

A person wearing a dark cap and a light-colored t-shirt is shown from the chest up, leaning over a table and sketching in a notebook with a black pen. They are wearing multiple beaded bracelets on their left wrist and a watch on their right wrist. The background is softly blurred, suggesting an indoor setting with natural light.

Ricky knew his sketchbook was his ticket to art school.
When it was gone, so were his dreams.

TOMO SAVES THE DAY

A Short Story

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Tomo Saves the Day

By Madeline Slovenz

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This story is dedicated to [Tom Stillwell](#) on the occasion of his birthday.

Ricky had to go back to class after the meeting with the principal and his mother; but not before his mother grabbed him by the elbow just outside the office. She waved his sketchbook in his face. "This is the last time I will take time off work to come down to this school for your shenanigans. Got it?"

Ricky wiggled out from her grip. "But Ma, it's art. Please."

She tucked the book under her right arm and stormed toward the lobby. "I have to get back to work."

Under his breath he mumbled a few choice words then ran after her. When he tried to grab the book back he was startled when she turned around. "Mark my word young man."

Instinctively, Ricky held his hands up in surrender and took a step back. His mother tucked the sketchbook in her tote bag. "This notebook of yours is not art. Understand? Principal Crapolito says your drawings are a distraction and I agree. They have no place in a middle school. Now get back to class. I'll deal with you when you get home. Got it?"

"Come on Ma, get real. They're not a distraction."

"This sketchbook is not going to be a problem in this school anymore. Consider it gone. Vanished. No longer in or of this world. Do you hear me?"

"Okay, okay. I'll keep it at home this time. Promise."

"Home? I don't think so. How do you think you'll get into Bronx Science or Stuyvesant if you waste your time drawing cartoons instead of studying? Not happening any more. It's over" She turned and stormed out of the school.

The sound of her high heels clacking on the hardwood floor, as she marched out of the building, echoed through the hall. The heavy door slammed shut behind her. It was final. Ricky was doomed.

As if on cue, the natural light that poured in through the windows dimmed when a storm cloud shaded the sun. Ricky stood there not sure how to take it all in. She meant it this time. She was really going to toss the sketchbook. He needed that sketchbook for his audition to get into Art and Design High School. As a lump formed in his esophagus a bit of bile crept up burning his throat. He took a deep breath to calm himself and held back the urge to throw up.

As soon as the dismissal bell rang, Ricky dashed out to the parking lot to get his bike. Kids in this Staten Island neighborhood were in love with their bikes; they were their vehicles of freedom that afforded them just enough separation from their parents to establish a sense of self and independence. One of the

students at the bike rack greeted him with bad news. "Hey Ricky, looks like you got a flat."

Enraged, he kicked his bike and yelled a string of obscenities.

"Chill out, man. It's not the end of the world."

Ricky glared at his friend then threw a punch into the air. "That a-hole Cranpolito."

"Oh, right. Heard the loudspeaker when they called you to the office today. You in trouble?"

"It's my sketchbook, man. He gave it to my moms."

His friend said, "That sucks. Can't help you there."

"Yeah, how about lending me your pump?"

"Can't help you there, either. Someone boosted it last week. Sorry, I have to go," he said, then biked off, leaving Ricky to solve his problem alone.

There was no quick solution to the flat, so Ricky walked his bike all the way home from school, which gave his anger about losing his sketchbook time to fester and build. Even the neighbor's border terrier, who usually whined and jumped up to greet him, growled at him baring its teeth from behind the chain-link fence that separated their yards. Ricky was giving out a vibe that demanded attention and he yapped back at the dog. "Get outta my face you ugly hound. Git. Git outta here."

Ricky kicked the fence and locked up his bike in the garage. The house was empty. As usual, his mother was still at work, so he grabbed an apple from the refrigerator, dragged himself into his room and flopped onto the bed. With eyes closed, he took a bite of the apple and tried to imagine how he could tell his mother that he was sick of academics and really wanted to go to art school. She was dead set on him getting into a specialized math and science high school.

