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How would I feel if Austin Pace had never been born? Let's not talk about it.

The alarm went off at 1:30. That's right, you guessed it: another school fire. I can't say I wasn't glad to hear the alarm bell; I hadn't been able to concentrate all day because of what had happened that morning. At least now I could feel angry without having to pay attention to teachers at the same time.

Used to be nobody raised much of a fuss when the fire alarm went off. The teachers would just get the class up and funnel them "in an orderly manner" down the stairway and out into the field. Now it was much quicker, and much more serious. Used to be they were all drills or false alarms, but last year there were three real fires. The last one burned down the gym.

Now, as we marched into the hall, I could swear I already smelled smoke.

The scene out in the field was much more chaotic than any of the teachers could stand for. Kids were running in the field, and the neat little rows of classes were breaking down into mobs of kids—a good many of them pressing up against the fence to see the smoke pouring out of the cafeteria. It wasn't a whole lot of smoke, but it was enough to cause a commotion.

I didn't really care to watch the fire; I had my own prob-

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lems to think about. If I sound heartless, it isn't because I didn't care about anyone left in the school. I had overheard the principal say that the school had been cleared, and there was nothing to worry about, except for the cafeteria burning down (which, believe me, is exactly what the cafeteria deserved).

While the cafeteria smoked, I fumed, still filled with the anger Austin had put in me that morning.

"I don't want to talk about it!" I told Cheryl when she asked me about the track team. She knew exactly what I meant when I said, "And don't ask again."

"Well, join the club," she said.

"Why, what's wrong with you?"

"Oh, nothing," she said. "It's just that the play they're doing this year is *Annie*."

"So?"

"So, guess what snotty little brat is absolutely perfect for the role?"

"Rebecca's trying out?"

"I don't even think she has to. They'll just look at her and give her the role."

Cheryl continued to complain at me about Rebecca and other things. I turned to look at the school. The firefighters were standing by the fire truck, doing nothing in particular, which meant that the fire was not a big one and had been

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put out right away. The cafeteria had been saved, although it would probably smell like smoke for the rest of the year.

We all knew there would be no more school that day; not till they were positive there was no fire left, and the building had a chance to air out. Still, they couldn't let us go home until 3:00, and so the school yard began to resemble a junior high school riot, with kids playing all sorts of unruly games that made the teachers all start pulling out their hair.

"... a club," said Cheryl.

"Huh?" I asked, not having heard her.

"I said we should form a club of all the kids who are second-best."

I laughed. "Yeah, right . . . and one by one do away with everyone in our way! Mwaaah-ha-haa!"

"No, I'm serious. We could have a club just for fun—something that only we could have, and none of the 'unbeatable' kids could be in it, a second-best club!"

"That's a stupid idea," I said.

"No it's not! We could all go and do things, and have fun, and really make the 'unbeatable' kids jealous that we thought of it before they did. We'll be one up on them for a change."

"Yeah? Who would be in this club?"

"I don't know. We'd have to think about it for a while, and come up with some names. I'll bet there are lots of kids who'd want to be in it—my brother, for instance."

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"Nobody else'll want to do it. They'll laugh at us."

"But if they don't, Jared, we could be starting something big, a secret club that will go on for years after we've gone on to high school!"

I thought about this. Cheryl always had a way of convincing me of things. But this time she wasn't the one who convinced me. It was someone else.

"Hey, Jared," someone called. It was that familiar voice, a voice I didn't want to hear. I could almost see those Aeropedes and that red hair, and those long bony arms.

"Hey, Jared, wanna race?" asked Austin. "First race of the season."

So this was it. The challenge. Austin was always the one to challenge first. Usually he waited until the second week, when he had seen me run and was absolutely sure he'd be able to beat me. This time he asked on the second day, and there were too many kids around for me to turn down the challenge.

"Don't you think it'd be better if we waited till the field was clear?" I said.

"Isn't this clear enough?"

