Name_____

Per_____

WAR

Excerpt from Jerry Spinelli's book,
Knots in My Yo-yo String: The Autobiography of a Kid

I hate war. But when I was little, I loved it. War was a game, guns were toys, death an amusement ride. The first card game I ever played was called war.

I also played with little green soldiers, maybe two inches high. I loved their perfect, tiny helmets that reminded me of cereal bowls. Even the faces of the soldiers were perfect and green. Their tiny mouths and eyes were forever locked into a battlefield moment that I could only imagine.

I read G.I. Joe and Combat Kelly comic books. Then, down at the creek, I would poke a stick into the powdery bottom silt, pop it upward, and go "Boom!" I pretended the resulting brown underwater cloud was an atomic bomb explosion.

And of course, I played war with my friends. […] I [also] read about war, about the bodies of soldiers, even enemy soldiers, whose lifeless hands clutched photographs of loved ones back home.

I read of the torture of captive troops. […] Such things happened to spies and to people who knew too many enemy secrets. I resolved that if I was ever in a war, I would be a dumb non-spy.

But I could not resolve to be a solider. Every passing day, every February first—the date of my birth—prodded me closer to the ominous cloud that hung over my future. It was called the draft, and it mean that when I (and all other boys deemed healthy enough) got out of high school or college, I would have to join the armed forces whether I wanted to or not.

As if to prepare me, my daydreams placed me in grim wartime situations. I saw myself, apparently a failure at avoiding secrets, in the hands of enemy interrogators. […] Sometimes in my fearful fantasies my captors bypassed torture and simply marched me out to the firing squad. But I never got shot. Even as six rifle sights met at my trembling heart—"Ready! Aim!"—I call out to the commanding officer, "Wait a minute!"

The commanding officer pauses.

"There's something you don't know. If you shoot me you'll never find out."

The officer calls off the guns. He expects me to divulge vital military secrets, but the information I offer is purely personal. I tell him something about his wife, his family back home, something he could never have known without me. He is overcome with gratitude. He dismisses the firing squad. And I have discovered something: Words can save me.

Despite all the attention I paid to warfare, I was never in a real fight. Around sixth grade this began to bother me. I saw other kids flailing and clubbing, tearing each other's shirts to shreds, trading bloody

noses, and I said to myself, "Hey, why not me?" I began to feel deprived because my right hand had never known the feel of fist on chin. I felt a growing need to hit somebody.

But who? I could think of no one I wanted to hit. And apparently nobody wanted to hit me. Every day I walked to and from school unchallenged. I was a burr in no one's saddle. A likable bloke.

However, the prospect of going through life punchless was too strong to ignore. I looked around my classroom. Who was as small as I, or better yet, even smaller? Who was unlikely to hit me back? Who needed hitting?

There was only one answer: Joey Stackhouse.

Joey Stackhouse was skinny. Mash down his blond pompadour* and he was maybe half an inch shorter than I. He had a narrow, foxy face. But his main feature was teeth. He was a walking warning against not brushing. When he smiled, you found yourself looking at all the colors in your crayon box. Plus his clothes were shabby.

For several days I hung close to Joey, alert for an offending remark or gesture. He remained obstinately harmless, as friendly as ever. It became clear that I myself would have to manufacture the momentum for the punch.

I worked myself into a snit. I convinced myself that anybody with teeth like that was asking for it. One day he walked home with me after school. We were on the 700 block of George Street, close to my house. I picked a fight with him, accused him of something, I don't remember what. Then I hit him. I balled my fist and swung, and when my knuckles landed—*thock*—against his chin bone, I was as surprised as when my stone hit Johnny Seeton [*a friend who had his face cut open on a rock that Jerry accidentally threw at him*].

As punches go, it was dainty, more tap than wallop, my intention being to match a punch's form, not force. I'm sure that, physically, he barely felt it. But a punch has a double impact, as I was about to learn, and only the first lands on the chin. Joey's eyes widened. He stood there staring at me with such wild astonishment that I knew at once he had not, not in a million years, been asking for it. He started to cry. He blurted out, "Why'd you do that?" and ran back down George Street.

If I ever had notions of becoming a warrior, they died that day as I turned the other way and walked home alone. It has been more than forty years since I hit Joey Stackhouse—the first and last person I ever punched—and it remains the only taste of war I ever needed.

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*pompadour: a man's style of hairdressing in which the hair is combed into a high mound in front