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The big fight wasn't exactly my fault. Also, there wasn't exactly a fight, except for the fact that I did get punched out. It's about the beginning of September on a really hot day, the kind of day we always have in Balona, CA 95232, in the fall. And just before lunch we were coming in from the field, sweating like crazy and kicking the ball on our way to the showers, even though Coach O'Gorgon is always telling us that's our one chance to pick up the ball and run with it.

A few guys from the other eighth-grade class were standing near the girls' locker room, ogling the females going in. I can't imagine why, since there's no Venus de Milo or Miss America among them. Except maybe for Claire Preene, who has long blonde hair and when she isn't being stuck-up is actually sort of pretty, if not Miss America. Maybe when she's in high school she might win Korndog Kween of Big Baloney—that's what we kids call Balona High School.

Anyway. My pal Mike Jacobs kicked the ball to little Sam Grappini as we closed on the locker room, and Sam aced it to me. I thought I would be really suave and zoom the ball into the locker-room doorway like a pinball into a gateway. And I would have, too, except that Dan Grady backed into the doorway just

when the ball left my foot. It made a straight shot and nailed him on the near shoulder, and he staggered into the door, hollering like a Klingon singing his Death Song.

Big deal. He wasn't hit so hard, and Coach O'Gorgon who came in from the field just then saw it all and goes to Dan, "Come on, Grady. You're not hurt. Get over to the other side of the gym and wait your turn to come in."

And to me he hollers through his big black mustache, "Ordway, you get out on the track and give me a lap. You know you're supposed to carry the ball in." It seems like most of the teachers here have mustaches.

I thought Coach's judgment was fair. Besides, Grady's jaws were clicking at me like the monster in *Predator*, so I went back out to the track and ran around it once and then came in, took my shower, got dressed, and got in the cafeteria line.

I haven't described myself yet so you can get a picture in your head about me, and I will pretty soon, but first I need to tell a word or two about Dan Grady since he is a noteworthy player in this drama, as they say. Dan is about two or three years older than any of the rest of us eighth graders and probably ought to be in maybe his third year of high school, because he's spent the last year or so "abiding" in a group home. The word about him was that he got caught doing something with a Delta City gang, and instead of sending him to Runcible Hall, the judge sent him somewhere over on the coast, and he couldn't get into school and sat it out for a year. Or maybe two. That's the story anyway.

Dan has hair on his arms and coming out of his nose. He has sort of a mustache and a belly, but also muscles that bulge out. A weird combination for a kid in junior high. He can do the giant swing, which means he can jump up and grab onto the horizontal bar and swing himself around eventually in a complete arc, jumping off at the end of the arc and landing on his feet. And he is only fifteen. Or probably sixteen. Anyway, he isn't as much kid as grownup. Even his voice is huge, even if it is squeaky. You could hear him swearing all the way across the field. Get the picture of Dan Grady? He is also about a foot higher than me and is thirty pounds heavier.

And, of course, hairier.

We were having korndogs for lunch, which we get served pretty often, since I guess Balona must be the korndog capital of the world. Sammy Jack Sly's great-grandpa is known as the Korndog King and they make korndogs right here in Balona, CA 95232, which otherwise is a pretty small town, being only about 2,000 people or so right next to the Yulumne River which has levees built up on both sides so it doesn't flood the town in the spring (except once in a while). Anyway, when I got my first korndog stuffed about half-way into my mouth I saw old Dan Grady coming across the cafeteria straight my way.

I was sitting with Mike and Sam. Mark Freundlich was right there, too, and John Ying and Sammy Jack Sly. Mark, who is pretty tall and has black curly hair and is mostly quiet, goes, "Hey, Jack," meaning me and not Sammy Jack, who is short and has lots of pimples. "Look who's coming for lunch," says Mark, and moved down the bench away from me a little. "Can I have your other korndog?" he says. "It looks like you're not gonna want it."

Dan Grady came straight up to our table and grabbed me by the shirt with one hand while I was looking at him, chewing my korndog like mad. Then he punched me in the mouth, causing me to fall back into Mark and John. Everything got sort of weird-looking, not only from the hit I took but also because now I didn't have my glasses on which had sort of flown off onto the table. I think he was going to come after me and hit me again.

