

The background of the entire image consists of numerous thin, grey lines radiating outwards from a central point at the top, creating a sense of motion and energy.

PROJECT Z

ATTACK OF THE ZOMBIE ZING

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TOMMY GREENWALD

SCHOLASTIC INC.

THE FRENCH FRY GAME

Lunch was the worst.

The rest of the day wasn't so bad, but *lunch*—that time of day when every kid is basically saying to the world, “These are my people, and they're who I will be spending my precious hard-earned downtime with during a brutal day of learning and reading and writing”—was really hard.

Because I had to sit there, watching Kiki and Ross giggle and gawk and make googly eyes at each other, and pretend that I didn't care.

Actually, I should say *we* had to sit there, because my friend Evan was right next to me.

Don't get me wrong, though. It's not like I liked Kiki—and by like, I mean *like*. No, that wasn't it at all. I'm pretty sure us zombies don't think in terms of that kind of “like.” But I was still trying to accept the fact that one of the first and best human friends I'd ever made was now in

what could theoretically be called a “romantic” relationship with the one boy who tormented me more than any other human during my early days at Bernard J. Frumpstein Elementary School.

(Sorry. I tend to use big words when I’m upset. I promise never to use the word *theoretically* again. Or *romantic*, for that matter. Instead, I’ll use something more age-appropriate. Like *squishy*.)

So yes, I suppose I was a little unhappy about the whole Kiki-Ross situation. But it’s not like I lost sleep over it—and not just because I don’t sleep. I cared, but not *that much*.

But Evan, on the other hand . . . Evan was a different story.

He was taking it much harder than I was. I think maybe because he did, in fact, feel some of those squishy feelings about Kiki. Not that he would ever admit it, of course.

We were sitting at lunch one day, and it was the same old story. Everyone was enjoying their sandwiches (some kids) or pizza slices (most kids) or fish sticks (a few kids) or tofu salad (Evan) or jelly beans (me) or whatever it was they were eating, and chatting and laughing and occasionally throwing stuff and generally acting like sixth graders.



Except for me and Evan. We were acting like grouchy old men.

Ross, Kiki, and a few other kids were playing a game they called “How many French fries can you balance on your nose?” Ross was the reigning champion. This particular day, he was up to seven, which, when you think about it, is pretty impressive. No one else had managed to pile on more than four.

And then all of a sudden, Kiki got hot. Somehow, she managed to stack up the fries so high, you couldn't

even see her eyes. And not one French fry fell! None of us had ever seen anything like it. Even I managed to emerge from my general glumness to marvel at her accomplishment.

“Evan, look,” I said, nudging his elbow. “Kiki’s on a roll!”

“I don’t care,” he said, refusing to take his eyes from his food. “Piling French fries on your nose is so dumb. I mean, like, what is this, kindergarten?”

It didn’t seem like the right time to remind Evan that we had all played a very similar pile-food-on-your-face game at his birthday last year.

But hold on.

It *did* seem like the right time to remind Evan that his birthday was coming up again pretty soon!

“Hey, Evan, isn’t your birthday coming up again pretty soon?”

“I guess,” he mumbled. “But I’m not having a party this year.”

“Seriously? Why not?”

“Because I don’t feel like it.” Then, without another word, he got up, put his tray away, and left the cafeteria.

Oh boy. This was worse than I’d thought.

I started to follow him but then walked back to watch

the end of the competition. It turned out that Kiki's stack had reached a grand total of fourteen French fries, a record that was sure to stand until the end of time. Or was it? Because Ross, who disliked losing almost as much as he disliked zombies—at least until he got to know them—wasn't about to give up.

"Last round!" crowed Kiki, reveling in her sure victory.

Ross did some body stretches, as if it were an athletic contest. "Oh, I got this," he said. "There's not a doubt in my



mind you're going down." He grabbed the plate of fries, tipped his head back, and motioned to his friend Brett to start placing the French fries on his nose. The gathering crowd, which now included most of the sixth grade, started chanting along with each fry. Even the teachers and lunch workers craned their necks to see what was going on.

"Four! Five! Six! Seven!"

I glanced over toward the cafeteria exit and happened to see Evan, who hadn't quite left after all. He'd poked his head back in, wanting to see how it ended, just like the rest of us.

"Nine! Ten! Eleven!"

And then—in the blink of an eye, exactly the way most momentous world events happen—the French fries all came tumbling down off Ross's nose and back onto the tray with a soggy plop (they were pretty damp and gross by then).

The contest was over. Kiki had dethroned the reigning champ.

She thrust her arms in the air as the crowd's chant turned to "Kiki! Kiki! Kiki! Kiki!"

Ross bowed before the new champion. "Congratulations," he said. "It couldn't have happened to a nicer person."

And then, from one second to the next, Ross kissed Kiki right on the cheek. And Kiki kissed him back! Right there in front of everyone!

Well, technically, not in front of *everyone*.

Evan had disappeared.

Again.