The sound of her car pulling into the driveway brought his rage back to the surface. He jumped up, grabbed his jacket and darted out the front door just as his mother entered the kitchen door yelling, "Ricardo Teo Perez, present yourself right now!"

He was out of there and ran at top speed toward his uncle Manny's house, desperate for advice. Out of breath, he pounded on the front door. Manny pulled it open. "What's going on? Come in. You look scared."

"I'm not scared," Ricky said as he smacked the doorframe with the heel of his hand. "I'm royally pissed and can't take it any more."

"Calm down, son. Come on in, sit." Manny made a sweeping gesture of invitation. He was a close family friend who had taken Ricky under his wing

ever since he was a baby and he always felt welcome at Manny's house.

Ricky walked in, stomping his feet on his way to the kitchen. "I'm not kidding around, Manny. This is it. This is . . . where's Lucia? Is she here?" Not sure how much Manny's wife Lucia gossiped with his mother, Ricky wanted to ensure privacy before sharing too much.

"The coast is clear. Sit down. Tell me what's bothering you."

"I've had it. I missed the deadline for applying to audition for LaGuardia High School and now I'm not even going to get into Art and Design." He walked to the sink, looked out the window and made a fist.

"Don't be so hard on yourself. You've been working diligently on your portfolio. All you can do is keep working and do your best. This isn't the time to give up," Manny said. "Remind me, when's your portfolio due?"

Ricky turned around and pounded his fist into his other hand. "That's just it. Tweedle-Dumb confiscated my sketchbook again and my mother had to come to school and get it this time."

"Again?" Manny said.

Ricky paced back and forth. "I'm doomed. She tossed it. It's gone."

"Wow. Really?"

"Yeah, really. She said if she got one more call from the office, that would be the end of my sketchbook. And today she got that call. I'm toast."

Manny muttered under his breath, "That woman's like a dog with a bone."

"There's not enough time to start over. I'm screwed any way you look at it."

"And the portfolio's due when?"

"December 14th."

Manny glanced at the calendar on the wall. "Mid December."

Ricky said, "Yeah, the fourteenth. It's on a Saturday."

"Well . . . that gives you a little more than two months." Manny went over to the refrigerator. "Take a load off your feet. What do you want? A Coke? Or I can give you a — "

"Coke, gimme a Coke."

"Sounds like you need a shot with that." Manny laughed as he put a can down in front of Ricky and popped open a Bud for himself.

"This isn't funny, Manny. I can't start all over again."

Manny turned one of the kitchen chairs around and straddled it. "You know I still have some of your drawings you did that summer you stayed with us. I can probably dig them out."

"Those old Egyptian mummy comics? No freekin' way."

"Yeah, those. I kept them."

"What, was I in sixth grade when I drew those? You still have them?"

"Of course. Give me a minute."

Ricky popped the top on his Coke and took such a big swig he nearly choked. Soda fizz bubbled out of his nose. A tea towel hung from the stove, so he grabbed it and wiped up the mess.

Manny pulled out a shirt box from the bottom drawer of the secretary and handed it to Ricky. "Here."

He opened the box and fingered through the drawings. "Oh, man. This stuff is crap."

Manny said, "It's good work. Don't be so hard on yourself."

"I'm a much better artist now." He slid the box toward Manny. "Naw. It's not going to get me into Art and Design. You keep them. I'm all about Ancient Chinese warriors and kung-fu fighters now."

The phone rang. "I bet that's your mother. What do you want me to tell her?"

"Nothing. I'm outta here."

Manny went over to the phone. "You're off the hook, it's Lucia. I have to take it."

Ricky took the last sip of his Coke. Grabbed a couple of his old drawings, folded them up, tucked them in his back pocket and waved to Manny as he ducked out the back door.

When he got home his mother was gone again, thank goodness. It was Wednesday, a school night for her. She left him a note saying she had to go to class and that his dinner plate was in the fridge. But she added that she was grounding him.