But all of a sudden, there was Sam grabbing the mop that was leaning on the wall next to our table. He reversed the mop like he was in a Fourth of July parade with a rifle stuck out in front of him, and he hollered, "Hay, Grady" in his high voice. And Dan Grady turned around to see who was the twerp who was challenging him, and got the mop handle square in the middle of his solar plexus. He gasped and folded backwards, sitting down hard on the green tile floor.

Some kid yelled, "Hey, Grady's down!" Naturally, all the guys around, and girls too, climbed up on tables to see the sight, and there was lots of shouting to come see how Grady got clobbered.

Dan Grady was still just sitting there sort of wheezing and trying to catch his breath when Mr. Allison came to our rescue. Actually, Mr. Allison came to the rescue of Dan Grady, because I think Sam was about to stick old Dan again for good measure when Mr. Allison suddenly appeared with Mike Jacobs just behind him.

Now I need to tell you a little bit about Mr. Allison while old Grady is still catching his breath, because Mr. Allison is pretty important to all of us at Balona Junior High, which we often call Little Baloney and which isn't a three-year school like they have over in Delta City, but only grades seven and eight.

Mr. Allison is our principal. He is pretty old but he has most of his hair, black and slicked-down, and is in good shape despite having a pretty big nose and quite a belly on him. He was a paratrooper, as he keeps telling everybody, and he jumps for heart every year. Not out of an airplane, of course. He jumps rope in front of the eighth grade assembly and demonstrates how you can raise money for the Heart Association. It is quite a sight to see that belly going up and down and Mr. Allison getting redder and redder in the face and his slicked-down hair rising and falling all in one piece like a flying carpet up there.

We sort of hold our breath when Mr. Allison demonstrates rope jumping for us, because he is probably going to have a fit one of these days and collapse on the spot. At least that's what Mrs. Brill, the school secretary, keeps saying. But what he is doing when he demonstrates is showing us how to get involved in Jump Rope for Heart and bring triumph and fame to the school, like he says pretty often. Mr. Allison was also a boxer when he was younger, as he mentions every once in a while, so he is really a pretty good rope jumper, not gasping a whole lot while he jumps. He tells us that he gave up smoking cigarets a while back and he wouldn't gasp at all if he'd never smoked.

When I was an elementary school kid a couple of years ago he was my principal there, too, and we really liked him because he used to tell us stories and he taught us to jump rope. He also expected us to be kind to each other. And he liked us to learn to play musical instruments and chess. Claire Preene went to his

elementary school, too, and she credits Mr. Allison with her playing the flute today, since he once said she looked pretty playing the flute when she was just trying-out the thing at an instrument try-out the school was having.

Mr. Allison is strong, too, a lot stronger than even Dan Grady, which brings us back to the cafeteria where Dan is sitting there on the floor, looking dissed and embarrassed. Anyway, Mr. Allison picked Dan Grady up off the floor with one hand in Dan's hairy arm-pit and goes, "Okay, Dan, let's go to the office and have a chat." But he said it in a kind voice, even with all the kids gathered around and hoping he'd smack Dan Grady one. Or two. He also looked at me and said, "You, too, Jack."

Now that surprised me. It didn't surprise me that Mr. Allison would expect me to go to the office, but that he remembered my name even though he has almost four-hundred kids in school. That threw me, but my mom once told me that a good principal really needs to know the names of the kids, and Mr. Allison sure does.

"And Sam, too," he said. He looked around. "Who else saw exactly what happened?"

Mary Lucero piped up, "I did, Mr. Allison," even though she was sitting at least two table-rows away. Mary always has to say something, and usually it means bad news. Even though I was still kind of punchy, I saw that Mark Freundlich had edged even farther away not wanting to be part of this. I guess when big Mike Jacobs saw Dan heading across the room he just went and brought Mr. Allison, which was smart. John Ying sat there watching, listening, saying not a word, taking it all in.

Mr. Allison turned to Mr. Rip Sackworth, our math teacher who was on duty supervising the cafeteria—but who was actually sort of supervising Miss Runcible, the eighth-grade gym teacher who was also on duty and was sort of supervising Mr. Sackworth. I should mention that Claire Preene always calls Miss Runcible "Delilah," which I guess is her first name.

