

"I wasn't finished," Mrs. French said, with a tone that mom's use when you're in trouble. "I want 'em in alphabetical order."

"I can do that," Victor stated.

"First by *state*. *Then* by capitals. *That* should keep ya busy for a while," she finished, then looked at Paul.

"I'm good with helping Wally," Paul commented, throwing his hands up, before Mrs. French could give him the same assignment.

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10 Are You Okay?

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"He *really* told her that?" Marcus asked, as we waited for Paul's mom to pick him up. She had called the school and told them that she would be running late, so Marcus and I decided to wait with him.

"Yup. And he said it, all while staring her in the eye!" Paul emphasized, giving Marcus a stare that I'm sure is a bit exaggerated.

"Whoa. Talk about being disrespectful," Marcus commented.

“There’s definitely something wrong with that guy,” I commented.

“*Seriously* wrong,” Paul corrected me.

“I don’t know,” Marcus said, in an uncomfortable tone.

“What do you *mean* you don’t know,” Paul asked, seeming a bit offended.

“I mean, no one’s *born* that way,” he clarified.

“I’m not getting what you’re saying,” I said, a bit on Paul’s side for the moment.

“Maybe he’s been raised that way and just needs someone to show him some kindness so he can change,” Marcus suggested.

“And what do you call what we’ve been *trying* to do?” I asked, the one a bit offended this time.

“You didn’t let me finish,” Marcus pointed out. “It *could* be that, or it could be something else.”

“Like what?” Paul asked.

“Maybe something’s wrong at home,” Marcus said.

“Like what?” I asked, sitting up in my seat and leaning towards Marcus, hoping that maybe he would give me an idea on how to reach Victor.

“I don’t know! I read somewhere that sometimes people who don’t get enough attention at home look for it in other ways,” Marcus explained.

“Like how?” Paul asked.

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"*Any* way," Marcus answered.

"I don't get it," I said, slouching into my seat, realizing help wasn't going to come.

"Bad ways," Principal Martinez said, giving us all a good scare.

"Oh, my goodness!" Marcus said, clutching his chest with his right hand.

"I *already* have a broken leg," Paul said, gesturing to his cast. "You trying to give me a heart attack, too?"

Principal Martinez chuckled.

"How long have you been listening?" I asked.

"Long enough to realize that Operation New Kid isn't going as well as you'd like," he answered.

I know he says that he knows *everything* that happens in his school, but how in the *world* did he know that I had dubbed his challenge, 'Operation New Kid'?

"What did you mean when you said, 'bad ways'?" Marcus asked.

Principal Martinez took the computer chair from the attendance clerk's desk and rolled it in front of us, before taking a seat.

"You see, some students who don't get attention at home. Or not *enough* attention at home, usually look for it in other places," he explained.

"Uh huh," Marcus said, with furrowed eyebrows and a locked gaze on Principal Martinez.

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“And since they spend most of their day at school, they tend to seek it here,” he continued. “Unfortunately, they don’t usually do it in the proper ways or even at the proper times.”

“What do you mean?” Paul asked.

“For example,” he began, “some students know that if they make inappropriate sounds, or rude comments, when a teacher or staff member is speaking, their classmates will usually laugh at them. Or their teacher will scold them. When their friends laugh at them, they receive positive attention. When they get scolded or disciplined by a teacher, they receive negative attention.”

“Go on,” Marcus instructed, now scratching his chin.

“You see, a student who is looking for attention, doesn’t necessarily care what form that attention comes in. Positive or negative. He or she is just seeking to replace that attention they are missing at home,” Principal Martinez finished.

“You mean that they don’t care if they get in trouble or not?” Marcus asked.

“Nope,” he answered.

“But why do they usually get mad and sometimes yell?” Paul asked.

“Believe it or not, it’s all part of the game,” Principal Martinez said.

“But Victor doesn’t do that,” I pointed out.

“Yeah,” Paul agreed, “he’s just rude when you talk to him.”

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“Really?” Principal Martinez asked.

“Yup,” I answered.

Just then, the phone rang.

“Maybe I’m wrong,” he said, standing up from his chair. “But then again, that’s just *one* example of how people look for attention in the wrong ways.”

He returned the computer chair back to the attendance clerk’s desk and answered the phone.

“Your mom’s here,” he said, after hanging up the phone. “Thank you, Marcus and T.J., for waiting with Paul. You guys truly are a great example of what a true friend is.”

After helping Paul to his car, Marcus and I walked home in silence. Paul’s mom had offered to give us a ride, but we thanked her and said we’d rather walk. I think we were both focusing on the same thing. We’re both trying to figure out how to use what Principal Martinez had said. Trying to figure out a way to make Operation New Kid a success.

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Unfortunately, the T.J. League has run out of ideas for befriending Victor, so we’ve decided to leave him alone for the time being.

After a couple of days, everything went back to normal. The T.J. League worked with Funmaker John to run recess, and sometimes

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lunch recess, when we were needed. Lunch recess is usually run by the sixth graders. And instead of focusing on Victor, we focused on helping Paul around until his leg healed.

We even joined Marcus and his youth group for cosmic bowling, pizza, potato wedges, and wings at his youth group's Fun Friday. Justin *almost* set a new record for most wings eaten, but was beaten by someone unexpected. Sammy! Who knew she liked wings so much?

But something's been bothering me. These last few days I've noticed Victor sitting alone at the Buddy Bench. Even when people invite him to play, he just sits there. He doesn't shake his head 'no' or shoo them away. He just sits there. When *I* went up to him and offered to help him find a game to play, he didn't say anything. He didn't even look up from the ground.

I don't know what it is, but something is *definitely* wrong. And I'm going to find out what it is.

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"So, what!" Justin said, as we were setting up equipment for recess.

"Yeah," Erick agreed, "we've *all* tried to be nice to the guy. And he just doesn't care. So why should we?"

"I hate to admit it, but I concur," Sammy said, picking up a basket of jerseys.

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“But isn’t it our job to make sure that *everybody* is enjoying recess?” I asked.

“*Technically*, we can’t force anyone to do anything that they don’t want to do,” Sammy said. She is *definitely* too smart for her own good, sometimes.

“What if it was me?” I asked.

“But it’s *not* you!” Justin said, shaking his head.

“I’m just *saying*,” I tried.

“And *we’re* just saying,” Erick interrupted. “We’ve *all* tried our best be nice to him and he’s shot us *all* down!”

“Yeah! What do you expect us to do?” Justin said.

“I expect you to keep on trying!” I said, starting to get upset. “Since when does the T.J. League give up?”

“Well, maybe this is one time we should,” Sammy said.

“Yeah,” Marcus agreed. “It doesn’t seem like we’re getting his attention.”

“But maybe we still could!” I argued.

“*Plus*, he’s so *rude*,” Justin added.

“But he *could* change,” I shot back.

“Unlikely,” Sammy commented.

“I agree. It doesn’t seem like he *wants* to change his ways, T.J. Maybe he’s just unreachable.”

“‘Unreachable’? Really, Marcus?” I asked. “I’m surprised to hear that coming from *you*.”

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“Why? It could be true!” he said, defensively.

“But what about what Teacher Jeff has been teaching us? About how some people may seem unreachable but that no one is *truly* unreachable. And about how Saul was a bad guy. The *worst* even. Someone that the Jews never thought would change. Never imagined *could* change!” I reminded him.

“What are you *talking* about?” Justin chimed in.

“I believe he’s paraphrasing a story from the Bible. The New Testament if I’m not mistaken,” Sammy answered for me.

Of course, she’s right. Not much of a shocker.

“*You* go to church?!” Erick asked, surprised.

“*You* don’t?!” I responded.

“Guys! We’re getting off-topic,” Paul intervened. “T.J., we’ve all pretty much made up our minds to let Victor be Victor. If he changes his mind, we’re willing to give him another try. But until then, he’s on his own.”

Everyone nodded their heads in agreement.

“Well, I don’t care *what* you guys say. We’ve never failed a mission before, and I’m *not* about to give up on this one!” I said, walking away to set up two on two basketball.

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After recess, I couldn’t focus. Actually, I’m not even sure what Mrs. Whiston has been teaching us. Something is *definitely* wrong

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with Victor. He hasn't even said anything rude to correct Mrs. Whiston. And when I asked him for a pen because mine had run out of ink, he simply reached for one in his backpack and handed it to me. No snide remark. No tossing it out of my reach. He simply handed it to me. Now I know for *sure* that something is wrong. There's *got* to be something I can do. There just *has* to be.

Instead of working on my United States map like I'm supposed to be doing, I'm trying to think of a way to figure out what I can do. You know, to get Victor to tell me what's wrong. I started making a list of things that *might* work, and I figure I'll just go down the list until something works out.