At the kitchen table, he started to sketch on a piece of notebook paper he ripped out of his binder. In no time, he had completed three panels of a new comic. Entirely forgetting about dinner, he used colored pencils and a black fine-tip pen to make cross-hatching and box outlines. By portraying his mother as a Chinese Empress Dowager who had piles of artwork on scrolls that she had confiscated from her subjects stacked high on each side of her throne, he got some of his frustrations out. The principal made an appearance, too. Ricky characterized him as a huge, angry bird trying to break out of its gilded cage, and in the third panel he drew the Monkey King as a kung-fu hero flying in from behind to slay them both. He left three white bursts around the hero to pen in, FWACK! POW! BAM! On the next page, he started to sketch in a full panel to show the Monkey King distributing the scrolls to the throngs of peasants who

had gathered outside the castle.

The next day, Ricky woke up early and snuck out of the house before his mother woke up. He cut school and took the Staten Island Ferry into Manhattan with all the commuters. Usually when he snuck into the city, he went on a Saturday and hung out in Chinatown at the martial arts store, admiring the weapons and checking out the kung-fu magazines. But it was day one of the annual New York Comic Con and he thought he'd try his luck at getting in.

The doors didn't open until 10 o'clock so he decided to walk all the way from the ferry terminal up to 34th Street to kill some time. He didn't have a badge so he had no idea if he'd be able to get in. Badges were fifty-five dollars and he had a little over eight dollars in his pocket.

It was a chilly October morning. The Javits Center was close to the Hudson and the winds from the river chilled him to the bone. He decided to warm up with a hot coffee and butter roll from the food truck on the street.

"Give me a coffee light and sweet with a roll."

The vendor handed him a roll wrapped in foil and a coffee.

"That'll be two bucks kid."

Ricky dug into his pocket, pulled out his wad and peeled off two singles. He found a sunny corner that wasn't windy and leaned against the wall to eat his breakfast alone. People were starting to arrive for the Comic Con and he wondered how he would manage to get in. Every single person who entered had a badge hanging from a lanyard. There was no way he was going to get through the doors. So he thought he'd hang around the will-call window and see what he could do. He got in line and thought he'd try his luck. When it was his turn he leaned up to the round hole cut in the window and said, "Do you have a ticket for Ricky Perez?"

"Ralph Perez? Yeah, two tickets. You with an adult?"

Ricky got hopeful. Maybe he could pass for Ralph. "Um. My father's parking the car. He told me to pick up the tickets."

"You need ID, kid. Step aside until your father's here. No unaccompanied children allowed in."

That was a fleeting moment of hope that he knew would not return. His luck had run out and it was only 10:15 a.m. He watched while the next guy stepped up and picked up two badges. He looked over at Ricky and said, "It's going to be a great con this year. See you inside."

Right. See you inside. Fat chance. Ricky's hopes of getting a badge were slim

to none so he thought he'd try to slip by security at one of the entry points. He hung around watching the throngs arrive all with badges swinging from their necks. It was a Thursday and he was practically the only school-age fan there. Sure, a few kids passed through the gates but they were all accompanied by their parents.

A man with two young kids in tow, a little boy and a girl, approached Ricky and said, "You okay?"

That took him by surprise. "What?"

"Sorry, but I saw you standing there all alone. Are you lost?"

"Oh, no. Not lost. I came alone and thought I'd be able to get in, but no luck. I can't even get a badge."

"Yeah, that's a tough one. Sold out?"

"Not enough money."

The man's phone rang. "Gotta take this. Good luck," he said then took his family off to the side to answer his phone.

Ricky slipped into the crowd that had clogged the entry points hoping he'd be able to get by security. He was tall for his age so he stood out.

"Badges out. Badges out. Keep the lines moving."

He saw his opportunity. A group of teenagers were filing through and he got in line with them.

He was stopped. "Where's your badge kid?"

Fibbing, he said, "My uncle has it and he already went in, we got separated."

An old fat grey-haired Javits Center security guard in an ill-fitting black uniform came over to assist. "I'll take care of this, Sam. Keep the lines moving." He turned to Ricky. "Step aside, sonny. Come with me."

Bingo! He was in. At least he got through the gate. As the security guard led Ricky over to the wall, he said, "What's your name, son?"

Ricky lied again. "Manny Morales."

