

The door of the school library burst open and Parker blasted in. “Hey, Jelly,” he rumbled, “you have got to come and see this!”

Parker’s a good head taller than me and built like an SUV. When he pulls your arm, resisting could cause permanent damage. I let myself be dragged into the hallway as Ms Longo, the librarian, put her finger to her lips and said, “Shhh,” behind us.

There was a huge crowd of kids jostling outside the main office. They were elbowing each other and saying, “Wow! Cool!” and “Ex-cellent!”

I removed Parker’s meaty fingers and rubbed my arm. What was everyone looking at?

The big sign on the wall proclaimed: *Sherwood Forest Public School Annual Speech Competition*.

Oh, big deal. Every year, the students in grades three to six have to give a speech. And every year, I've mumbled mine as fast as I could and got it over with.

"So . . . ?" I turned to Parker.

"You should go for it this year," he said.

"You're kidding me, right? Why would anyone go through that torture just to win some lame medal?"

"Because," he said, "you've always wanted one of *those*, Jelly." Parker pointed at the display case beside the sign.

I caught my breath.

On the glass shelf gleamed a brand-new tablet computer. I blinked. With accessories. There was even a Bluetooth keyboard and a fancy drawing stylus and — this was unbelievable — a gaming controller.

My mouth fell open.

"*That's* this year's prize!" said Parker.

No wonder everyone was so excited.

My parents wouldn't even let me watch more than an hour of TV a day, and our computer was only for homework. Of course, I didn't own a single video game.

I gazed longingly at the glossy black device with its sleek case that folded into a stand. I thought about having my very own tablet, in my own room, and the games I

could play on it — Z-World Tectonic, Journey to Outer Zed and, best of all, Battle MegaZed.

Too bad it was a *speech* contest.

Ahead of us, a girl said, "Oh! Look at that, Victoria."

"It doesn't matter what the prize is, Elsa," replied Victoria. "I compete for the challenge of it."

The sound of Victoria's voice always gave me the creeps. I rolled my eyes at Parker. But Victoria wasn't bragging. She was the student council president — the smartest girl in my class, and she never let anyone forget it. She was the first to answer questions, first to hand in her test before the end of the period and first to volunteer, even for stinky jobs like cleaning up the playground. Teachers loved her.

I felt Parker's fingers grip my arm again. "You could so win that thing."

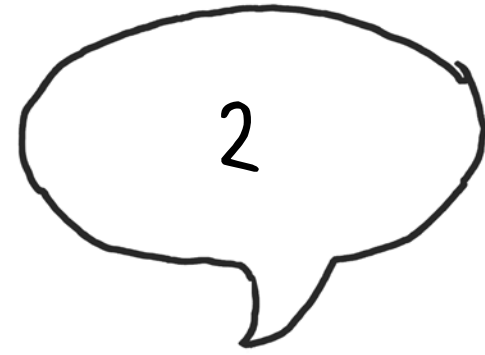
Victoria's head swivelled around as I shook off his hand and joked, "Oh, sure, piece of cake."

Parker and I edged closer and inspected the display case until the bell signalled the end of recess. The mob of students vanished and Parker said, "Hey, Jelly, we're gonna be late."

He zoomed off before I could reply. I stared after him and thought how weird it felt that Parker wasn't in my class this year. When we were little, our moms said we stuck together like the insides of a sandwich. Since Parker

Brown's initials are P.B. and mine spell J.A.M. (for Joseph Alton Miles) . . . well, that's why everyone calls me Jelly.

I jogged to my locker, grabbed my binder and pencil case and ran to English.



The classroom was buzzing. I slipped into my chair unnoticed while Ms Mitrovika clapped her hands and said, “Class, please . . .” The room gradually fell silent as she spoke. “I’m delighted you’re so enthusiastic about the competition. You’ll have two weeks to research, write and practise your speeches.” She looked around expectantly. “Now, I know it’s early, but has anyone thought about their topic?”

Guess whose hand shot up?

“Yes, Victoria?” said Ms Mitrovika.

“I’ll be doing my presentation on . . .” she paused for dramatic effect, “. . . the conservation of biodiversity in South America.”

Her best friends, Elsa and Becky, regarded her with open-mouthed awe. It figured. You could count on Victoria to choose a big, important subject, guaranteed to impress. A few other hands went up. There was the usual collection of mind-numbing ideas: my family's camping trip; why I love my cat; and how to save electricity. My only serious competition would be Victoria.

What?

I'd be crazy to go up against her. But a picture of me playing Z-World Tectonic flashed in my mind. I smiled at the thought.

Ms Mitrovika looked in my direction. "Joe," she asked, "have you chosen a topic yet?"

My brain froze. I should have just said no. But I didn't. Instead, my mouth said, "Umm . . . I . . . I'd rather not share it at this time."

Ms Mitrovika raised an eyebrow. Everyone else said, "Ooooooh," like they thought I was being mysterious. Except Victoria. She twisted around in her seat and whispered at me, "Hey, why don't you want to say your topic?" Her mouth turned down in a fake pout. "Is it that bad?"

Everyone around us stared and I wished I could think of something really clever to say. But, as usual, under pressure my mind had gone completely blank. Victoria turned back and put her hand up to answer the question the teacher had written on the board. I kept my eyes on

the desk. I was afraid that people might actually *feel* the heat of my burning cheeks.

I didn't know what my speech was going to be about. But I knew one thing — I really wanted it to kick Victoria's speech's butt.