What's the first thing on my list, you wonder? I've decided that at lunch recess, I'm going to sit at the Buddy Bench with Victor. Even if he tells me to leave. I'm going to sit there *every day* if I have to. Until he tells me what's wrong.

And if that doesn't work? Then I'll move onto the second thing on my list. Which will *have* to work. Why you ask? Because that's all I've got so far.

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Since no one else in the T.J. League thinks that Victor is worth their time, I've decided *not* to tell them about my plan. After finishing my lunch, I headed straight for the Buddy Bench, but there was one problem. It was kind of a *major* problem, though. Victor wasn't there!

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I *know* I had seen him get up, throw his trash away and leave. It's not that I was stalking him or anything. It was just that I wanted to make sure that he would be there, waiting at the Buddy Bench, when I finished *my* lunch. And now, here I am. All alone. At the Buddy Bench.

"Hey, T.J.!" a fourth grader greeted me. "Want to join us for a game of four square? We only have three people and need one more!"

"No thanks," I answered, and just stayed sitting on the Buddy Bench. "Maybe next time."

I know what you're probably thinking. You're probably thinking that I was rude. That she was just trying to be nice. You're thinking that I should have just joined her and her friends for a game of four square. You're probably saying to yourself that I could have just tried to talk to Victor tomorrow. And although you'd probably be right, you're forgetting something. I *stink* at *any* game involving a ball! Don't believe me? Go back and read chapter two!

As the fourth grader walked away, I began to scan the blacktop. Where could Victor be? As I looked towards the Hula Hoop Tag zone, I noticed Victor coming out of the four hundred wing boy's bathroom. *That's* why he wasn't at the Buddy Bench. He had to use the restroom!

As he got a drink of water at the fountain, I decided to walk away from the Buddy Bench in case he decided not to sit down there since *I* was already there. I went to the playground and weaved in and

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out of the running fifth graders, all while keeping an eye on Victor. As he sat down, I began counting. I had decided that fifty seconds was long enough to wait, so he didn't think that I was stalking him.

As I reached forty-five seconds, I started walking towards the Buddy Bench. Someone had already approached him and invited him to play a game, but he just sat there, lifeless, as he had done for the past few days. I approached the bench from the left side, since he was sitting on the right side.

At first, I sat in silence, just watching people play on the blacktop. I know I had decided that I was going to go through with this, but it was proving harder than I had thought. Victor had been so mean, that deep down inside, I was a bit afraid that he would just be the same old Victor.

But then it hit me. And after it did, I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe that I had been scared at all. Mrs. Whiston had taught us that the hardest and scariest obstacles to overcome tend to teach us the greatest life lessons. The kind that last a lifetime. She also said that when we overcome these obstacles, future obstacles tend to be less frightening. That we learn more about who we are when we *don't* back down.

I know who I *think* I am, but now I have a chance to prove it. There's *no* way I'm passing up a chance to prove it. I'm going for it. You'd better believe I am. I've made up my mind. There's no changing it. Here I go. Wish me luck!

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“Sooo,” I said, not even looking at Victor, “are you okay?”

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ELEVEN

What'd He Do?

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“T.J.,” my mom said, concerned. “Is everything okay? What’s wrong, baby?”

I had rushed into the house and thrown myself around my mother’s waist, burying my face into her stomach. Normally, I would be at Marcus’ house today, but I told him that I needed to go straight home. I’m sure he didn’t know why, but I think the tone in my voice told him that it was important to me.

I may be making my mother a bit uncomfortable, but I just can't let her go. I also can't stop crying. Something inside me is hurting. A hurt that I've never felt before. Some*where* inside me is hurting. A place that I didn't even know existed. And ever since this hurt started, it hasn't faded away, like other hurts do. This one has stayed. Right in the center of my chest. I don't know what it is, but I know what's caused it.

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After sitting down with Victor at the Buddy Bench and asking him if he was okay, something unexpected happened. His eyes began tearing up. *Victor's* eyes began to water. And before I knew it, he leaned forward, his hands covering his face, and began to bawl.

I didn't know what to do! Any time I had talked to Victor before this moment, he had responded with sarcasm or some snippy remark. I was prepared to ride him out to find out what was wrong. For *days* if that's what it took. But I was not prepared for *this*. Or for what came after.

"Oh, my goodness," I said, scooting over to sit next to him, "what's wrong."

Victor didn't answer. Not surprising. What *was* surprising was that he didn't push me away when I placed my hand on his back. Although, he did shrink away a little, he didn't get angry and order me to 'go away'. He just sat there. Crying.

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“Come on,” I said, standing up, “let’s go to the office.”

I don’t know if this is the right thing to do, but I know that I have to do *something*. And normally, when someone is crying, you take them to the office.

Victor didn’t get up at first. He just sat there. Still sobbing. I decided to put one hand under his arm and my other hand around his back to help him stand up. He shrank back, again, when I touched his back. Kind of like I do when I get a bad sunburn after we’ve gone to the beach. But he didn’t fight me.

After standing up, he kept his hands over his face as I guided him towards the office. It’s weird. It’s kind of like he trusts me. *Victor* is trusting *me*. I didn’t think he trusted *anyone*. Except himself, of course.

As we entered the office, Mr. Ellis was giving someone an ice pack, which they immediately placed on the back of their head.

“And remember, just because someone else decides to weave in and out of the swings while people are swinging, doesn’t mean it’s a good idea,” he said, in a fatherly tone.

“And what’s the damage here?” he asked me, as I stood with my arms still around Victor.

“I’m not sure,” I answered, truthfully, “he just started crying.”

“Well, people don’t just start crying for no reason,” Mr. Ellis commented.

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“I *know*,” I agreed, “but I didn’t know what else to do, so I brought him here.”

After unsuccessfully trying to get Victor to talk, I suggested to Mr. Ellis that maybe Victor would be comfortable talking to Mrs. Garrison, the school’s Intervention Aide. He agreed and radioed for her. She was finishing up her lunch but came as soon as Mr. Ellis called.

“Good afternoon, Victor,” she greeted him, “I can see that something has upset you. Would you like to tell me what it is?”

Once again, Victor didn’t answer. He still hadn’t even taken his hands away from his face.

“I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what’s wrong, sweetie” she said, placing her hand on his shoulder.

Once again, he shrank away. Mrs. Garrison immediately removed her hand with a concerned look on her face.

“How about we go to my office,” she offered, “that way we can talk in private. Thank you, T.J., for helping Victor up to the office. I’ll go ahead and help him from here.”

After nodding to Mrs. Garrison, I turned around to go back to the playground, but Victor stopped me. He grabbed me, by the wrist, removing his hand from his face for the first time since we were at the Buddy Bench. As I turned around to look at him, he had a ‘I don’t want to go alone’ look on his face. I immediately looked at Mrs. Garrison, unsure of what to do.

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“It’s okay, T.J. It seems he wants you to stay with him,” she remarked, as she walked to the office door and held it open for us.

As soon as we exited the office, Victor covered his face again, so I guided him to Mrs. Garrison’s office.

For those of you who don’t know who Mrs. Garrison is, she is *awesome*! She is trustworthy, respectful, fair, caring and kind. She *always* knows just what to say to calm a person down. And she gives *great* advice.

The best part of all, she’s *real* with you. If what you did was wrong, she’ll *tell* you! But, instead of just making you feel bad or guilty, she’ll sit with you and help you figure out what better choices you can make next time. ‘Make good choices’ is basically her motto.

She’s also a *great* listener. If you’re having a bad day, she’ll sit and listen to what you have to say, *without* interrupting you. She *doesn’t* belittle you for feeling the way you do. Although, she *will* tell you if you’re milking something. You know, like if you struck out during whiffle ball at recess and decided to turn that bad five minutes into a drama that lasted *all* day.

“Right in here boys,” she instructed as we reached her office.

After entering the room, Mrs. Garrison motioned for me to sit down on the couch in her room. She grabbed a nearby chair and sat in front of us. Just as she sat down, we could hear Funmaker John blow his whistle to signal that recess was over, so she stood back up and

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walked to her desk. She picked up her classroom phone and called the office.

"Hello, Mr. Ellis, this is Mrs. Garrison, could you please let—" she covered the speaker with her hand and whispered to me, "who's your teacher?"

"Mrs. Whiston," I answered.

"And what about Victor?" she asked.

"Mrs. Whiston," I repeated.

She then took her hand off of the phone's speaker and finished her sentence.

"Could you please let Mrs. Whiston know that T.J. and Victor are with me in my office?" Mrs. Garrison asked. "Thank you."

After hanging up the phone, she came back and sat down in the chair she had placed in front of us. And for the next fifteen minutes or so, I learned more about Victor than I had in the past two *weeks*! I may sound excited, but let's just say that I almost wish I *didn't* know as much about him as I do now.