"Manny, do you see your uncle anywhere?"

Ricky stretched his neck, feigning a search, and said, "Nope. I don't see him."

"I'm sure he'll come back to the entrance as soon as he notices you aren't with him."

A loud stream of static emanated from the guard's radio hooked on his belt. "Stand here," he said, pointing to the wall. "Hold on, let me get this."

He turned his back on Ricky and took a couple of steps away to answer his walkie-talkie. "Go for Jimmy," he said. "What's your two-o?"

That's when Ricky's instinct to run kicked in. He took off in the direction of

the main hall at top speed, weaving in and out of the attendees. It was looking good until, seemingly out of nowhere, two plainclothes cops grabbed him by the elbows. "Hold it right there!"

Stopped in his tracks, Ricky froze on the spot. Never having been questioned by the police before, he started to sweat. Why did I run? What was I thinking?

The tall one said, "What's your hurry?"

The other one got in his face and demanded, "Where's your badge?"

A crowd started to form a circle around the scene.

"Move it along. Nothing to see here. Move it along folks," the tall one said.

Then the other cop tugged on Ricky's elbow to pull him toward the wall. "Let's go. Move it over here." Safely off to the side, he parked Ricky with his back to the wall. His partner came over and jutted his chin out. "Come on. Let's see your badge."

Ricky was trapped. He thought, what do I do now? Lie and say I lost it?

The silence between him and the cops seemed endless. He started to feel queasy. This was the first time he had ever been approached by a cop and he knew he was guilty. Can they arrest me? Oh my god.

Then the tall cop said to his partner, "I got this."

He pointed his finger at Ricky and pressed the button on his radio, "Ten-twenty main hall midway. Ten-seventeen. Male teen. Entry breach."

Off to his right, he saw the security guard that first pulled him aside approach. Oh my god. I'm in big trouble now. There's no way out of this one.

"Officers, thanks but I've got this." Then he turned to Ricky. "Did you see your uncle?"

That was Ricky's opening to continue his first lie. "I did, sir. I thought I did. But when these officers stopped me I lost him again."

The tall cop said, "You got this one?"

"I'm good."

"Radio if you need assistance." The police officers walked off, leaving Ricky with the Javits Center security guard.

Although he was somewhat relieved to be back with the rent-a-cop rather than the N.Y.P.D., Ricky knew he was not totally out of the woods yet.

"Let's go to the office, I can get on the P.A. We'll find your uncle. Is he always this irresponsible?"

They started to walk back to the entrance area.

Ricky said, "It's cool. He let's me go on my own a lot. He probably forgot he didn't give me the badge. That's all. I think I can find him. I know his favorite

comics. I'll be okay if you let me go."

The man with the two children Ricky had encountered earlier started to pass by, but stopped. The man turned to Ricky. "Are you in trouble?"

The guard said, "Are you the uncle?"

Before Ricky could say anything, the man with the two children said, "What's the problem officer?"

"Do you have your nephew's badge?"

The man took off one of the two badges hanging around his neck and handed it to Ricky and nodded to the guard. "Will that be all sir?"

Ricky was stunned. Why did this man, almost a total stranger, do that?

The security guard said, "I'm just glad you all got together. Was about to call you on the P.A. You have to wear your badges at all times. Have a nice day."

His radio started to squawk again. He picked it up and walked away.

Ricky didn't know what to think. He wanted to hug the man, but squeezed out a small, "Thank you, Mister."

"Think nothing of it. My wife called just as you took off. She can't get out of work today. You said you had no money, so I looked around for you. Guess this is your lucky day."

"Yeah, it is. You don't know how lucky I feel," Ricky said.

The man extended his hand to shake. "I'm Mr. Kenopik and this is my daughter, Sasha, and my son, Eric. What's your name?"

Ricky kicked into polite mode and shook the man's hand. "Ricky Perez. Pleased to meet you Mr. Ken . . Ken-op—"

"It's Ken-op-ik. Come on in, join us."

"Wow. Thanks. But I can't afford to pay you. I only have six dollars left."

"It's all paid for. I tried to return it at will-call but there's no refunds."

