

**THIS IS
JUST A
TEST**

A Novel by

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and

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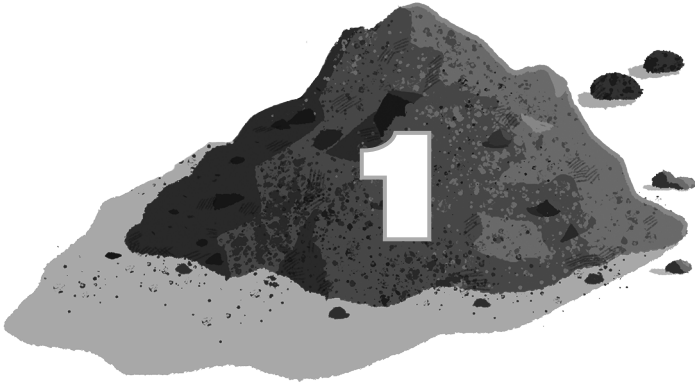
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The closest I ever came to being a hero was when

our class took a field trip to McKimmon's Farm. It was the middle of November, and we'd already had a couple of frosts, which killed off a lot of the green things and which made us wonder whose idea it was to visit a farm this time of year. Spring would make more sense, when they were planting stuff. Or if the farm grew pumpkins, which it didn't. When we went, everything was dying on McKimmon's Farm, and that included the poison ivy, which Mr. McKimmon wasn't growing as a crop or anything; it was wild.

Wild, and, like I said, mostly dead. The sun was shining down hard on us, in that cloudless blue postcard way that happens in Virginia.

The teachers told a group of us to sit at the picnic tables so they could pass around seeds and dried gourds, which Mr. McKimmon actually did grow. Hector, my best friend,

squirmed between the bench and the table and ducked underneath.

“What are you doing?” I asked. The other kids were giving Hector a look.

“It’s shadier down here,” Hector said. One thing I’ll say about Hector is that he’s not afraid to be unconventional. It used to be a quality I admired, like when Hector suggested that we do everything backward for a week, or when he signed us up for correspondence classes in French because he wanted to go to the Cannes Film Festival one day. But in junior high, unconventionality was usually another word for *dork*.

“Knock it off,” I told Hector. I was pretty sure that under the transitive property of junior high social lives, whatever our group was thinking of Hector, they were going to start thinking of me. Hector popped back up.

“My little brother does that all the time,” said Kelli Ann Majors. I happened to know that Kelli Ann’s little brother was eight; it was one of the facts I had collected about her. It was also exactly what I was afraid someone would think.

“Watch this,” said Scott Dursky, who was in a couple of my classes. Under normal circumstances, I ignored Scott and his stunts. But now he was providing a distraction—the good kind. I watched him, hoping everyone else would, too, as he walked to an oak tree that had a bunch of vines attacking the trunk. They looked like tentacles. Scott grabbed one to try to get some climbing leverage, but the vine was loose and fell out of the tree while he was holding it.

Terry Sutphin stood behind him and said, “Nice try. Let me show you how it’s done.” Scott grabbed a different vine for a better hold. It was furry. Even from where we were sitting, I could tell it was poison ivy.

“That’s poison ivy,” I told Hector. “They shouldn’t be touching that.”

“Hey!” Hector shouted. “That’s poison ivy.”

“Says who?” Scott didn’t let go of the vine, though you could see his grip relax slightly.

“Says David,” said Hector. We walked over to the tree.

“I don’t see any leaves,” said Terry.

“You can get poison ivy from the vine, too,” I told him. “You know: ‘Hairy vine, no friend of mine?’ It still contains urushiol.”

“I’ve never heard that,” Scott said, but he let go of the vine.

“He’s making it up,” said Terry. He patted the vine, which looked like the tail of a scruffy cat. “This is my pet, Lucky. He would never hurt me. Don’t you want to meet my pet?” He reached for the closest girl, who shrieked and ran away.

“Why would I make it up?” I said. If I were going to make something up, it would be something like: studying too much for your bar mitzvah can stunt your growth, or eating only Chinese food causes premature baldness. Personally, I would like to spend less time studying Torah and more time eating pizza.