

The Fire and the Agony

PEOPLE WERE MILLING around the phys-ed bulletin board before classes. Ours wasn't the only team choosing captains that day, and everyone there waited impatiently for each coach to put up the results.

I wasn't one of the kids waiting. Sure, I wanted to be captain, but I didn't want to think about it. The more I thought about it, the more worried I would get, and I'd feel miserable until the results went up. Better to think about anything else until then. I thought about my new teachers, my old friends, what I would have for lunch, anything but the track team and Austin Pace in his million-dollar Aeropedes that never got dirty and looked like they came from planet Krypton, or someplace like that.

I wandered around a bit before the homeroom bell rang, looking for people I hadn't seen the day before. People really do change in one summer. Charlie Garcias had grown like six inches since June, certain locations on Abbie Singer had begun to inflate, if you know what I mean, and half of every-

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one I knew seemed to have gotten rid of their braces. I talked to Ralph Sherman, who said that he made a movie in Hollywood over the summer. Ralph was always good for a laugh, because he had never uttered a word of truth in his entire life.

Pretty soon I forgot all about the track team, and was in a good mood—such a good mood that I even said hello to Tyson McGaw. He grunted back, then five minutes later got himself into a fight with some kid whose name I don't remember.

Watching Tyson get into fights was a school tradition. Personally, I never got into a real fight with him. Like I said before, Tyson fought like an animal, and I wanted nothing to do with that. Just looking at him you could tell that something wasn't quite right; his eyes were kind of far away, like he wasn't seeing you, and his stringy, matted hair was just plain ugly—it seemed no amount of combing could help that. Tyson was definitely not a mother's dream.

Mr. Greene saw the fight and ran down the hall. Mr. Greene was a vice principal, but doubled as the school guidance counselor, which must have been a tough job, since so many kids go wacko during junior high.

After Mr. Greene had broken up the fight (which wasn't much of a fight; it was more like Tyson doing an impersonation of the Tasmanian devil), everyone in the hall began to applaud and laugh at Tyson as he continued struggling with

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Greene. I have to admit, I laughed a little, too—like I said, it was a school tradition.

Mr. Greene held him as he struggled, then Tyson turned to Greene and screamed out a whole lot of words I don't want to repeat, and started breathing like a bull ready to charge.

"You know what he did?" he screamed at Greene.

"What did he do, Tyson?"

"He called me a slimeball!"

I laughed right away—I just couldn't help it. It was the way he said it, with all that anger in his voice, long and drawn out: "sliyyyyyyim-balllll."

Everyone laughed, but I guess I must have laughed the loudest, because Tyson broke away from Greene and stomped up to me.

"You think that's funny, huh?" he yelled, almost ready to pull back his fist and hit me.

"You touch me, Tyson, and I swear I'll flatten you!" I said. "I'll . . . I'll hang you by your toenails over a bear trap!"

That one really sent him for a loop. He looked at me with those weird eyes, trying to figure out how that would feel. For a split second, I felt bad for him. Here he was, this nutty kid in a frenzy, and everyone was laughing at him. He must have felt terrible. I almost felt like saying, "It's OK, Tyson, you're not a slimeball, take it easy," just to make him feel better, but then everyone around me began to laugh even harder, and Tyson stormed off.

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Greene gave me this dirty look that said, "Bear trap? I'll give you bear trap! Bang! Zoom!" and ran after Tyson. Yes, school was the same as ever.

As the homeroom bell rang, I heard a voice behind me.

"Jared, I'd like to speak with you for a minute."

I recognized the voice right away. I turned to see Coach Shuler. You know that feeling you get when you think something great is gonna happen, and your heart misses a beat, and you get shivers down your spine? Well, that's what I felt just then. Why would Coach Shuler pull me aside to talk to me unless he had good news for me about the captaincy?

"Hi, Coach, what's up?" I said cheerfully.

"Got a minute?"

"Yeah."

"Great. Why don't you come into my office."

I followed him down the hall, and into the gym, where it was much quieter. Our footsteps echoed in the huge empty gym as we crossed it. It was cold and the air had the sour smell of the floor varnish. We went into the gym office.

"Have a seat," he said, then he picked up his clipboard and began to look at it. He sat in the other chair, behind the desk. "I totaled up the results," he said.

"Yeah?" I said, trying to sound like I didn't really care.

"It was pretty close."

"Yeah?"