Ricky put the badge over his head and stared down at it. "Thank you. This is the best thing that has ever happened to me."

"How old are you, Ricky?"

"Fourteen."

"Shouldn't you be in school?"

"Um. Yeah. I guess so."

Mr. Kenopik leaned over and whispered, "You shouldn't be cutting school or jumping gates for that matter."

"Yeah, I know."

"We've all done it," he said.

Ricky thanked Mr. Kenopic again and went off on his own to explore. He had

a mission. His heart was set on meeting the indie artists and to get tips on how to break into comics.

Ricky had never attended an event so colossal. It was a mob scene. Everywhere he looked, he saw something that drew him in. He got the biggest kick out of the cosplayers who were dressed up like their favorite characters.

He approached a guy dressed as Superman. "Hey, Superman. Can I take your picture?"

"Only if you include my Lois Lane."

Ricky felt he was getting into the spirit of the convention. "How about we do a selfie?"

"Sure." Then Superman and Lois Lane put their arms around Ricky as he extend his phone to shoot the selfie.

He felt great until he reviewed at himself in the picture he took. Sad. Dressed in old jeans and a faded T-shirt that didn't even have a comic book image on it. What was he thinking when he left the house to go to the con? Not much. But he did have the presence of mind to bring some of his work with him.

Out of his back pocket he pulled his drawings all folded up, the two he took from Manny's and the one he threw together on loose-leaf paper at the kitchen table. He unfolded them and felt small as he compared his work to the vibrant and professional images on display. Ricky knew he would never get a chance to be that good if he lost out on getting into Art and Design. His sketchbook was his ticket to getting into a good school. He knew all the work he had put into his portfolio was gone and the sorry state of what he had in hand was never going to fly.

Enough of the big booths and cosplayers, Ricky was on a mission. After asking a few people, he found Artist Alley. Wow. There were lines of tables, on which independent artists were displaying original work. There were authors and artists for as far as he could see. Walking up and down the rows of tables, Ricky took it all in. He never dreamed there were so many professional comic book artists. He was a fan and consumer of comic books but this was the first time he had ever seen the original works. Some sold panels wrapped in plastic for one hundred dollars each, others for twenty-five. It was clear there was no way he was going to acquire any original art that day. He had already had his lucky break when Mr. Kenopic gave him a badge to enter.

Bleary-eyed and exhausted with delight, he came upon a table labeled "Forces of Honor." It was a comic he was unfamiliar with.

"Hi there," the man sitting behind the table said.

"Hi. Nice work," Ricky said.

"Glad you like it. I'm Tom, the author and publisher. The artwork is done by a variety of artists all over the world. Enjoy."

Ricky was thrilled that someone actually spoke to him. At the other tables, he was intimidated, afraid to say anything or ask any questions.

He picked up a graphic novel, *Rage Fanatic*, and started to leaf through it.

Tom said, "That's my latest."

"Cool. So you don't do the drawings yourself?"

"Nope. I'm Chicago based and I work with artists, letterers and colorists over the Internet."

"I'm an artist."

"Really? Is that some of your work you got there?"

All of a sudden Ricky felt small again. He had forgotten he took his drawings out. They paled in comparison to what was on display.

"Let me see," Tom said.

"Um. It's not so good."

"Everybody's got to start somewhere. Let's have a look."

Reluctantly, Ricky presented the three pages to Tom and cringed while he looked them over.

"Hmmm. A fan of Egyptian mythology I see."

"Not anymore. It's ancient China and kung-fu these days. Look at the last one."

Tom pulled out the recent work on loose-leaf and said, "Very different style in this one. I like it. Who's the wicked empress?"

"My mother."

"Hmmm. What's with the bird in the cage?"

"My principal. He's the a-hole who got me in trouble with my mother."

Tom looked up over the top of his glasses and gave Ricky a look.

"And is that Monkey King to the rescue?"

"You know this stuff?"

Tom said, "I'm impressed that you're grounded in the classics. A lot of kids your age . . . How old are you?"

"Fourteen."

"Good for you. A lot of kids your age don't read enough classical literature to bring to their work. You're off to a good start. What's your name?"