Miss Runcible's taller than Mr. Sackworth and sometimes she looks like maybe she's some older than him, but probably since she's also a lot prettier than him, he didn't seem to mind she being

taller and older.

“Did you witness this, Mr. Sackworth?” asked Mr. Allison.

And Mr. Sackworth looked around and scratched in his armpit and rubbed his long jaw and swiped his hand over his sandy-colored hair and said that he had been looking for seventh-grade crime in the other direction at that very moment and also that he thought Miss Runcible was also probably looking in the other direction at that time, too. Mr. Sackworth took his glasses off and wiped them on his necktie, the same one he wears every day, and all year long.

“Hmmm,” goes Mr. Allison, nodding his head. “Well, let’s see what this’s all about.” So Mr. Allison and Dan, Sam and me, I, along with Mary Lucero all marched into the office.

“Mrs. Brill,” said Mr. Allison, “I guess I’m going to need a three-way with Dan’s guardian, Sam’s mother, and somebody from Jack’s house.”

He said it that way about my house because my mom and dad and my grandma and grandpa are always coming to school for things like plays and concerts and games, and I guess Mr. Allison knew that any one of them could be counted on to be “in charge” of me.

Also, I guess because my grandpa and grandma are at home mostly, taking care of my sister Tery, and then me, and my mom is at the bank until four and my dad is at the paper usually until five.

“Well now, Mary, what happened?” said Mr. Allison. We were all sitting in the outer office and a bunch of other people were all ears, including two or three teachers who were peeking in from the door to the faculty lunch room, looking to enjoy a little entertainment along with their korndogs, I guess.

Mary sat up straight and adjusted her glasses and stretched her neck up and got this virtuous look on her face. “I saw it all, Mr. Allison,” she said, patting her wavy black hair and looking around and showing off her teeth-braces at everyone in the office, including at Dan. “Dan smacked Jack, and Sam poked Dan, and you grabbed Dan and...”

“Okay, Mary, I get the picture,” said Mr. Allison, rubbing his eyes and seeming to maybe already know a lot about it. “Dan? You

started this?"

To his credit, as my dad would say, Dan Grady admitted that he had punched me out. "I don't know what happened after that though, Mr. Allison. I got blind-sided and somebody konked me with a weapon." He probably didn't want to admit that a wimpy little kid like Sam had skewered him with a mop. He wouldn't look at Sam. Sam is really little and skinny and has curly black hair and also a bottom front tooth missing like a seven-year-old, but has big pink lips. Sam was also trying hard not to look at Dan, either, and was instead looking at the ceiling.

"This has to do with an accident that happened with a soccer ball just before lunch, right?" said Mr. Allison to all of us. We nodded, wondering how he had got the complete story so soon, and then right away figuring it was big Mike Jacobs who went to get him and told him. "Was it an accident, Jack?" asked Mr. Allison.

"Yes, sir!" I said, looking straight at Mr. Allison and at the same time at Dan out the corner of my eye. I guess that made me sort of shifty-eyed looking. "I didn't mean to hit Dan with the ball." My dadgrandpa is trying to teach me to say "sir" and "ma'am." Even though it still sounds phony to me it does get results.

"Yes, sir," I repeated. The sir-word sounded a little less phony that time.

"Are you feeling any pain or discomfort?" asked Mr. Allison. He looked at the corner of my lip, which felt hot and puffy and tasted salty, which may have been either from my blood or the french-fries. Anyway, it didn't hurt. It hurt later, but it didn't when Mr. Allison asked me about it.

"No," I said, trying to sound brave like a top gun, like Tom Cruise in that old-time movie, and as if the whole thing was not important at all, even if my lip was about to fall onto the floor. "No, sir, it doesn't hurt at all." I didn't want Dan to get me a second time.

"Well, Dan," goes Mr. Allison, "you were definitely in the wrong, but at least you were easy on him." He said just the right thing, because you could tell that Dan was still feeling bad about getting put down, just when he was going to whack me again.

“And Jack, you were in the wrong outside the gym, but you were not at all in the wrong a few minutes ago in the cafeteria. So I would say that you were the more-or-less innocent party.” Mr. Allison was sort of talking to himself, except that everyone was listening to him.

