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ARNIE YASHENKO

Too bad *Yash* only has four letters. Because having your name spelled out by a squad of cheerleaders feels pretty great—and it's over practically before it starts.

Mom and Dad should have named me Maximiliano or Demetrius.

I crouch over the plate, dig my cleats into the dirt, and point my bat at the sky. I have the most aggressive stance of anybody on the Comets—bat high, crowding the plate, daring the pitcher to brush me back.

Even though I'm in middle school, I've been playing on the high school's JV teams since November. The only JV team I'm not on is football, since there is a rule

against eighth graders competing at the high school level for that sport. Bummer.

That's why I love hearing that *Y-A-S-H* from the cheerleaders. But they're high school girls—so to them, I'm just a kid.

At least, that's what they thought till they saw me play.

I let the first pitch sizzle by, right over the plate. Strike one.

I back up just a little and lower my bat a couple of inches. It gives the pitcher the false sense that he's got me scared. The second pitch is off the plate. Like I'm clueless enough to swing at a bad one.

And the third—that's my pitch. I swing *through* the ball, not at it. When the bat makes contact, it jars me all the way to the shoulders. That's when I *know*.

I don't even have to watch the ball soar past the outfield and over the fence. I can tell by the roar of the crowd: it's a walk-off home run. I trot around the bases at a leisurely pace, enjoying the moment. The cheerleaders are going bananas. Middle school kid? What middle school kid? I'm the guy who won the whole game!

My teammates are gathered around home plate to spray me with their water bottles—team tradition. They definitely don't consider me just a kid. The home runs

help. I hit a lot of them. I was also second-leading scorer on the basketball team. And when I'm finally eligible for JV football in the fall, I'll be a touchdown machine for sure. I'm great at all sports, but football's my number one.

I play it cool though. You have to act like you've been there before and you expect to be there again. That's when I notice Principal Carmichael—he's the only person in the bleachers who isn't celebrating. Typical. His face is grim, and he's looking straight at me.

To be honest, it makes me a little nervous. Carmichael's *my* principal—the middle school one. Which means he's probably here to see me. But why?

I break away from the team and head over to Carmichael, whose droopy face looks even sadder as I approach. He's probably depressed because the middle school Comets are riding a seven-game losing streak. With me playing JV, those guys have lost their best player. But it's not my fault! *He's* the one who went along with it when the JV coaches wanted to claim me for their teams. *He's* the one who scheduled me in ninth-period PE all year so I could ride the minibus to the high school in time for practice.

“See that, Dr. C?” I venture. “Another walk-off dinger.”

It's like he's not even listening. "Come with me, Arnold. I have to speak with you."

I hate being called Arnold. Arnie is better, but only my mother uses that. To the rest of the world—even most teachers—I'm Yash.

The principal leads me into the field house, and we go straight to Coach Basil's office.

I keep talking. "I wish I could play for the middle school too, but most of the games conflict . . ."

He seats himself at the coach's desk, leaving me standing, like I'm in trouble or something. I know I'm not, but that's how it feels.

"It's just better for me to play JV," I forge on. "It's more my skill level. . . ." I let my voice trail off because I sound like I'm really full of myself. Nobody likes the guy who toots his own horn—even when he's got a lot to toot about.

"That's the problem." The principal raises a hand to signal I should stop talking. "We always scheduled your gym classes at the end of the day so that you wouldn't miss any academics when you went off to practice with the junior varsity."

"Right. Who cares if I do PE with my own grade or over here at the high school?"

The principal looks stricken. "It turns out that the

state does. Eighth-grade PE is now a required credit in order to graduate from middle school. And you've missed too many classes to qualify for it."

"But," I argue, "it's only because I've been doing different PE that's a million times better."

"I agree with you," Carmichael tells me honestly. "The problem is that the education department has changed the rules. If you don't have this credit, you have not completed the eighth grade."

"You mean—" I'm horrified. "I *flunk*?"

He chuckles humourlessly. "Nothing as drastic as that. But the fact is, you can't start high school in the fall unless your record includes eighth-grade PE."

"That means I flunk!"

"Of course it doesn't. There's plenty of time for you to earn that credit—in summer school."

"Summer school?" I practically howl. "You want *me* to go to summer school? For *gym*?"

"I don't want that, Arnold," the principal tries to explain. "It's the state. They're giving me zero flexibility here."

"But couldn't you—like—*lie*? You know, sauce me a free credit? I did way more gym with JV than I ever could have in one middle school class."

He shoots me a look that would scorch metal. "I'm

going to pretend you didn't just suggest that. Our summer school offers a program called Physical Education Equivalency, or P-E-E—

“*Peet?*” I echo.

“P-E-E,” he corrects me pointedly. “It’s for students who, for whatever reason, need to fill in a missing piece of their physical education curriculum.”

“You mean”—I can barely form the words—*“Slugfest?”*

Carmichael’s expression is blank. “I beg your pardon?”

“Like—you know—I mean—” Okay, I’m babbling. When you’re a top athlete, you can’t talk about how you’re great and everybody else has two left feet. But you know the kind of person who has to retake gym in the summer—the kind who was too uncoordinated to pass it in the fall, winter, and spring! The kind who can’t bounce a ball without knocking themselves unconscious! Who would trip over a chalk line on a football field if they ever went near one! Who think sports are for dolts and cave people and that anybody with a brain would rather spend their time playing chess and solving equations!

There’s a name around here for the people who end up in that class—slugs! That’s why they call it Slugfest!

I can't be a slug! I'm Yash! That means something in this town. But how can I tell that to the principal without sounding like a stuck-up jerk?

And suddenly, I have the answer. "Dr. Carmichael, I can't do summer school. Everybody knows I'm going to quarterback the JV Comets this fall. I have to be at their summer workouts."

The principal seems exhausted now. "I'm sorry, Arnold. It's out of my hands. I'll talk to Coach Basil and explain that you're going to be in summer school."

"No, no, *no!*" I wail. "If I miss the workouts, I won't qualify for the big seven-on-seven flag football tournament in August!"

He frowns. "Football tournament?"

"It's the ultimate showcase for eighth graders to break onto the high school scene. It was supposed to be my launch party!"

Carmichael's skin is practically grey. "We owe you an apology, Arnold. We thought we'd created a perfect schedule to accommodate your special talents. We were wrong."

"If *you're* the one who's wrong, how come *I'm* the one who has to go to summer school?" I can feel my eyes prickling and I'm trying really hard not to cry.

"I understand how disappointing this must be." He

folds his arms in front of him, like the subject is closed.

My mind is spinning. There has to be a way out of this! The mayor is a JV basketball fan—his son is on the team. A benchwarmer, sure, but maybe his dad can put in a good word for me. Or my great-grandfather—he won a bronze star in World War II. You can't make a hero's great-grandson be a slug. Or my mom—she was second runner-up for Miss Clarington as a high school senior. Yeah, I know it's bad to use connections to get your way, but aren't some things so terrible that you have to do anything you can to avoid them?

The worst part is I can't even blame Carmichael. He's only pushing me around because the state is pushing *him* around.

That's when it starts to sink in: This is a law. Nothing is going to change this. Not being good at basketball or baseball or even *football*.

Slugfest, here I come.