

A clammy rain misted down on the six hundred and eighty students assembled in ranks on the muddy front lawn of Cedarville Middle School. Soggy sneakers splashed as the principal led his students through twenty jumping jacks, bellowing encouragement through a megaphone.

Ben Slovak struggled along, trying to wave and jump while still keeping control of the wriggling lump in his hoodie. From time to time, a pointed snout and beady eyes poked up past his collar, looking distressed.

"I don't think Ferret Face likes this!" Ben exclaimed. Ben suffered from narcolepsy, a disorder where he might fall asleep at any time of the day. The small ferret inside his shirt was trained to administer a gentle wake-up nip whenever his patient began to drift off.

“Ferret Face is a smart guy!” puffed Griffin Bing, laboring beside him. “Yeah, okay, so we need a morning workout. But in the rain?”

Everyone knew that Dr. Egan had been a successful high school football coach before getting his doctorate in administration. But no one had expected the new principal to turn this middle school into training camp. It had been going on since the second day of the semester — push-ups, leg lifts, running in place, sit-ups.

Griffin was already more than sick of it — and he wasn’t the only one. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Logan Kellerman three rows over, barely going through the motions. Behind Logan, Melissa Dukakis thrashed on beneath a head of long, stringy hair that was now plastered to her face. She looked like the unopened bud of a tulip — one that was out of breath and puffing hard.

Of Griffin’s closest friends, Pitch Benson alone was managing to keep up. Pitch was an accomplished rock climber in top physical condition. Her movements were fluid, her athleticism matched only by the principal himself at the front of the throng.

A painful slap made contact with the back of Griffin’s head. He emitted a cry of shock, and his

retainer popped out of his mouth and landed in the mud.

“Look alive, Bing!” sneered a nasty voice from behind him.

Under any other circumstances, Griffin would have stood right up to Darren Vader, his archenemy. But right now the priority was to save the retainer. His parents had made it clear that he was to guard the expensive dental appliance with his life.

He dropped down to his knees, scanning the wet grass. Where was it? All around him, flying feet stomped and flailed.

“Nobody move!” Griffin shouted.

“In your dreams!” Darren laughed, kicking mud all over Griffin’s kneeling figure.

Desperately, Griffin ran his hands through the grass, feeling for the familiar plastic-and-metal shape. Nothing.

“Ben!” Griffin tried. “Can you help me find my retainer?”

“That’s disgusting!” Ben exclaimed suddenly.

“What are you talking about?”

Ben was staring inside the collar of his hoodie. “Ferret Face just threw up on my stomach!”

“It might be motion sickness,” offered Savannah Drysdale, who knew more about animals than

anyone in town. “You know — the way people sometimes get nauseous on long car rides. Poor little guy. It’s not his fault.”

Ferret Face peered up out of the shirt with a grateful burp.

“But it’s gross!” Ben complained.

Darren brayed a laugh. “Too bad they don’t make little barf bags for ferrets!”

“Would somebody just help me find my retainer?!” Griffin wailed.

Savannah was disgusted. “Don’t be such a baby. You’re looking right at it.” She reached down and plucked it off the turf. “If you keep your mouth shut for a change, maybe it won’t fall out so often.”

Griffin examined the filthy, slime-covered metal. Oh, how he hated this torture device! It squeezed, it scratched, it kept him up at night. But if he ever lost it, he would have to find a new family.

He turned and shook his fist at Darren. “Some-day, Vader —”

He was interrupted by three sharp whistle blasts.

“All right, everybody!” Dr. Egan yelled. “Good workout. Remember, your mind can never be sharp if your body’s not with the program. We’ll make

something out of you couch potatoes yet. Now listen up, because I've got big news."

An uncomfortable murmur rippled through the crowd. The students had heard more than enough "big news" in the past two weeks — like the big news that they were lumpy and out of shape, that soft bodies produced soft minds, and that sport was the ultimate character builder. They'd been told that homeroom would be replaced by twenty minutes of morning calisthenics — and that they were all going to get healthy, even if it killed them.

"The only news I want is that we don't have to do this anymore," Ben murmured.

"How come we can't hear his news inside, where it's nice and dry?" Savannah muttered under her breath as the rain turned to a steady drumming on their heads.

"If I catch cold," warned Logan, who had just landed the lead in the school play, *Hail Caesar*, "I won't be able to project my voice to the back row of the auditorium."