He looked up from his clipboard. I really couldn't read his expression. He had a poker face, I guess; you could never

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tell what was in his head. He stalled, keeping me in suspense. I didn't have a poker face; I knew all the expectation was in my eyes. In my lap I had my fingers crossed so hard that my knuckles were turning white.

"You didn't get it, Jared. I'm sorry."

At first it was like I didn't quite hear him. My fingers were still crossed, as if crossing them could change what he had said. I still held my breath, but then what my ears had heard made its way into my brain.

You know that sinking feeling—the kind you get about ten seconds before you realize that you're going to throw up? Well, I didn't feel like I was going to throw up, but that sinking feeling stayed around for a long time.

Before I went into his office, I had been prepared to lose, but then he called me in, and I was sure that I had won. Why couldn't he have just let me find out when he posted it? I could have handled that. It wouldn't have been so bad; I would have just looked and walked away. But now he had gotten my hopes up, and I couldn't just walk away; I had to sit there and feel lousy.

"Like I said," continued the coach, "it was a close race. You and Austin were neck and neck all the way." He began to fiddle with his clipboard. If it wasn't his clipboard, it was his whistle, if it wasn't his whistle it was his glasses—he always fiddled with something. "Listen, I know how much you wanted to be captain, and because of all your hard work, I'm

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going to make you a very special offer. As runner-up, you are entitled to something very special, so I'm making you assistant coach."

"Assistant coach?" I said. It might not sound so bad to you, but you have to understand that assistant coach was a position usually given to some younger kid who was not a good enough runner to be on the team. He might as well have told me I was team mascot. Assistant coach!

"That's right."

"Well, what do I get to do?"

"Take attendance, get equipment, stuff like that."

Well, what was I supposed to say to that? Austin gets all the glory and power of being team captain, and I get to take attendance. I tried to be enthusiastic, but I just couldn't, and the coach could see it in my eyes. I didn't have a poker face.

"Thanks," I said.

"You don't seem too happy about it."

"No, I'm happy. I'm just a little upset about not being captain. That's all."

"Sure, I understand. You can hang around here for a few minutes if you like. I'll give you a late pass for home-room."

"Naah, that's OK." I'm sure he could tell by my voice that it wasn't OK. I didn't have a poker voice either.

"Listen," he said, "there's always high school."

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"Right," I said, silently thinking how L'Austin Space would win again when we were seniors in high school. "Thanks," I said.

"Least I could do. You're a good kid, Jared. I feel bad for you."

"Naah, don't feel bad for me. I don't want you feeling bad for me."

"Well, I mean that I think sometimes life gives people the short end of the stick, you know, and I think you deserve more."

"Thanks," I said, for the twelve-hundredth time.

"See you this afternoon?"

"Yep."

"Be early," he said, "so you can take attendance."

The hall was empty when I left the gym, except for one kid; none other than L'Austin Space himself was standing outside the gym doors. He was waiting for me. It wasn't a coincidence.

"Oh, you spoke to the coach already, huh?" he said.

"Yep."

"So he told you I won?"

"How did you already know?"

"He spoke to me first," said Austin. "You don't think he'd tell you before he told me, do you?" Austin waited for an answer, but I didn't give him one.

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"I bet you'll like being team secretary," he said.

"Assistant coach!"

"All it really is is team secretary. Hey, I'll make sure to give you lots of memos to type. Maybe you can come over to my house sometime and answer some phones," he said, laughing.

I turned and walked down the hall. He followed, his Aeropeds gliding across the floor. I wanted to step on them, and leave nice gray tread marks on the snow-white leather toes.

"It's not secretary," I said.

"All right, 'gopher' then."

I stopped. "What?"

"You know, Gopher: 'hey Jared, go-pher this, hey Jared, go-pher that, hey Jared, go-pher, go-pher, go-pher.'"

I just scowled at him. He saw the anger in my unpoker face, and laughed. "Just kidding," he said, in the nastiest, most obnoxious tone a person could come up with, then he laughed harder and turned away, his Aeropeds bouncing off down the hallway, squeaking on the floor.

I felt more humiliated than I'd felt in a long time as I walked down the hall. It wasn't the fact that I was assistant coach that bothered me, it was the fact that Austin knew first, and as usual, made fun of me, calling me "Gopher." It was bad enough to feel hidden in his shadow, but to be humiliated; that was something else. He was twisting the knife.