After getting a hold of Victor's hands and helping him to calm down with some breathing exercises, Mrs. Garrison did what she does best. She focused, one hundred percent, on Victor. She listened, asked the right questions, and offered her support in any way that she could. And Victor, well, I *think*, is glad that he shared.

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“Mi amor, what’s wrong?” my mom asked, as I continued to hug her tightly. “Let’s go take a seat.”

My mom shifted my hug to the side of her and walked us to the living room. Then, without letting go, we sat down on the couch. Luckily Xochitl isn’t here, or she would be laughing at me and teasing me for crying.

“Okay. Okay,” mom said, gently pulling me away from her, “talk to me.”

After letting go, mom used her apron to wipe my eyes and clean my nose. It took me a moment before I was calm enough to speak.

“Are we better now?” she asked. I nodded my head slowly. “Okay, tell me what’s wrong.”

Just thinking about what was bothering me almost made me start to cry again. My eyes began to water but mom grabbed some tissue from the coffee table and dabbed my eyes before I could start.

“You’re okay now. Just talk to me,” she said.

“Why are people so mean?” I asked, wanting to know the answer more than *anything* I had ever wanted to know before.

“What do you mean, mi amor?” she asked.

“I mean, how could he do that to Victor?” I clarified. Sort of.

“How could who do what?” mom asked.

“How could Victor’s mom’s fiancé treat him like that?” I said, a bit of anger in my voice.

“Victor. The new kid in your class, Victor?” she asked.

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“Yes,” I answered.

“What did Victor’s mom’s fiancé do?”

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12 Tell Your Story

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“There’s no rush, Victor. Take your time,” Mrs. Garrison said, in a reassuring voice.

Victor explained to Mrs. Garrison, and me, I guess, what led up to today’s episode at the Buddy Bench. And the more we sat there listening, the more emotion you could see on Mrs. Garrison’s face. She usually has a pretty good poker face, but something about what Victor was telling her kept her from hiding it today.

You see, Victor had told Mrs. Garrison that when he was a baby, his dad had left him and his mom. And that until he was in the second grade, his mom was a single mother. That's when she had met Jack.

Jack was a great guy to Victor. Jack would buy Victor things and take him places. He would do all the right things. All the great things you see on television and in the movies. Victor's mom fell in love with him, and so did Victor.

The first time Victor's mom told him that Jack was going to babysit him because she had to take on a double shift, Victor was *so* excited! He couldn't believe that he was going to have this great guy, who might be his dad someday, *all* to himself. He had even planned out the *entire* night. Games and toys and pillow forts. You know, everything a seven year old would like! But as soon as Jack picked him up from school, Victor knew that something was wrong.

Jack didn't have that same smile on his face when Victor got in the car. And when Victor started to tell Jack all about the plans he had made, Jack turned up the volume on the radio. Then, when Victor handed him the paper, with all the plans he had written down, Jack crumpled it up and threw it out the window. Victor knew *immediately* that something was wrong. This wasn't the Jack that he knew.

Usually, Victor's mom would take him straight home and feed him a snack before helping him with his homework. Then they would cuddle on the couch and watch Victor's favorite show. Jack didn't do any of that.

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Jack drove him to a neighborhood that he didn't recognize, where streets were very narrow, and the houses were almost touching each other. They stopped outside a house and Jack told him to stay in the car while he went inside and talked to a friend.

While he waited, Victor noticed something strange. There were no kids outside. Back at home, there were *always* kids playing outside. Then Victor noticed something even *more* strange. Someone had thrown their shoes onto the electrical line. Why would they do that? They still looked brand new. If Victor ever wasted a new pair of shoes like that, he *knew* he would be in *big* trouble with his mom!

When Jack finally came back, Victor asked him about the shoes, but Jack told him 'don't worry about it'. Then they visited a few more of Jack's friend's houses. Each time, Victor had to wait in the car. Eventually, he fell asleep from boredom.

When he woke up, he was at home. Sort of. He was in *front* of his house, *still* in Jack's car! He took his backpack and tried to get inside, but the door was locked. After knocking and ringing the doorbell for a few moments, with no answer, Victor had gotten scared. He sat down on one of the chairs on his porch, and just like any scared little kid would do, Victor started to cry. Jack finally opened the door and ordered Victor to get inside before anyone noticed that he was outside, alone.

When Victor asked for a snack, Jack told him to get one himself. When Victor asked Jack for help with his homework, Jack

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told him that he didn't have time to help any *kid*. That if Victor was as smart as his mother *claimed* he was, then he could it by himself. So, he did.

When he had finished his homework, Victor decided that he would still try and do some of the things he had written on his list. First was play with the action figures from his favorite television show.

When he asked Jack, Jack asked him if he was five years old. Victor reminded him that he was seven and a half. Jack asked him what they were supposed to do with his toys. They didn't exactly do anything on their own. Victor explained that they would make believe that they were alive. 'You know, play pretend' Victor had told him. Jack said that it was 'dumb and unrealistic' and not worth his time. Jack finished it up with 'you need to take your head out of the clouds and grow up'. Victor was hurt and decided that he wasn't going to try anything else he had written on his list.

Instead, Victor asked if he could watch his favorite television show since he was done with his homework, like he normally would, but Jack wouldn't let him. He said he was watching an important game. 'Go do something in your room', Jack had ordered him.

This was *not* what Victor had expected. There had been no games. No toys. And no pillow forts. Jack was being a *completely* different person. That was, until his mother came home.

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You see, Jack had ordered pizza for dinner, and Victor was in the middle of his second slice when he heard his mother's car pull up in the driveway. Jack had quickly asked Victor what his favorite television channel was and changed it as fast as he could. He then picked Victor up, pizza and all, sat Victor down beside him, and then put his arm around his shoulders. And he did it all before Victor's mom could come through the front door.

When Victor's mom had asked how everything had gone, Jack had done all the talking. Jack told his mother that he had helped Victor with his homework, that they had played together and that he had even let Victor choose dinner. Of course, it had all been a lie. And when Victor's mom went to the restroom, Jack pulled Victor in close and told him that if he *ever* told his mom what *really* happened, that she wouldn't believe him. Because who would she believe? An adult or a *kid*?

But Victor didn't give up on Jack right away. He figured that maybe he was just having a bad day. So, the next time Jack had to babysit Victor, Victor decided to give it a second try. He wouldn't ask for Jack to play make believe. Instead, he asked if Jack would take him to the mall. His friends at school had told him all about this new arcade they had built in there. It would be his first trip to an arcade!

Once again, Jack shot down his idea. When Victor told Jack that his mom wouldn't take him because she didn't have the money, and that he had been saving up his allowance so that Jack wouldn't have

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to pay for anything, Jack still denied his request. But Victor didn't give up. He *really* wanted to go to the arcade, so he ran to his room and came back with all the money he had saved up and even offered to pay for Jack to play. The money seemed to get Jack's attention. He took it from Victor and told him that he would hold onto it so that Victor wouldn't spend it too quickly. The next thing he knew, he and Jack were on their way to the mall. At least that's what he *thought*.

After a few minutes in the car, Victor noticed that they were going the wrong way. When he told Jack, Jack told him that they were going somewhere more important. When Victor reminded him that the arcade was important to *him*, Jack told him that 'video games are for people with little minds' and that Victor would thank him when he was older. Instead of going to the arcade, they ended up at that house with the shoes on the electrical line. Victor never did get his allowance money back.

Once again, Victor decided not to give up. When Jack had to watch Victor again, Victor decided to try something completely different. Victor had noticed that Jack was always watching soccer games on television. He would get so angry and yell at the television when his team was doing badly. He would also get excited and cheer at the top of his lungs when they scored. Sometimes, when they scored, he would even lift Victor up high and spin him around the room. So, Victor decided to learn how to play soccer.

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Victor would play soccer at *every* recess. He wanted to be the *best* that he could be. He figured that if he could get good at soccer, that maybe, just *maybe,* he could get on Jack's good side. He had run out of other ideas. It was this or nothing.

Luckily, his chance to impress Jack came sooner than he thought. After he finished his homework, he went to his room and changed into the soccer jersey his mom had just bought him. It was a jersey of Jack's favorite team. Then he grabbed his soccer ball and rushed to the living room where Jack was watching soccer.

Victor asked Jack if he wanted to play soccer with him. Jack told him to get out of the way. He couldn't see the game. So, Victor moved aside and asked Jack again. Jack didn't answer. Victor stepped a little closer to Jack and asked again. And again, Jack said nothing. Finally, Victor stood right next to Jack and asked, with a huge smile on his face, if Jack wanted to go outside and play soccer. 'Go play with yourself!' Jack had shouted while backhanding Victor away from him.