"Ricky Perez. You think my work is good?"

"It's a good start. Sure. I think with some training and enough practice, you will be even better."

"Good enough to get into Art and Design?"

Tom put the drawings down. "What's Art and Design? A college?"

"No." Ricky looked down and shuffled his feet. "It's one of the art high schools here in New York. It's not LaGuardia, but you still have to audition to get in."

"So, tell me more."

Ricky perked up. He felt empowered by the attention Tom was giving him. Finally someone was seriously interested in his work. His voice got a little life in it. "You have to present a portfolio. They interview you about it. Then they have you draw on the spot. It's hard to get in, but they have a track for commercial art. That's where they teach cartooning, but I need to get my portfolio ready by December 14th."

"Do you keep a sketchbook?"

"That's the problem. The principal confiscated it and called my mother in. She threw it away so I have to start from scratch."

"I see."

"Those Egyptian panels are from when I was in sixth grade. They're crappy, I know."

"Not really," Tom said. "But you'll have to redo them." He picked up the latest drawing. "You show promise. This one has much more style. The cross-hatching is well done. I can help you."

"What? You'll help me?"

"I like your attitude, Ricky."

Tom did that thing of looking over his glasses again in a scolding way. "But you skipped school today, didn't you?"

Ricky didn't want to lie anymore so he told the truth. He and Tom bonded over a conversation about their shared tastes in comic book artists and authors. The highlight was when he invited Ricky to sit behind the table to mind the shop while he went out to get them both a sandwich for lunch.

That was the beginning of a two-month online exchange where Tom mentored Ricky in building his portfolio. It was a grueling two months of back and forth criticism and re-drawing.

On the day of his audition, Ricky showed up with his sketchbook and fifteen of the drawings he had mounted on pieces of white oak tag. Most of the students

were with their parents, but parents were made to wait in the auditorium. Applicants only in the registration area.

At the registration desks, each student checked in, got a number and took a seat. There was no one he recognized, but he already knew there wasn't going to be any other students from his middle school. Ricky saw an empty chair near some other boys. He sat down, tucked the rolled oak tag between his knees and clutched his sketchbook to his belly. It looked like all the other applicants arrived with their portfolios bound in black rigid folders or big colorful plastic cases with handles. There was part of this process he was not understanding.

Ricky gazed down at his lap, embarrassed that he didn't have a fancy portfolio case like the others. He shifted his eyes all the way to the left, then to the right checking to confirm that everybody else had a separate portfolio. He knew then that he misunderstood what was required for the interview but tried to make the best of it.

When they started calling numbers, the students in his group filed into the studio. Someone collected the portfolios and said that faculty would be grading them during the studio piece.

Everyone took seats at drawing tables arranged around a still life that was displayed on a pedestal draped with a sheet in the middle of the room. It was the first time he had been in an art studio. It smelled of turpentine and oil paint. Layers of paint drips covered the easels and the floor. Canvases were stacked against the walls. This environment reeked of creativity. This is where I belong, Ricky thought.

He pulled three pencils out of his coat pocket. Two of them had broken points. At least one was still good. He looked around and everyone else had already started drawing realistic renditions of the bowl of fruit.

Boring. I'll show them, he thought.

Intent on getting into the commercial art program for cartooning, his competitive spirit of kung-fu kicked in.

It was time to take a chance. Ricky used the still life as an element in a cartoon panel. By prominently placing the fruit bowl in the foreground of a Chinese palace foyer he sketched in a kung-fu warrior sneaking in from behind to steal one of the plump grapes. Using cross-hatching for lowlight he had just enough time to add the shadow of the palace guard looming in the distant doorway before time was called. That's when he started to worry about the choices he made. He wiped the sweat off his upper lip, took a deep breath in and let it out with an audible sigh.

Three observational drawings were required. The second was to draw a chair with a pile of books and a coffee cup. And the third was a toy box with a teddy bear sitting on top. He set each of them in a cartoon context.

Part one down; the interview was next. Once back in the waiting area, the applicants' numbers were called one by one. Finally, he heard his. He collected his sketchbook and followed the interviewer into the room.

