

The School Bully

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June 20, 2005

Chapter 1

Something was definitely different!

For the past three weeks I had come home to greet JP in fear of the latest story he would tell me of his experiences with the school bully.

I heard the first one only after he came home looking sullen and sad day after day. Each time I would ask him what was wrong and he would put me off with a "Nothing", a shrug, or a change in the subject. But JP was never good at hiding how he felt about things, so I knew I would eventually hear how he was suffering.

"François and his friends chased me into the school today." JP reported. "I just had time to park my bike and run – so I headed for my class as quickly as I could."

"Why did they chase you?" I asked – trying to sound supportive.

"I don't know." he said, "They always bug me for some reason."

"Have you tried to be friends with them?" I asked – sounding so much like a parent. "Sometimes, if you smile at people or chat with them in a safe setting, they will change their mind about you." I continued – this time feeling a bit helpless as I tried to take my usual 'pacifist' approach to my son's dilemma.

"I'll try." JP responded, but I knew he didn't have much confidence in this strategy.

His next story was about how he came the long way home when he got on our island – just to avoid running into François without the protection of the school. He recounted how the only way he could avoid them on the bridge was to carefully check to see when they crossed and wait long enough for them to get home before attempting to follow.

"Did you try to make friends?" I asked, once again feeling like I was placing too much of a burden on a 7-year old.

"I tried, Dad." he responded – without offering more details.

"Do you want me to talk to someone about it?" I asked.

"It will only make things worse." JP answered, looking like Eeyore without his tail.

Our conversations went on like this for a number of days – each time with slight variations on the news and each time with my offers of help being rejected. I was ready to take action on my own.

But today, something was definitely different!

Chapter 2

When I walked into the kitchen, I found JP at the counter putting peanut butter on his bread.

But he was putting on peanut butter like I had never seen before. He was like a champion chef creating a masterpiece, like a renowned painter unveiling his newest creation, or like a winning athlete climbing the stand to accept his gold medal. He stood tall and confident, spread the peanut butter thick and even, and had a look on his face that announced the world was all in order.

"How are you doing?" I asked – somewhat nervous about what I would hear.

"I'm fine." he replied, in a matter-of-fact tone. But his body language told a very different story: he was much more than 'fine'!

"Did you have trouble with François today?", I tentatively asked.

"No." he replied as he slapped a second slice of bread on his sandwich.

There was a long pause.

"I tried, Dad! – I really tried!" he finally blurted out. "I tried being nice to him – but it just never worked."

"What happened?" I asked again.

"When I got back to school at lunch, François and his buddies were waiting for me at the bike rack." JP began. "I didn't know what to do."

"They started pushing me around and threatening to beat me up. I think they would have if the bell hadn't rung and the teacher came out to the door."

"Just as I turned to go into the school, François told me that he wanted to have it out

with me once and for all. He said he would meet me after school on the other side of the fence to settle our score."

"I was terrified!", said JP. "It was the worst afternoon I had ever had. All I could think about was the coming fight."

By the time school was finished that day, all the students knew that there was going to be a big fight between François and JP.

Chapter 3

JP was the youngest person in his class. Officially, he should have started school a year later, but since his birthday was so close to the October deadline, we snuck him in with the children in the earlier year.

François, on the other hand, was one of the older boys. I expect he did not like the way that JP would so easily attract the attention of the other children through his jokes and comic antics. Like most schoolyard bullies, he probably felt that he could get the attention he deserved by making fun of JP and terrifying him with threats.

He certainly was successful in terrorizing JP, but it also meant that he had only a few friends in the class. Many of the other students had suffered as a result of his threats, so they were careful to stay out of his way.

"He certainly knew how to make me sweat!" JP continued. "He and his buddies kept looking at me and smiling all afternoon. I figured I was dead meat."

The school buzzer after the final class is usually one of the happiest times of the day. It's the signal for every student to put together their books and pencils, get the last minute instructions from the teacher and head off to the next adventure planned over recess and lunch.