Victor explained how he had spent *every* recess learning how to play soccer so that they would have something in common. He even told Jack that not only was he the *smartest* kid in his grade, but that he had now become the best *soccer* player in his grade. Without taking his eyes off the television, Jack told Victor that 'sports don't prove your intelligence or how successful you'll be in life'.

SAMPLE

For the next two years, it was the same thing. As long as Victor's mom was there, Jack was every single mother's dream. And every time Jack had to babysit Victor, he was the *complete* opposite. That was, until Victor and his mother moved in with Jack.

Jack had gotten a promotion at work and told Victor's mom that they should move in together. He told her that with his raise, he would be able to cover the rent *and* the bills. That she wouldn't have to work double shifts anymore. And that any money she made would be all hers to spend however she wanted.

Victor's mom had liked the idea, but told Jack that she wanted to wait until the end of the month so that she could notify the landlord and so that she didn't lose out on any money she had already paid. Jack had agreed that it was a smart idea.

After moving in with Jack, things had only gotten worse between him and Victor. It had given Jack more time with Victor. That meant more time *alone* with Victor. Victor basically became Jack's slave. Even *when* his mother was around. But he always tried to make it look and sound like he was just playing. 'We're just bonding', Jack would say.

Of course, Victor's mom didn't see what happened when it was just Victor and Jack. Not only *that*, but they also never stayed in one place for more than six months. And any time Victor would whine or do something Jack didn't like, Jack would push or smack Victor. At first, it didn't hurt that much. And it usually didn't leave any marks.

SAMPLE

But the longer they lived with him, the stronger the shoves and hits became.

And it wasn't just the physical attacks. Jack would also say the meanest things to Victor. Like tell him that he was dumb. Or that he would *never* grow up to be anything important. And that Victor would *never* be as successful as Jack was.

One time, when Victor asked why Jack was so mean to him, Jack told him 'because no one likes you!'. And when Victor pointed out that he had *lots* of friends, Jack told him, 'Those aren't your friends. They only *pretend* to be your friends because they feel *sorry* for you'.

This last statement had caused Victor's voice to get all shaky. Mrs. Garrison placed her hand on Victor's knee but didn't say anything. Victor took a deep breath and sighed before continuing to tell his story.

About a month ago, Jack had told Victor's mom that he had a friend in the realty business who had found them a house for cheap. 'It's a deal we can't pass up', he had said. And as his mother thought about it, Jack had gotten on one knee and proposed to her. After that, Victor's mom agreed not only to marry Jack, but to move here, with him.

It was Victor's worse nightmare. He had recently thought about telling his mom about how Jack wasn't really the great guy that she thought he was, but now it was too late. Jack had even given Victor a

SAMPLE

fake hug, just so that he could tell him ‘don’t you *dare* ruin your mother’s day’. And later that night, as he offered to ‘tuck Victor in for bed’, he reminded Victor that nobody believes what a kid has to say over an adult.

Mrs. Garrison ensured Victor that she believed *everything* that he was telling her. I just sat there in awe and disbelief. I had *never* heard *anything* like this. I had never even *seen* anything like it on television or in the movies!

Mrs. Garrison then asked if Jack had hit Victor recently. Victor didn’t answer. Instead, he stood up and turned his back to Mrs. Garrison.

“Victor?” she called.

Still nothing. Mrs. Garrison couldn’t see it, but *I* could. Victor’s eyes were filling up with tears. But this time he wasn’t covering his face, and as I stood up to place my hand on his shoulder, he shrank away before I could touch him.

He then did something I didn’t see coming. With his back now facing both of us, Victor lifted his shirt. Slowly. And the higher he raised it, the more terrified I became. Victor’s back was *covered* in bruises.

Some were thin lines. Some were round. Some were lighter while others were darker. But it was the darkest one that scared me the most. Not only was it the darkest, but it was also the biggest. And it was in the shape of a hand. An *adult* sized hand.

SAMPLE

Now I knew why Victor had shrunk away like *I* did when I have a sunburn. Then *I* began to tear up. How could *anyone* do this to another person? How could anyone do this to a *kid!*

Mrs. Garrison, whose eyes were also filled with tears, slowly and gently pulled Victor's shirt down so that it was back to normal. She then turned Victor around and gave him the *biggest, gentlest* hug she could. Then Victor did another thing I had never seen him do. He hugged her back.

SAMPLE

13 A Great Idea

SAMPLE

I had finished recounting my story about Victor, and I expected my mom to say something, but she just sat there. Tears in her eyes. Tissue, clenched in her right hand. Then she pulled me close and gave me the same kind of hug that I had given her when I came home.

It was weird. The hurt that I was feeling when I came home was finally starting to fade. I guess telling my mom about it had helped.

After a minute or so, my mom finally released her hug and used the tissue in her hand to wipe her tears.

“How could he do that, mom?” I asked. “How could he do that to Victor?”

“I don’t know, baby,” she answered, truthfully. “Some people like to have control over other people. Especially people smaller and weaker than they are.”

“But that’s not right!” I objected.

“I agree, mi corazón. But that’s just the way it is sometimes,” she said, standing up to throw her tissue away.

“We *have* to do something!” I said, following her to the kitchen.

“I agree, mi hijo, but the school has probably taken the proper measures to make sure that Victor is safe,” my mom explained.

“But there’s gotta be something that *I* can do,” I protested.

My mom tossed her tissue in the trash, then slowly turned around and knelt down so that she and I were eye to eye.

“You already did, T.J.,” she said. “You’ve done more than you even understand.”

“I don’t get it,” I said. “I didn’t do anything.”

My mom placed her hands on my shoulders before saying something that I had not considered before.

“You didn’t give up,” she said.

“Huh?” I said, in confusion.

SAMPLE

“When everyone else in the T.J. League had given up on Victor, you didn’t,” she pointed out. “When you saw Victor sitting at the Buddy Bench, day after day, you were determined to find out why. You cared. And when he needed you most, friend or not, you stayed by his side. You were there for him, T.J. You showed compassion. And by what you’ve just told me, Victor not only needed that, he appreciated it.”

I was following everything that mom was saying. Everything until her last statement. How had Victor ‘appreciated it’? Mom must have seen the confusion in my eyes, because she continued to help me understand what a great act of kindness I had just performed.

“You said that Mrs. Garrison told you that she would help Victor and that you turned around to leave, right?” she asked.

“Yes,” I answered, softly.

“And how did Victor react?” she continued her questioning.

“He stopped me,” I said, grabbing my own wrist.

“That’s right,” she said, with a smile on her face.

“I still don’t get it,” I admitted.

“T.J., he didn’t want to be alone,” she said. “I *doubt* Victor knew who Mrs. Garrison was before today.”

“Probably not,” I agreed.

“And he was probably scared,” she continued.

“Yeah,” I said.

SAMPLE

“And who did he choose to be with him when he finally decided to tell someone about all the horrible things that have been happening to him?” she asked.

“Me,” I said, not proudly. Just shocked.

“He chose *you*, T.J. He chose *you*,” mom said, placing her hand on my chest. “He chose the *one* person who showed that he cared the most. The person *determined* to become his friend. The person that probably showed him how *wrong* Jack was.”

Once again, mom had completely lost me.

“You said that Jack told Victor the only reason people were friends with him was because people felt sorry for him, right?”

“Yes,” I answered.

“You proved him wrong,” she said, with confidence. “You showed Victor, through your actions, that you didn’t feel sorry for him. You showed that you *truly* wanted to be his friend. And in the end, you showed that you *truly* cared.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Really,” she answered.

“Thanks mom,” I said, with a short-lasted smile, “but I still want to do something for Victor. He deserves it.”

“Oh, mi tesoro, you have the most beautiful heart,” mom said, giving me another hug. “Maybe you should talk with Mr. Martinez. He’ll probably know what could help Victor best.”

Just then, the doorbell rang.

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“Mom! It’s me!” Xochitl’s voice rang, through the living room and into the kitchen.

“Oh!” mom said, standing up quickly. “I forgot that Thalia’s mom has an appointment today.”

For the rest of the day, I couldn’t stop trying to think of a way to help Victor. And now, here I lay, staring at the ceiling. *Still* trying to think of something. There just *has* to be *something* I can do.

As it became harder and harder to keep my eyes open, it popped into my head. I knew what I could do!

SAMPLE

14 This May

FOURTEEN

This May Help

SAMPLE

Once I got to school, I went straight to the office.

"I'm sorry, T.J.," Mr. Ellis apologized, "but Mr. Martinez isn't here yet."

"That's okay. I can wait," I said, taking a seat in an office chair.

I took out my notebook and began to read over the notes I had taken last night. They are a bit more sloppy than usual since I was

half asleep when I was writing them. This is a *great* idea. I just *know* it.

"T.J.!" an excited voice boomed, from behind me.