"Nervous?" the interviewer said.

"A little."

"Understandable. I'm Mr. Stein, one of the commercial art teachers."

Ricky wiped his hand on his trousers before he extended it to shake, just to be sure it wasn't sweaty.

"Please, have a seat. You probably will want to take your jacket off. It's warm in here."

"That's okay, thanks."

Ricky handed Stein his sketchbook and sat down in the chair across the table. He saw his observation drawings on the desk. The bowl of fruit assignment was on top. Looking at it upside down, he noticed that the pedestal wasn't straight. A bead of sweat that had been forming on his forehead slid down landing to his cheek. He started to have second thoughts about not doing a classic still life sketch and tried to casually wipe his cheek with the back of his hand. This was not a good start. Stein was right, it really was hot in his office, but it was too late to take his jacket off.

Ricky blurted out, "Do you like my drawing?"

Stein slid his reading glasses down from his bald head and picked up the still life. "I like how you think outside of the box, Ricky. This one tells a story."

"Whew, I was afraid you wouldn't like it."

"Well, Ricky, to tell you the truth, this was an observational drawing exercise, not where you draw from imagination. So this may be a problem."

Ricky's eyes got huge, his jaw dropped open and he fell back in the chair. "So, I failed."

"It's not that you failed." Stein sat back in his chair and wagged his finger at Ricky. "Have you had much art in school? Or do you attend any after school art classes?"

"In school, not after school."

Ricky knew he wasn't doing well right off the bat when Stein said, "And your teacher never taught you about observational drawing?"

"We don't really have an real art teacher. She moved before school started, so

we get a different sub every six weeks. We just draw whatever we want."

Stein said, "So, nobody helped you prepare for this interview?"

"Not really. Is that a problem?"

Ricky felt Mr. Stein was quieter than he'd expected. He didn't even look at Ricky. He quietly started flipping through the sketchbook looking at random pages. As he did so, he scratched behind his neck, occasionally pulling the sides of his mouth down, as if he were cleaning off some stray food. Ricky became uncomfortable with the silence; it felt like more than five minutes had gone by and Mr. Stein wasn't really interviewing him.

"I don't suppose you brought any letters of recommendation with you."

Finally something was going his way. Ricky perked up. "I did."

He proudly pulled out of his back pocket the letter that Tom had sent him and passed the envelope to Stein. "I have this from the publisher and author of Spin That Rack Comics.

Stein said, "Tom Garfinkle?"

"Uh-huh." Ricky nodded.

Stein removed the letter from the envelope and unfolded it. Without looking at Ricky, he glanced down at the printed page and said, "Hmmm."

That didn't sound good to Ricky. "Something wrong?"

Looking up at Ricky, Stein said, "Garfinkle's still out in Chicago last I heard. How did you get a letter of recommendation from him?"

Ricky was about to explain when Stein placed his glasses back on the top of his head and said, "I see he's been your mentor for the last two months. Impressive. Tell me more."

Some life came back into Ricky's voice. He told the story of meeting Tom at the con and then added, "I'm going to be his intern. He wants me to keep my grades up, so it'll be a summer internship."

"Well, your excellent academic standing carries weight in our decisions. Your good attendance record too, so that will count in your favor when we discuss the lack of variety of media and subject matter in your portfolio."

Stein rolled up the portfolio pieces on oak tag and bound them with a rubber band. Then tucked the three observational drawings into the sketchbook.

"That's it?" Ricky expected more.

Stein stood up and said, "That's it."

"So, my portfolio isn't very good?"

"It's not bad. You show great promise as a cartoonist." He placed both of his hands on the desk and leaned toward Ricky. "But, it lacks the range of skills and

media we would have liked to have seen.”

Ricky got up and eked out a quiet, “Okay.”

Stein added, “And, don’t forget, I’m making a note on the glowing recommendation you got from Garfinkle, and the internship he offered you. All that counts in your favor.”

Ricky’s hopes were not bolstered by Stein’s words of reassurance. He left the building deflated, knowing his portfolio lacked variety and that his observational drawings were creative but all wrong.