Sometimes, it was a ride down to the beach where the wet sand invited sand castles or the frogs offered hide and seek. Sometimes, it was a short trip to Jack's for some candy or ice cream. In the winter, it could even be a rush to the park to add more snow on the jump to make it the best slide ever.

But whatever it was, it was usually a buzzer of freedom – separating the 'have to do' time from the 'want to do time' of the day.

This was not to be the case today. For JP, the buzzer only marked the point at which he would have to face his tormenter – and his fate.

"When I heard the buzzer sound", he confessed, "I didn't want to move at all!"

Chapter 4

JP slowly got his books together as the class headed out through the door.

"See you in a minute." whispered François as he passed by JP's desk. "Don't be late!" chuckled his friend close behind.

"I tried to figure out another way home, Dad – I really did." JP insisted, "But by the time I got out the door there was a whole gang of kids waiting for me just outside the gate. There was no other way to go."

"I see." I replied, trying to assure him that I believed his story. "What happened then?"

"The kids just waited in a circle around François – just waiting for me to join them." he replied. "I felt as if I were going to jail."

"Just as I thought" taunted François "you're too scared to fight. What happened to your big mouth now?" François crouched down into the karate pose that was so familiar to boys of his age. He raised his hands with palms open as if he were on the movie set with Bruce Lee.

"Nothing" JP started to say, but he was abruptly cut off as François came at him with a kick that seemed to be coming right for JP's chest.

It must have been at that instant that François realized the mistake he had made. It takes years to train a karate master in the speed and agility necessary to attack yet still remain safe. Without that training, getting close enough to your opponent also means that he can do some damage to you.

JP was certainly younger than him, but he was not smaller. Nor was he weaker. After all, he was well trained in wrestling since he had an older sister who was not shy about a good tussle at any time. In fact, she still feels the ache in her toe where her not-so-well placed kick had cracked against JP's hip. It was now clear that his 'training' had paid off.

As François' foot headed toward him, JP stepped aside and caught it. The momentum that François had created was enough to upset his balance and slide his other foot from under him. He quickly found himself flat on the ground.

It took François a few seconds to recover from the shock, but it did him little good since JP was on top of him and quickly pinned his arms to the dirt.

"Do you give up?" JP yelled at him – almost in as much shock at the success of his attack.

"Never!" said François defiantly as he twisted and wriggled trying to regain some control and dignity.

"Say 'Uncle!'" answered JP. This was even easier than a wrestle with Daegan – François was not only smaller, but he didn't seem to know any of the tricks that Daegan would play on him. François isn't as tough as I thought.

François was beginning to get the message as well. He tried with all his might to loosen JP's grip from his hands, but was unable to do so. Even defeat was going to be better than the indignity of lying in the dirt with this guy on his chest.

"Uncle." François finally cried – even though he didn't have a clue what it meant – other than he had lost the fight.

"Are you sure?" JP barked back – loud enough for all the onlookers to hear.

"Yes." replied François and it was only then that JP carefully let his hands go and climbed up from the dirt.

"It was amazing, Dad." he added, "All of a sudden I was a hero. All the kids who didn't help me out when I was being picked on by these bullies, were now my friends. They congratulated me and hung around like I was a star or something. Even a couple of François' buddies told me after that they didn't like the things that he was doing. What do you think was going on there?" he asked.

"And you know what was most amazing of all?" he added. "When I offered to shake François' hand, he accepted it!"

I was too busy shaking my head to answer. Shaking my head because my son had dealt with his problem in a way that he knew would upset his Dad. Shaking my head because he overcome the ineffectiveness of my best intentions. Shaking my head because he wanted to tell me. And most of all, shaking my head because of the pride I felt for my son who could hold all of these conflicting sentiments at once – without losing compassion.

"Your grandfather was right." I replied. "If you don't meet your match, you'll raise it!"