"Principal Martinez!" I said, standing up and shaking his hand.

"What brings you into the office this early in the morning," he asked.

"It's kind of private," I said. "Could we maybe talk in your office?"

"Sure. Of course. Right this way," he said, motioning for me to lead the way. "Hold any calls, Mr. Ellis."

"Will do, Mr. Martinez," he said, giving a small head nod.

"So, what can I help you with today?" Principal Martinez asked, after closing the door behind him.

"I'm not sure you heard about what happened with Victor yesterday," I said, placing my backpack on a chair at his round table.

"I did," was his short answer.

"So, Mrs. Garrison told you what happened in her office?" I asked.

"She did," he answered, in a concerned voice.

"Good," I said.

"I'm not sure I follow, T.J.," Principal Martinez said, taking a seat at his round table.

"It's good because I promised Victor that I wouldn't tell anyone about what he told us yesterday. And since you already know, I don't

SAMPLE

break that promise," I explained, opening my notebook to my great idea and placing it on the round table.

"What's this?" Principal Martinez asked, wrinkling his eyebrows.

"It's my idea to help Victor," I said, proudly.

"Oh, T.J., bless your heart," he said, placing his hand on my shoulder, "but Mrs. Garrison and I are making sure that Victor is getting *all* the help that he needs."

I know that he didn't *mean* to be rude, but it was almost like he was saying that my great idea wasn't needed.

"And I'm sure that your idea is great, but—," he began to say before I interrupted him.

"You're right. It *is* great. And that's why we *have* to do it," I said, looking him straight in the eye, while placing *my* hand on *his* shoulder. "Not for me. For Victor."

Principal Martinez took a deep breath, closed his eyes and said, "this world needs more T.J.'s."

After explaining my idea to him, Principal Martinez smiled and told me that my idea truly *was* a 'great idea'. He then informed me that we wouldn't be able to do it today, which immediately turned my excitement into sorrow.

"But why not?" I asked.

"Victor won't be at school today," he answered.

"But why not?" I repeated.

SAMPLE

“Victor is getting some much needed help,” he said, somberly. “He should be back to school in a day or two.”

“Oh,” I said, disappointedly.

“That’s *good* news, T.J.,” Principal Martinez said, excitedly.

“I know. He’s getting the help he needs,” I said, taking my notebook and closing it.

“Not only that,” he said, leaning in close, as if to tell a secret, “that gives us time to set up your great idea!”

I hadn’t thought of that part before. It *would* take a bit of preparation. And Victor getting the help he needed *is* more important at the moment.

“Thanks Principal Martinez,” I said, standing up, placing my notebook in my backpack, and giving him a *big* hug.

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Victor ended up missing two days of school. But it was *just* the right amount of time for Principal Martinez and I to set up my great idea.

Since Principal Martinez *knew* that Victor would be returning today, he asked all the teachers to show up to school fifteen minutes earlier than usual. He had explained what was going on and how what they were about to do might change Victor’s life. For the better.

Principal Martinez had also spoken with Victor’s mom and asked *her* to bring Victor to school early. He said that he wanted to

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meet with them about something important. She said that she would make sure they were there on time.

Of course, I had shared with *my* mom what my great idea was, and how it was important for me to be early to school, also. She said she was proud of me and made sure that I was up early enough to get to school before Victor did.

When I got to school and entered the office, Mr. Ellis motioned for me to come behind the counter, so I did. He then motioned for me to come to him. He had never done that before.

As I approached him, he put his right hand in the air as if asking for a high five. I was a bit tentative, but I obliged him and gave him a high five anyway.

“It’s no wonder you’re the leader of the T.J. League,” he said. “Every league needs a great example for their leader. And you, T.J., are not just a great example to the members of the T.J. League, you are a great example to us all.”

I didn’t say anything back. I just smiled and gave a small nod before walking through the hallway that led to the teacher’s lounge.

When I got there, Principal Martinez and all the teachers were waiting around for Victor. All except for Mr. Weatherman that is. He was stuck in traffic due to an accident on the freeway.

“This is a great idea, T.J.,” Mrs. Whiston said, walking up to me and placing her hand on my head.

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“Thanks,” was all I could say. For some reason, I’m becoming *very* nervous.

A few minutes later, Mr. Ellis rushed in to say that Victor’s mom had just parked her car. Mr. Ellis is on ‘Victor watch’.

“Thank you, Mr. Ellis,” Principal Martinez said.

Once Mr. Ellis exited the room, Principal Martinez and I stood at the entrance of the teacher’s lounge while all the teachers organized themselves around the edges of the room. All we can do now is wait. And boy is *that* nerve wracking! The *longer* we wait, the more *nervous* I become.

“Right this way,” we could hear Mr. Ellis say, from the front office.

Victor entered the teacher’s lounge first, with his mom close behind, her hands on his shoulders.

“Hi, Victor,” I said, holding my hand out.

“Hi, T.J.,” he responded, shaking my hand. “What am I doing here so early before school starts?” he asked Principal Martinez.

“Well, Victor, your friend, T.J., here, came to me a few days ago, *very* concerned about you,” he answered.

Victor took his attention off Principal Martinez and looked directly at me.

“But don’t worry, he didn’t break his promise,” Principal Martinez assured Victor. “He came to me and said that he wanted to do something to help out his newest friend. Something he couldn’t do

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alone. Something that might show him that not all people are bad. And more specifically, not all *adults* are bad."

Principal Martinez gestured to his left, where Mrs. Jenkins, a kindergarten teacher, stood holding out her hand. Victor slowly approached her and shook it, followed by his mom, who also shook Mrs. Jenkins' hand.

"Good morning, Victor. My name is Mrs. Jenkins and I'm a kindergarten teacher. When I was in kindergarten, I was very shy, and kids used to pick on me. My teacher would get upset with me because I had a soft voice that was difficult for her to hear. And believe it or not, I wanted to be a singer when I grew up! Confusing? I know.

"In the third grade, I signed up for the school talent show. I signed up to sing my favorite song, Somewhere Over the Rainbow. When I showed up for the tryouts and people found out that I signed up to *sing* in the talent show, they picked on me so hard that I cried.

"I went to the teacher in charge of the talent show and said that I was quitting the tryouts. But she wouldn't let me. She told me not to listen to those mean-spirited people and told me to sit next to her. She allowed me to regain my composure and even let me perform last.

"When it was my turn, I was *so* nervous that I couldn't sing. She told me to close my eyes and imagine that I was in my favorite place in the whole world. She then started the music again and I began to sing my heart out.

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“Not only did I amaze those kids who were making fun of me, I amazed the talent show teacher. She chose me to be the closing act of the talent show and told me that if I wanted to be a singer, that I should chase my dreams and not let *anyone* discourage me.”

“But then why did you become a teacher?” Victor asked.

“I became a teacher so that *I* could be like that talent show teacher. I wanted to be someone who could encourage kids to overcome,” she answered with confidence.

Mrs. Jenkins then motioned towards Mr. Thomas, who was standing right next to her. He held his hand out, and the hand shaking continued.

“Hi, Victor. My name is Mr. Thomas and I’m a first-grade teacher. When I was in elementary school, I was *always* the shortest kid in my class.”

“But you’re so *tall*,” Victor pointed out.

“Yes,” Mr. Thomas chuckled, “but it wasn’t always that way. When I was in elementary school, I *really* liked sports. But I was so short that I wasn’t very good at any, so I used to get picked on a lot. I was too short to be fast. Too small to hit or kick hard. And *worst* of all. My favorite sport was *basketball*.

“I was *so* short, that no matter how hard I tried, I just could *not* make a basket. Not even if my *life* depended on it. Because of that, I was *always* chosen last. *If* I was even chosen at all. It really hurt, when I wasn’t chosen.

SAMPLE

“When I was in middle school, our P.E. teacher, Mr. Carpena, announced that the school would be having basketball tryouts. I had never been on a team before, but I practiced at home, *every day*, so that I could make the team.

“When I showed up for tryouts, boys started pointing at me and laughing. It *really* discouraged me, and Mr. Carpena noticed. He scolded them and said that if they couldn’t be good sports, he wouldn’t let them try out for the team.

“During tryouts, I couldn’t keep up with the other boys. I couldn’t make any three pointers. I could *barely* hit the rim for free throws. By the end of tryouts, I had decided that there was *no way* I had made the team.

“Little did I know it, but I had gotten the attention of Mr. Carpena. Before I was able to leave, he approached me and told me that I had the best drive and the best heart of anyone at the tryouts. I pointed out that I hadn’t made a single basket. He said that it didn’t matter. That basketball was more than that.

“When he posted the results the following day, my name was at the top of the list. As team captain. I was flabbergasted! When I asked him why he had chosen me as team captain, he said that I had the most spirit. My teammates weren’t too happy to find out that *I* was their captain, but Mr. Carpena assured me that they would get over that soon enough.