"How many of you know," Dr. Egan asked, "that Art Blankenship was a local boy from right here in town who graduated from this very school back when it was the old Cedarville High?"

Not a single hand went up.

“Who’s Art Blankenship?” whispered Pitch.

Griffin shrugged and tried to clean off his retainer by wiping it on his pants.

“That’s another thing we all have to learn!” the principal exclaimed. “Pride! Art Blankenship was the assistant linebacker coach of the nineteen sixty-nine Super Bowl Champion New York Jets! You’ll never guess what I found behind a stack of toilet paper rolls in the custodial supply closet!” He held up a small, shiny object that no one could really make out. “This is Art Blankenship’s Super Bowl ring! The real deal!”

There was a smattering of applause.

“His widow donated this ring in his memory to the old school, where he learned to become a winner!”

The applause grew a little stronger.

“You’re right to be impressed,” the principal approved. “But you should also be screaming your heads off! Somebody had no problem taking this treasure and sticking it on a dark shelf, to be buried in toilet paper and forgotten! Well, it’s not forgotten anymore! This ring is going into a place of honor — in the display case in front of the office! Every

time you see it, I want you to think about Art Blankenship's legacy — how he grew up here, and walked these halls, and went on to reach the highest possible level! Now, the bell's about to ring. I want to see some hustle and some pride as you go in for first period." He clapped loudly. "Let's move!"

He didn't have to give the order twice. There was a stampede for the door as the students rushed to get out of the rain.

Just as Griffin was about to step inside, the new principal barred his way.

"Griffin Bing, I'm not blind, you know. Do you think I didn't see you out there, goofing off, crawling around on the grass? Don't deny it. You've got mud on your knees."

"Sorry," said Griffin, reddening. "My retainer fell out, and I was having trouble finding it, what with the rain and all —"

"There are no excuses, only results," Dr. Egan interrupted impatiently. "It's true in football, and it's true in life. Don't think I don't know about you. Your reputation speaks for itself." From his pocket, he produced a neatly folded newspaper clipping from the *Herald*, Cedarville's local paper. The article read:

YOUTH CRIME WAVE IN “SAFE” CEDARVILLE?

By Celia White, Staff Reporter

We may think of youth crime as the problem of New York City and places like it. But how many of us are aware of our own little crime wave right here in sleepy Cedarville?

I’m not talking about mischievous doorbell ringing or unpleasant graffiti. That’s kid stuff for our local “heroes.” How about the theft of valuable zoo

animals? Or a baseball card worth nearly a million dollars?

The police have so far decided to look the other way, so this paper is restricted by law from naming names. But the perpetrators are still among us, sitting in our classrooms, befriending our kids, and, for all we know, planning their next caper. . . .

Griffin looked up, too horrified to read on. The article was about him and his friends!

The principal fixed his piercing eyes on Griffin. “You’re regular celebrities around here, you and your buddies.”

“It’s not true!” Griffin managed in a strangled voice. “I mean, it all sort of happened — but not like it’s written there!”

How could he even explain it? Yes, he and his team had pulled off two zoobreaks and a baseball card heist. Yet what this football coach/principal could never understand was that, in all those cases, Griffin and the team had been fighting for

fairness. Sure, a few laws had been broken, and the police had gotten involved. But none of the team members had ever been charged with any crime. In the end, the authorities had always been able to see that Griffin and his friends had only been trying to do the right thing.

“I’ll let you off with a warning this time,” Dr. Egan concluded. “But remember — I’m watching you. And make sure your accomplices know that I’m watching them, too.”

Ben was waiting for Griffin in the main hallway. “What was *that* all about?”

Griffin burned with resentment. “It was about chewing us out for what we haven’t done yet. Did you know that crazy old bat Celia White wrote an article in the *Herald* that pretty much calls us criminals?”

Ben flushed. “My mother reads Celia White every week. I just about lost an eardrum on that one.”

“Yeah? Well, now it’s Egan’s new bible!” Griffin rolled his eyes. “The guy just made seven hundred kids do jumping jacks in a monsoon, and *we’re* the ones who need watching? Celia White should be writing about that!”

Ben brushed nervously at the lump in his shirt where Ferret Face huddled. “We haven’t been in

middle school two full weeks and already the principal's out to get us."

Griffin nodded grimly. "We definitely need a plan to get him off our case. . . ."

He went on, but Ben had stopped listening after the fateful word: *plan*. In Cedarville, New York, Griffin Bing was The Man With The Plan.

And it always led to trouble.