

Tag--I'm It!

by W.M. Akers



"Tuesday. 12:45. Recess. The game is tag. The stakes are high. There is no time to waste," Ryan said this to himself under his breath, on the edge of the jungle gym where kids played tag.

A football fan, Ryan's favorite part of the game was the commentators. Their deep, serious voices made football seem like more than a game. They made it dramatic-like a gladiator fight from ancient Rome. Ryan thought gladiators were pretty cool.

When kids on his playground played tag, he pretended to be a commentator. In his deepest possible voice, he took the imagined audience through the ups and downs of the match.

"Around the corner comes Billy Watkins," he intoned. "Billy's having a strong season so far, and those who watch this sport closely think he might be about to step up to a higher level. If he fulfills his promise, his name could stand alongside the greats of the game-names like Shirley Tompkins and Judy Whitmore, Andy Tobin and George Francis. "

As he came around the corner, though, Billy Watkins slipped in the mulch and fell on his face.

He rolled back and forth on the ground, whimpering. No one showed sympathy.

"On the other hand," Ryan said, "Billy may disappoint us all. "

Ryan knew something about disappointment. He had time to play commentator because nobody really wanted him to play tag. He'd never understood why, but when he joined the game, nobody would chase him. If he did somehow manage to become "It," nobody would run. But he didn't try to play; if he just narrated the game, he wouldn't be left out. He was still playing tag—he was just playing it in a different way.

"Hey kid!" said a voice behind him, a freckle-faced girl with frizzy pigtails named Angela. A newcomer to the game, Ryan thought to himself. A rookie hungry for respect. A-

"Why aren't you playing the game?" she barked, interrupting his reverie.

"I'm playing. "

"No you're not! You're just standing over here being weird. "

"I'm providing commentary, for, uh..." Ryan tried to think of anything to say besides "for the folks at home." He couldn't. "For the folks at home. "

"What folks?! Are you on the phone or something? "

"Just leave me alone. "

"I can't! "

"Why not? "

"Because I'm 'It!' Why aren't you running? I'm 'It', and that means you're supposed to run." Ryan shrugged. She poked him in the stomach. "Fine! Now you're 'It!'"

Ryan froze. He hadn't been 'It' for a long time. He didn't know what to do. The rest of the players stopped, too, and stared at him. If he moved, would they move too? Or would they stand there, waiting for him to quit embarrassing himself and get off the playground?

"Uh, weirdo!" shouted Angela. "This isn't freeze tag. Start running! "

So he ran the only way he knew how: with narration.

"Heart pounding in his ears, the frightened young commentator springs into action," he muttered. "He isn't sure how, he isn't sure why, but he knows one thing. He is going to get that

girl with the pigtails. "

"Quit talking to yourself, and run like you mean it!" said Angela.

"He races up the slide, and across the footbridge, his target in his sights just a few feet away. The bridge's wooden slats clatter under his feet, sending shockwaves up his spine and into his jaw. Ryan is undaunted. This will be his hour. He reaches toward his foe, stretches out his fingers, and-ow! "

Ryan's hands clutched air. He fell face-forward, off the jungle gym, landing where Angela had been just a moment before. She had slid down the fireman's pole. He had not been so graceful.

"Dazed and confused, the young competitor tries to get his bearings. He looks up and sees the face of his opponent staring down at him, looking concerned and curious about why Ryan is still talking to himself. "

"I think you might have broken your brain," Angela said.

"Ryan's brain is fine. Angela is the one who needs to worry. "

"Why? "

Ryan leapt to his feet and poked Angela in the stomach.

"Because Angela is 'It!'"

Ryan turned and ran, a happy gladiator, battling at last.