SAMPLE

“During that first season of basketball, my confidence and self-esteem grew by leaps and bounds. And so did I! By the end of the season, not only was I as tall as my teammates, but I was also the best point guard we had!

“I stayed on the basketball team all through middle school and high school. I even earned a full ride scholarship to college!”

“So why did *you* become a teacher?” Victor asked.

“Because, Mr. Carpena made a great impact on my life. He showed me that things this world may see as a weakness, *you* can turn into your greatest strength.”

Mr. Thomas then motioned to his left and the process continued.

It took about fifteen or twenty minutes, but Victor and his mom heard what *every* teacher had to say. And each one had a unique story about how they were negatively affected by the words and actions of people in their lives, but that it took just *one* person to see their potential to keep them going. To help them realize that the words and actions of other people don’t determine who you *are* or who you’ll *one day* become. And before Victor was even halfway through the line, Principal Martinez had to leave the room to fetch a box of tissues.

After the last teacher offered their story, Victor’s mom walked up to me and thanked me with tears in her eyes before hugging me.

“You’re welcome, ma’am. I just hope this helps,” I said honestly.

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“This *may* help. It just, might, help,” she said, turning to look at Victor who was nodding his head gently.

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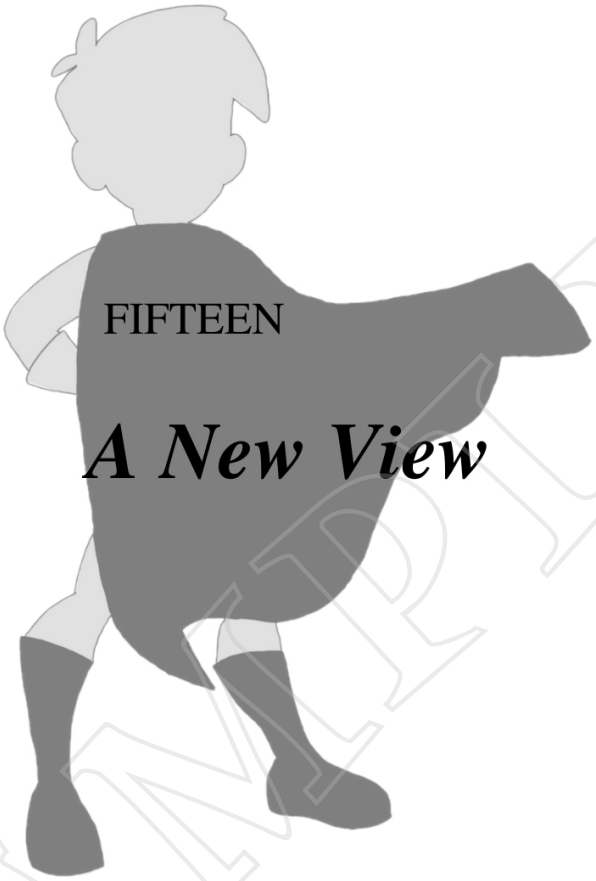
15 A New View



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There was still some time before school started, so I headed to the breakfast line to get some food while Victor and his mom met with Principal Martinez in his office.

"What were you doing in the teacher's lounge?" Justin asked.

"Nothing really," I answered.

"'Nothing really'? 'Nothing really'? Students are *not* allowed into the teacher's lounge, so I *doubt* it was 'nothing really'!" he said,

excitedly.

"You're right," I admitted.

"I know I'm right," he said, "so what were you doing?"

"Students *aren't* allowed into the teacher's lounge," I answered, before taking a spoonful of cereal into my mouth.

"Fine! *Don't* tell me!" he said, walking away in protest.

"Is everything okay?" Marcus asked, as he passed by Justin, on his way over to me.

"Nuffing wong he-ew," I said.

"What about the other day?" he asked, sitting down next to me.

"The other day?" I asked, truly unsure of what he meant.

"The other day," he said in a 'don't you remember' kind of voice, "you didn't come to my house because you wanted to go straight home."

"Oh!" I said, now knowing what he was talking about.

"'Oh!'" he mimicked.

"Yeah. Everything's okay," I said, taking another spoonful of yummy, sugary cereal.

"That's it? Just 'everything's okay'? No details?" he asked.

"Yup!" was my short answer.

Marcus gave me that 'best friends don't keep secrets from each other' look. But it wasn't going to work this time. I had made Victor a promise, and I was *determined* to keep it.

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Just before lunch, the whole T.J. League got called up to Principal Martinez's office. We had *no* idea why. And when we got to his office, Principal Martinez wasn't even there!

"Do *you* know why we got called up here?" Erick asked me.

"No," I answered, truthfully. "Why would I know?"

"Because you're in Principal Martinez's office more than *any* of us!" Paul pointed out.

"That doesn't mean I know why we're here!" I said, defensively.

"There you guys are!" Principal Martinez said, loudly, from outside his doorway.

"Good morning."

"Hi."

"Nice to see you."

"Follow me," he said, enthusiastically.

As Principal Martinez led us down the hall, we all exchanged confused glances. It was my turn to help Paul, so I walked slowly, that way he wouldn't get left behind. Luckily, Principal Martinez noticed and slowed down so that we all arrived at our destination together. Mrs. Garrison's room.

He then opened the door and motioned for us to enter. When we got inside, I noticed that all the tables in Mrs. Garrison's room had been put together to create one long table. In the center of that table,

SAMPLE

there was pizza, drinks, and ice cream. And at the far end of the table, stood Mrs. Garrison, Victor, and his mom.

"Come on in boys, and young lady," Mrs. Garrison greeted us.

"What's all this?" Sammy asked.

"This is for you," Principal Martinez answered.

"But *why*?" Marcus asked.

"Dude who *cares* why?" Justin whispered, loudly.

Everyone else in the T.J. League turned and gave him a 'are you *serious*?' look. To which he responded with a '*sor-ry*' look and raised hands in defense.

"It's just my way of saying thank you," Victor's mom said.

"For what?" Erick asked.

"For everything you've done for my son, Victor," she answered.

Everyone in the T.J. league, but me, exchanged confused looks again.

"Well, for everything you *tried* to do," she clarified. "To try and become his friend."

"I'm confused," Paul said, handing me his crutches and taking a seat.

"You see, Victor has had trouble making friends at his old schools," she started. "We haven't exactly stayed in one place long enough for him to make the right *kind* of friends. And I was afraid that when we moved here, he wouldn't have much luck, just like before."

SAMPLE

“Why don’t we all take a seat,” Mrs. Garrison suggested.

As everyone took a seat, Mrs. Garrison and Principal Martinez began to pass out the pizza and drinks. I guess so that the pizza wouldn’t get cold.

“And if it wasn’t for you guys,” Victor’s mom continued, “I *never* would have found out what was happening to my Victor.”

Confused looks were passed around, once again. Then Victor decided to speak.

“If it wasn’t for you guys,” he said quietly, “I never would have had the courage to tell my mom that Jack was abusing me.”

“What?”

“Who’s Jack?”

“Jack was *what*!”

“Jack is—*was*—my fiancé,” Victor’s mom clarified.

“Jack had taught me that nobody cared about me. And that the only reason that people were my friends, was because they felt sorry for me,” Victor explained.

“That’s terrible!”

“That’s horrible!”

“*That’s* unforgivable!”

“*That’s* why I was so mean to you guys,” Victor said. “*That’s* why I said all those mean things. Not because I was *trying* to be mean. I was just tired of people feeling sorry for me.”

“I *never* felt sorry for you,” Sammy said.

SAMPLE

“Yeah!” Justin chimed in.

“We just *truly* wanted to be your friends!” Marcus pointed out.

“But *why* did you guys want to be my friend so badly?” Victor asked.

“I think *I’m* at fault for that one,” Principal Martinez said, holding his hand up. “You see, I read your file and the notes that your teachers and principals had written in it. And there seemed to be an ongoing theme: becoming friends with the *wrong* people.

“And Erick, Justin, Marcus, Paul and Samantha, and T.J., also known as the T.J. League, are some of the school’s *best* examples of what a *true* friend should be. So, I just thought that if I asked them to show you around the school, you might just have a better chance of making the *right* friends.”

“Thank you,” Victor’s mom said.

“Yeah, thank you,” Victor echoed. “I think I get it now. After hearing everything those teachers had to say and looking back at the past couple of weeks, I now know that people can and *do* care. I just need to surround myself with the *right* people.

“I’ve also learned that that *no one* gets to determine *who* I’ll be some day. Only *I* get to determine that. And with the right kind of friends and teachers, there’s *nothing* I can’t do. Who knows? Maybe one day *I’ll* be a teacher. Maybe *I’ll* be the one with a story to tell. Maybe *I’ll* be the one that gets to help a kid get a new view on life. If not me, then who?”