I guess he liked that, because he smiled and told us an anecdote, which is something he sometimes does over the all-call at the beginning of first or fifth period, or sometimes both, and when he does, some of the teachers say, “Hay, there goes Allison wonderland again.”

“You know, kids,” Mr. Allison said, “Good people are never as good as they seem. And bad people are never as bad as they seem. We each of us has some good and some bad inside. And it has to come out, and does in different ways. Sometimes bad people do good things, and sometimes good people do bad things.” Mr. Allison stopped and looked sort of confused like he didn’t quite know where to go from there with his anecdote. That was a kind of habit he had when he was an elementary principal. He would tell an anecdote and forget the ending, and make us remember it for him.

He was still the same old Mr. Allison, I guess.

“What I mean,” Mr. Allison continued, looking at Dan, “is that Jack here is not all that bad even though people say he is.”

That was news to me, but right away Mrs. Brill shouted over to Mr. Allison, “I think maybe you mean ‘Dan,’ Mr. Allison?”

And Mr. Allison goes, “That’s what I said. I said, ‘Dan can be a pretty good kid.’”

Of course, that isn’t what Mr. Allison said, but we all gave him credit for meaning “Dan” instead of me. But what it really meant was that Mr. Allison wasn’t all that interested in punishing us, any of us, which was suave.

Mr. Allison’s secretary, Mrs. Brill, is a really tall fat lady with big ear rings and lots of goo on her face and on her eyelids and eyebrows, and everybody says she pretty much runs things at Balona Junior High, at least around the office. She right then got up from her desk, put her hands on her hips, and said in a loud voice, “Well, I guess I better start making out the suspension papers,

because the Board expects a suspension whenever there's a fight. Heads got to roll," or words about like that. And there were a lot of "Yeah" and "Right" and "You better believe it" and "It's about time" sounds from the direction of the faculty room doorway.

Mr. Allison looked out the window for what seemed to be a long time and then he said in a faraway voice, "I guess you're right, Sarah. Let's keep 'em here this afternoon, and have our conference right after school. Then we'll see." He sounded sad for having to suspend us when he didn't want to do it.

And we felt sad, especially those of us who had to sit in the office all afternoon, waiting for our parents to come listen to us get suspended later.

Mary got to go back to class, naturally, and Sam and Dan and I sat in the office waiting for two and a half hours. No books or magazines to read. Not allowed to talk.

Funny thing about Dan. He didn't give Sam or me hard looks. Just seemed sort of like an old balloon the day after a party and sat slumped in his chair looking at the floor, picking scabs off his hairy arms. Every once in a while he would sigh. He didn't say anything to either of us. Nothing. It was like the Incident in the Cafeteria had never happened. Except that my mouth got puffer and the teeth on that side ached.

I'll tell you something I have discovered. You know how on TV these guys get socked in the mouth real hard and they sort of look annoyed, but they never bleed and later they never puff up or say "Ow, it hurts!" or anything? I mean, they hardly ever even fall down. Let me give you a clue here. In real life when you get socked on the side of the mouth, you feel it. I mean like if you are hit by somebody as big as Dan Grady, you fall down. And then pretty soon you bleed and then you swell up and it hurts. And then you say "Ow!" all right.

I am having less and less faith in the media, as my grandpa is always saying.

Speaking of which, he, my grandpa, showed up right at 3:30. He came in the office, looked at me without any expression on his face, except maybe a little curiosity like he was thinking about a problem in chess, and sat down across the room. He's a really big

guy and looked like maybe he would be more comfortable sitting on two chairs instead of the one little pink plastic job he had to park himself on.

“Well, hello, Your Honor!” said Mrs. Brill to my grandpa, who was a judge before he retired.

“Hello, yourself, Sarah,” said my grandpa. “Has this one been committing abominations unto the Board?” he said to her, but looking at me. He is always using words and making strange jokes that a lot of people don’t understand, except that I do, a lot of them, hanging out around him so much, I guess.

“Well, sir,” she said, “Mr. Allison will be seeing you right away, just as soon as Mrs. Grappini and Mr. Deal arrive, which should be very soon.”

Sam looked up at that and started to cry. Dan dropped his head even lower. I tried to signal my grandpa that I was in the clear on this one, but he wasn’t looking at me. He was looking at Dan as if he was trying to remember something.