I turned around. Sure enough, the field was clear enough to race. Austin had come over with about ten kids, and more kids were joining us, because everyone knew what he was up to, and everyone knew about our rivalry.

"Maybe we should wait until your legs grow some more,"

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he said. Everyone laughed. I laughed, too; better to be laughed *with* than laughed *at*, right? Inside I wasn't laughing, though.

"Fine, then," I said. "Right now."

Austin smiled that crocodile smile. "Greg, go about sixty yards, and judge us." Greg Miller, one of the new seventh graders on the team, obeyed, as if he had been given an order by God.

So this is where it begins, I thought, this year's competition. This year's war. I felt strong, I felt ready to run, I felt like I always felt when I raced with Austin—that maybe this time I would beat him.

We got down into starting position, then Austin got up.

"Wait," he said, and took off his precious shoes, then his socks. He was going to run barefoot. "OK." He got back down. "Ready to lose?" he asked.

I didn't answer.

Martin Bricker got ready to start us, as more and more kids turned to watch. Even teachers were watching. So this is where it begins.

"On your mark . . . get set . . . go!"

I took off like a bullet, cutting through the wind and pounding the grass with every last bit of my strength. I didn't turn to look, but I could see in the corner of my eye that we were neck and neck.

Ten yards were gone.

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I looked toward Greg, down the field, and concentrated on turning everything I had into power.

This is for every time you beat me in races as a kid!

I pushed harder.

And this is for when you came back to do it again last year!

I pushed harder.

And this is for how you made me feel this morning!

I pushed harder.

We were still neck and neck.

Thirty yards were gone. Thirty to go.

The cheers faded away behind us.

And this is for challenging me in front of the whole school, and this is for everything you'll ever try to do to me for the rest of our lives, and this is for those stupid running shoes you wear!

Forty yards gone.

I was ahead of him by a foot! I was beating him! I pushed harder.

Fifteen yards to go! Fifteen to go!

And then, like he'd been holding it all back, he flew out in front of me. He didn't inch out, he flew out, like I was standing still. He moved like a machine in fast forward; a ship blasting into hyperspace. He was a foot in front of me. Two feet. Three feet. He turned to look at me, and smiled that awful smile of his.

I lunged. I dove forward in a wild attempt to reach the finish line before he did, but he was there before I hit the

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ground. I was moving so fast that I skidded along the grass, skinning my elbows and ruining my pants.

The Agony of Defeat.

I felt like that skier who wipes out on the ski jump every Sunday on *Wide World of Sports*. The Agony of Defeat: skinned elbows and ruined pants and a laughing L'Austin Space.

By now kids were crowding around Austin.

"Wow, did you see Austin take off?"

"Wow, he really beat him bad!"

"Wow, Austin's so fast!"

Wow this, and wow that. Austin was loving every last bit of it. They crowded around him and left me there on the ground to examine my elbows.

"You shouldn't race Austin, kid," said a seventh grader. "Austin beats everybody."

Austin looked down at me. He was barely winded. "You ran pretty good . . . for a gopher!" he said, and everyone laughed.

"Gopher!" they all said. "Gopher, Gopher, Gopher!" Austin raised his hands to conduct them as they all chanted in unison: "Go-PHER! Go-PHER! Go-PHER!" over and over again.

I could have killed him! I could have ripped him limb from limb, but then I thought about Tyson McGaw. No. I wasn't Tyson. I was civilized, and I wasn't going to attack

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Austin. Instead I stood up, brushed myself off, and waited till the gopher-chanting stopped. Then I looked Austin straight in the face, and put out my hand.

"Nice race, Austin." I shook his hand. Let me tell you, it took all my strength to do it, too.

"Yeah," he said. "See ya around, Gopher."

I turned and left while everyone crowded around Austin. My elbows had just begun hurting.

Cheryl was there waiting for me. That's one thing about her; she was always there, and she never laughed at me either.

"Are you OK?" she asked.

I looked back toward Austin, then turned to Cheryl and asked, "So, what are we going to call our club?"