SAMPLE

Victor paused, looked down at his lap and then back up at me.

“But until then, I was wondering if joining the T.J. League was still an option.”

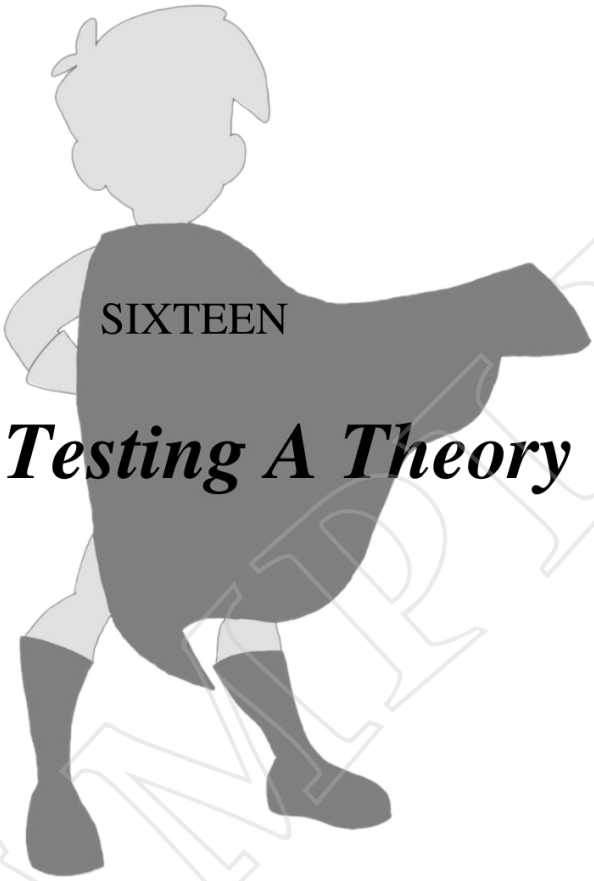
“Of course!”

“Yeah, man!”

“Let’s go!”

SAMPLE

16 Testing A Theory



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After that special lunch, Victor became an official member of the T.J. League. He didn't have any favorite superheroes, but that was okay. Sammy made sure he had *plenty* of reading material to make his decision. In the meantime, we've been having loads of fun just playing and hanging out.

It seems that Victor *was* paying attention when we were trying to become his friends. So much so, that he took each of us up on our

offers. You know, the things we had invited him to do?

First, he started with Sammy. Not only did she introduce Victor to the amazing world of comic books, through her personal collection at home, but she also introduced him to recess soccer. Sammy chose two fourth graders as team captain then loudly mentioned how good Victor was at soccer. You know, the way people do while looking at the sky, on their tippy toes, with their hands behind their backs. Yeah, like that.

Because of that little trick, Victor *wasn't* picked last. He also was the star of the soccer field that recess! You see, soccer works just like basketball. As soon as a team scores, the game resets. The winning team gets to continue playing, while the losing team has to get back in line and wait their turn to play again. Victor kept scoring on the other team, so *his* team never lost!

Second, Victor asked Marcus for some help with his math homework. Of course, Marcus obliged. And because Marcus and I switch houses after school, for homework, Victor got to meet our families!

While at his house, Marcus showed Victor some great tricks for learning his times tables. You know, how anything times zero is zero. And how you just have to add a zero to the number being times'd by ten. Or how when you multiply by nine, the tens place goes *up* by one and the ones place goes *down* by one. Things like that.

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Then Paul organized another video game and pizza day at his house. It took some convincing, but after *promising* that there would be no acrobatics, his mom finally agreed to let us come over.

We decided to start off with an easy game. The same one that Paul had tried to get him to play that day at the big tree. After getting the timing down, Victor ended up being the best of *all* of us at getting that frog across the screen! And when we decided to play some more difficult games, he was a *natural* at those, too! I think Victor has found his calling!

Next, we went to the park so Justin could give Victor some pointers on how to shoot a basketball. We all decided that playing around the world was better than trying to have a full-on game.

'It's all in the wrist,' Justin kept on telling him. And after not too long, Victor found out he was a pretty decent shot! He ended up beating Paul and me! I mean, *yes* Paul is still on crutches. And *yes*, I'm terrible at sports with a ball. But *still*! You have to admit. He *still* did pretty well for his first time!

After that, Victor's mom organized a bowling trip so we could all go bowling. Unlimited pizza and wings and all!

For the first game, we all started with the bumpers, you know, to make it fair. But for the second game, we tried it without the bumpers. Then we found something out. We're *all* pretty terrible at bowling!

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As for whether or not Justin upset Sammy as the wing eating champion, once again he was defeated. Actually, Sammy didn't win either. Victor, who pointed out that we didn't have to eat them all at once, paced himself during our time at the bowling alley, and beat Sammy out by just *one* wing!

Finally, Victor asked Erick if he still wanted a partner for the Annual Dance Off. Erick jumped so high, that he almost fell down when he landed. With just a week to go, Victor spent *every* lunch recess practicing and *every* afternoon at Erick's house so that they would be as ready as they could possibly be.

When the day finally came, the whole T.J. League showed up to offer our support. After all the dance routines had shown their talent, the judges needed time to tally up the points, so Principal Martinez took the mic and tried some standup comedy. *Tried* being the key word. I think he should stick with being principal. He's *good* at that!

Even though they didn't win, when their names were called out for second place, Erick and Victor shared an enthusiastic handshake that took like ten seconds to complete. Guess dancing wasn't the *only* thing they were practicing over the past week!

Erick's and Victor's mom offered to take us out for ice cream after the dance off. And after some begging on our parts, our parents agreed to let us go.

"So, guess we're seven for seven," I said, taking a lick of my ice cream and looking at Sammy.

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“What?” Victor asked.

“Oh, nothing,” Sammy said, smiling while kicking me under the table and with a ‘be quiet!’ look on her face.

“What made you do it?” Marcus asked Victor.

“Do what?” he asked.

“You think I didn’t notice?” Marcus shot back.

“Notice *what*!” Victor said, genuinely confused.

“Yeah, notice what?” Justin asked.

“You took us *all* up on our original offers,” Marcus said.

“What do you mean?” Paul asked.

“It’s like this,” Marcus said, leaning in as he spoke. “We all approached Victor with an idea to become his friend.”

“Uh huh,” Erick said, while we *all* leaned in with Marcus.

“First, T.J. asked him to join the T.J. League,” Marcus said, using his fingers to keep count. “Secondly, Sammy offered to make him a captain for soccer at recess. Then, I offered to help him with math. After that, Paul invited him for video games and pizza. Justin wanted to teach him the best way to shoot a basketball. I tried again by inviting him to go cosmic bowling. And with *you*, Erick, being the last person who approached him, Victor has now done *everything* we originally asked him to do.”

“Oh!” we all said, in unison.

“So, I repeat,” Marcus said, “what made you do it?”

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“I wanted to see what Principal Martinez was talking about,” Victor answered.

“I’m confused again,” Justin said, raising his hand like we were in school.

“At that lunch we had in Mrs. Garrison’s office, Principal Martinez said that you guys were some of the *best* examples the school has of what a *true* friend should be,” Victor said.

“Uh huh,” Sammy said, slowly with her eyes slightly closed.

“And I just wanted to see if what he said was true!” he admitted. “You know, test his theory out for myself!”

“So?” I said.

“So, what?” Paul said.

“So, what do you say?” I clarified. “Do we pass your test?”

“Hmmm,” Victor said, sitting quietly for a moment while scratching his chin and staring at the ceiling.

“Oh, come on!”

“Really!”

“Dude!”

“Just say something, already!”

Then he took another lick of his ice cream and smiled the biggest smile I’ve ever seen him use.

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17 Until Next Time

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The great times with Victor and the T.J. League continued beyond that night at the ice cream parlor.

Any time he needs help with homework, Victor walks home with Marcus and me. His mom has offered to drive us, but he says he likes the time we get to spend together when we walk. He already knows how to get to our houses, from memory! And because he's

taller than Marcus and me, he has *no* trouble jumping the fence in the backyard.

Now, we *would* walk to *his* house after school, but *he* lives even farther than *Paul*! But I think that it's worked out for the better. Our moms have even gotten to know his mom pretty well and sometimes they even ask her and Victor to stay for dinner!

Sammy continues to provide Victor with endless supplies of what she calls 'research'. Since comic books aren't actually allowed at our school, Principal Martinez just asks that we exchange them after school, which we agreed was fair.