The time between the interview and finding out the results was a long two-and-a-half month process of waiting. Although Ricky had taken the specialized high school exams that his mother arranged, his application to Art and Design was still a secret.

It was March and eighth graders all over the city knew that results would be out soon. Students in New York City list twelve high schools in order of preference in the fall and then have wait until March to see if they are matched with their first choice. Word had been going around school all week that the guidance office would probably get the acceptance letters by Friday. Ricky was distracted most of the day. He even tried asking the guidance counselor to give him his letter early, but he said he had given the match letters to the homeroom teachers to distribute at the end of the day.

The time came. Homeroom teachers passed out the envelopes as students filed out. Some ripped them open immediately and cheered running out into the hallways to share their good news, others slunk down in their chairs totally depressed. Ricky hesitated. He didn’t want to find out in front of everybody else; he was a loner. Emotions were running wild; he didn’t trust what he would feel.

He pedaled home at high speed. The coast was clear. He leaned his bike against the garage, pushed open the side door to the kitchen, raced to his room, tossed his book bag on the bed and sat on the floor. He pulled the letter out of the pocket of his bag, staring at his name on the outside of the envelope. He could not bear it any longer and ripped the envelope open. When his eyes saw he was matched with Art and Design High School his heart stopped. He started hyperventilating and jumped up and down screaming, “I did it! I did it! I did it!” He ran all through the house, screaming his excitement into the air. He had no idea how he would tell his mother.

It was time to thank Tom. He went to his desk, got out his art supplies and started drawing a comic just for him. He wanted to make a story depicting Tom

as the superhero. He made a good likeness of his face and cast him as a blond Sumo wrestler named Tomo who battles the Yakuza gangsters that terrorize Chicago. In the last panel, he showed an aerial view where he pictured Tom in full Sumo regalia getting ready to push over the Willis Tower, which crushes the bad guys who are running up the street from behind.

Then he wrote a heartfelt email thanking Tom for helping him and attached photos of the letter and the new panels he drew as a gift to his mentor. The subject line was: "Tomo Saves the Day."

Tom wrote back right away saying that he was thrilled at the news and how much he enjoyed the new panels. He added that no one had ever drawn him into a comic before. He urged Ricky to level with his mother about what he had been doing behind her back. He wrote:

You need to share your passion for graphic arts with your mother. She will be proud of the work you did and your accomplishments. You need to come clean with her, Ricky. If you do, I'll give you a chance to draw for my next story. I've got one in the works about a teenage ninja artist and I think you could make your debut as a professional. But not until I know you've squared things with your mother. How 'bout it?

That email weighed heavy on Ricky's heart for days. Then the specialized high school exam results finally came in. That was what his mother had been waiting for. An offer from any of those schools would trump the one from Art and Design. Ricky didn't make the cut for any of them; he only scored 520 out of 800. The cut off was 522, which meant that his only choice would be art school. He was afraid of his mother's wrath so he sought advice from Manny again.

This time Lucia was home and overheard the conversation about Ricky's dilemma. She chimed in, "Oh Ricky, honey, your mother already knows. She called me right away after she spoke to the guidance counselor today. She told her how happy you had been with the good news about your acceptance into Art and Design. Your mother's been waiting for you to tell her yourself so she can celebrate your success."

That was music to his ears. He couldn't wait, so instead of going home he biked all the way to Victory Boulevard to the insurance company where his mother worked and waited for her in the parking lot. When he saw her walking toward the car he started to get scared. Maybe she had changed her mind.

He could hear his mother's voice from a distance. "Ricky, what are you doing here?"

He approached her and said, "You got the exam results, didn't you?"

They started to walk to the car together. "I called the guidance counselor today." Usually she sounded pissed off, but he detected kindness in her voice. "I'm sorry you didn't make the cut. Are you okay?"

"So you're not mad at me?"

"Why should I be mad at you? Miss Jordan said you were accepted at Art and Design. She says that's one of the best art schools in the city."

Still stunned by her change of heart, he said nothing.

"Come on. Let's get dinner out and celebrate."



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