Victor says that his favorite character, so far, is Wolverine. He says that he likes how Wolverine has a past that could have led him to be a complete bad guy. *But*, because *one* person saw the potential in him; because he surrounded himself with the *right* kind of people, he now fights for the good guys. He fights for those who can't fight for themselves.

We've also discovered that Victor is a *complete* natural when it comes to video games! We even went mini golfing last Friday, and since we had some extra time before our moms were going to pick us up, we went inside to the arcade. Victor hadn't brought any money with him, since he thought we were only going to be mini golfing. I had five dollars on me, so I gave him one dollar and I kept the other four.

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When I had finished using up my money, I searched the arcade for Victor, assuming he had already spent his four quarters. Boy was *I* wrong. Not only was Victor still playing an arcade game, but he still had *fifty* cents in his pocket! I asked him if anyone else had given him any money and he said no!

When it comes to soccer, Victor has become the second-best player in our school! The only person that can beat him is Marcus. Which is why they're not able to be on the same team. Kind of like Marcus and I aren't allowed to be on the same team for freeze tag. He says that he's okay being second best.

And we still go to the park sometimes, to play around the world. And although he hasn't gotten much better, he still beats Paul and me! Paul blames it on his leg. I don't blame it on anything. I just remind everyone that balls full of air and I have an unspoken agreement to stay as far away from each other as we can. Except when I'm being a Future Funmaker, that is.

And now, every week at the end of Music Hall, when Mrs. Jordan plays the High Five Song, Victor shows us the newest dance moves that Erick has taught him. Except when she plays classical music. Then he just twirls around and jumps in the air like he's a ballerina. This usually makes everyone laugh. Including Mrs. Whiston and Mrs. Jordan.

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“I can’t believe I was missing out on *so* much!” Victor said, excitedly, as we sat, finishing our lunches.

“Well, I’m just glad you came to *our* school,” I said.

“Yeah,” Justin agreed.

“You’ve made this year *so* much better,” Erick pointed out.

“And I have *no* idea how long it’s going to take me to beat *your* high score on *my* game!” Paul said, throwing his hands up.

“How’s that a good thing?” Sammy asked.

“Because of *Victor*,” Paul said, gesturing at him with *both* hands, “I’m going to have to practice more. Which will in turn, make me a better gamer!”

“Makes sense,” Marcus said.

“Thanks guys,” Victor said. “For everything.”

“Thank T.J.!” Justin said, redirecting praise to me.

“Yeah, thank our fearless leader,” Paul chimed in.

“He’s the one who wouldn’t give up on you,” Erick pointed out.

“A great leader, through and through,” Marcus said, patting me on the shoulder.

“There’s no one else like him,” Sammy said, patting me on the *other* shoulder.

“I just did what Batman would do. I didn’t give up until I found the *right* solution to the problem. And boy am I glad I did,” I said, putting my arm around Victor’s shoulder.

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“Group hug!” Justin shouted, causing everyone to squeeze in the best they could, since they were all standing up and Victor and I were still sitting at a table.

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After school, Victor asked his mom if he could walk home with Marcus and me, but his mom said that they had something important to do, so he couldn’t go. Marcus and I didn’t think anything of it. We just figured he had forgotten about a doctor’s or dentist’s appointment or something. So, we started walking home without noticing Victor’s mom walking back into the school. Little did we know that we would find out the *real* reason the following day.

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The next morning, Victor wasn’t at school. As I sat next to his empty chair, wondering why he wasn’t there, the T.J. League was once again called up to Principal Martinez’s office. Only this time, it wasn’t even recess time yet!

When we got to the office, Principal Martinez’s office door was closed, so we waited at the front of the office. And once again, we questioned each other to see if anyone knew why we had been called up. And once again, *no one* knew *why!*

After a few minutes, the door to Principal Martinez’s office opened and he invited us to all come in. I was the first one to enter and I was surprised at what I saw. Behind Principal Martinez’s desk

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stood Victor and his mom! Victor's eyes and Victor's mom's eyes were red as if they had been crying.

"What's going on?" I asked, as we all squeezed into the room.

After closing the door and squeezing his way behind his desk, where Victor and his mom stood, Principal Martinez motioned for Victor's mom to explain.

"Good morning," she said, her voice a little shaky. "I just want to start off by thanking you all again for being such great friends to my Victor."

She took a deep breath and continued to talk.

"As we explained before, my ex-fiancé, Jack was abusing Victor. And when I found out, I had him arrested. Since then, Victor and I have been living the best life we've had since he was just a little thing.

"Unfortunately, the house we're living in, is in Jack's name. And because of that, we can't stay. Yesterday, his lawyer stopped by and told us that we had forty-eight hours to leave, or we would be arrested."

Nobody said anything, so as not to interrupt, but I'm sure the looks on our faces and our clenched fists spoke all the words that we wanted to say.

"That's why Victor couldn't walk home with you, T.J. and Marcus. Actually, after you guys left, I had a meeting with Mr. Martinez. He's helped us find a place to stay until I can finish all the

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necessary paperwork to make sure that Jack never gets to hurt Victor, ever again.

“And once that’s finished, to make sure that Victor *stays* safe, we’re going to be moving somewhere secret so that we can get a fresh start.”

“But you’ve already *gotten* a fresh start!” Justin said, through watery eyes.

“Yeah,” Erick sniffled. “You can’t just leave us.”

“You still have *so* much more research to do!” Sammy said, wiping a falling tear.

“And how can I rub it in your face when I finally beat your high score?” Paul said, looking down at the ground.

“You guys,” Marcus scolded, “you’re not making this any easier for him.”

“Yeah guys,” I agreed. “This is *not* how we treat a fellow Leaguer.”

“But—,”

“‘But’ nothing,” I said, in a commanding tone.

“Sorry.”

“Do you have anything *you* want to say, Victor?” Principal Martinez asked.

Just like his mom, Victor took a deep breath before speaking.

“I know that I’ve said this over and over these past weeks, but thank you. Truly, thank you. Principal Martinez was right. You guys

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are the *bestest* friends anyone could ask for.

“It’s because of you guys that I know, whatever school I go to next, I can make friends. And it’s because of you guys, that I’ll know which ones are the *right* kind of friends. The ones that are trustworthy. Respectful. Fair. Caring. And kind. The ones that stick up for those who can’t stick up for themselves.

“I will *never* forget you guys. And don’t worry, I’m *sure* we’ll meet again, someday.”

After finishing what he had to say, he stepped forward and gave us all hugs. One by one. His mother followed behind and did the same.

“Okay, you guys. Thank you for coming up,” Principal Martinez said. “You can head back to—.”

“Wait.” I interrupted. “There’s something important we have to do.”

Once I realized that Principal Martinez wasn’t going to object, I placed my hand in front of me like I had done so many times before. Marcus placed his hand on top of mine, followed by Erick, Justin, Paul, Sammy and finally, Victor.

“Once a Leaguer, always a leaguer,” I said, looking at everyone in the eye. They all nodded in agreement. “We protect and serve all living things!”

“The T.J. League reigns supreme!”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

"Mr. Angel" Ramirez

"Mr. Angel" has been writing stories since his elementary school days, and after MUCH encouragement from students, friends, and family, has decided to publish some of them for others to enjoy. When he isn't writing, he can be found leading the Blueprint Youth Ministry at Calvary Chapel Into The Light, spending time with his niece and nephews, or enjoying his favorite food: cookies!

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BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR

T.J.'S Adventures - Operation Full Control

The T.J. League 'protects and serves all living things' and does it nearly every recess. That is until he came to the school. Now things have changed and no one is having fun. Well, except for Erick. Something must be done. Can the T.J. League get things back to the way they were? Join us and find out!

Parental Guidance: Visits Topic of Strained Frienships

T.J.'S Adventures - The Nighttime Nemesis

T.J.'s scary bedtime story has been read by the entire fifth grade and the outcome is probably not what Mr. Anderson or Mrs. Whiston were thinking of when they assigned this free write. Bad dreams. Angry parents. Stuff like that. And now something new has come to light. What ever will T.J. do now?

Parental Guidance: Visits Topic of Bed Wetting

T.J.'S Adventures - Objective: Protect & Serve

It's been raining for days now, making recess a bit different for the T.J. League, Funmaker John and the rest of the students at T.J.'s school. And guess what? Today starts off just the same. But now the electricity is out, the Internet is down and the T.J. League is stuck in the MPR with all the first graders. There's no way things can't get any worse.

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Parental Guidance: Visits Topic of a School Lockdown

T.J.'S Adventures - Operation Superhero Support

It's almost Christmas, and the T.J. League, like everyone else, is preparing for all the fun things that the season brings. Until Sammy notices something, that is. But it could be nothing. But then again, maybe it's something. T.J. can't remember the last time Sammy was wrong. But then again, there's a first for everything. Right?

Parental Guidance: Visits Topic of Women and Children's Shelters

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