

***Gerbusters II***

“Okay Gerbusters,” said Miss Johnson, “this is it! Make sure you have your bands, scanners, and interleukin radios. Members of the T teams and B team, head out and scout for invaders. Don’t forget the rules, and be sure to use your interleukin radios. If you need help, we’ll send it. Go get those germs!”

Melissa, Ian, Carmen, Andrew, Jennifer, Carl, Billy, Elizabeth, and Juan hit the door and scattered. Miss Johnson gathered the rest of the class around her desk to listen to her interleukin radio. Gasparo, Giovanni, and Antonio hopped off the window sill and danced around the room.

“All right,” said Miss Johnson. “You can dance, but

no singing! We have to hear the radio.”

Melissa darted to the back wall of the sixth grade building. Each grade, from kindergarten to sixth, had its own building, and each building had three classrooms. An administrative building housed the library, the principal’s office, and the main auditorium. All buildings were laid out in a circle, surrounding a large playground that had a grassy playing field, four handball courts, five basketball courts, three tetherball courts, and a large sandbox with slides, swings, and bars. Grassy playing areas also covered the perimeter of the school yard. These extended all the way to the outside fence. Bushes and trees covered the fence making it impossible to see out. Invaders had plenty of places to hide and sneak around. The school occupied an entire block, and there was a single entrance on each of the four sides. Invaders could penetrate from any side.

Melissa halted with her back against the wall and her scanner pointed up, just like cops in the movies. She edged up to a corner, took a deep breath, and stole a look at the central playground. All clear. She looked to her left and right. Nothing moving. Another deep breath and she dashed to the corner of the fifth grade building. She caught her breath and looked around the corner at the central

playground. Something moved between the fifth and sixth grade buildings. Her pulse quickened. This could be her first chance to nab an invader. She paused, pondering what to do, and darted around the corner. She walked quickly (no running) to the moving figure, scanner pointed and ready for action. The figure walked away at first, then halted.

“Is that you, Melissa?”

“Yeah. Is that you, Jennifer?”

“Yeah. Seen anything yet?”

“Nope. How about you?”

“I think so,” said Jennifer. “I saw a boy just a second ago on the other side of the fifth grade building. I think he’s an invader.”

“Tell you what,” said Melissa, “you go around this side and I’ll go around the other and we’ll sneak up and trap him.”

“Okay. Do it quietly.”

Melissa and Jennifer snuck off in opposite directions. Melissa reached the first corner and peeked around. All clear. She rounded that corner and headed to the next. Another quick peek. Someone was there, headed for a classroom door, and it didn’t look like anyone she knew.

Jennifer's head poked around the opposite corner. Melissa signaled, and the two popped around their corners and beelined for the invader. The invader reached a door and grabbed the handle.

"Stop right there!" said Melissa. "The rule is you must stop and let us scan you."

"I know, I know," said the invader, a boy with blond hair and brown eyes, probably in fifth or sixth grade. He stood, grasping the handle, while Melissa scanned. No beeps.

"So you're not a polio virus," said Melissa.

"Nope," said the invader, smiling.

"Let me try," said Jennifer. She ran her scanner and it beeped. "Aha!" she said, "so you're a streptococcus bacterium. Nasty! Well you're not giving us a sore throat! Give me your red marker."

"No way!" said the invader. "You're not wearing a killer T or macrophage T-shirt. So I don't have to give you anything."

Melissa got on her interleukin radio. "Hey, we need a killer T or a macrophage over here at once. We're by the door to, uh, Mr. Henson's room. Quick! We've got a streptococcus bacterium here about to invade."

All Gerbusters on the prowl rushed at once to Mr. Henson's room. Carl arrived first. He proudly displayed his "Mighty Macrophage" T-shirt.

"Hand over your red marker," said Carl. "I'm a Mighty Macrophage."

The invader dug into a pocket, pulled out a red marker, and handed it to Carl. The other Gerbusters arrived and enjoyed the capture.

"Good work! We nailed one!" said Ian. "Real macrophages would kill the invader. Maybe we'll have pity on this one, and just take him to Miss Johnson. I'll call her now."

Ian clicked his interleukin radio. "Miss Johnson, we just caught a streptococcus bacterium. Shall we bring him in?"

"Who caught him?" asked Miss Johnson.

"Well, I guess Melissa and Jennifer did. But we're all here helping out."

"What! All of you? Who's patrolling for other invaders?"

The invader grinned.

"Whoops!" said Ian. "We're blowing it! You guys get back on patrol. I'll take in the invader." Ian marched the

invader to Miss Johnson's room while the others prowled for invaders.

Meanwhile Miss Johnson commissioned new Germbusters from her class.

"We've been attacked by a streptococcus bacterium," she said. "When that really happens in your body, your immune system makes more copies of cells that recognize streptococcus, so you're better prepared next time. I need two volunteers for the B team who'll scout for streptococcus."

Willy and Ann soon set off with streptococcus scanners and interleukin radios.

Melissa tiptoed to the second grade building. She was worried. What if an invader snuck into a classroom? The invader could mark kids left and right in the classroom without the Germbusters knowing. Better peek into classroom windows to check.

All looked clear at the second grade building. No invaders prowling outside. She peeked in a window to Mr. Glassen's room. The kids were sitting at their desks working—probably math exercises, since Mr. Glassen had addition problems on the blackboard. No invaders here. Melissa headed to the next room, Mrs. Richter's. They

too were doing math.

The last room was Mrs. Miyasaki's. Melissa peered in the window. The kids weren't sitting at their desks, but milled about as though playing keep away. Strange, thought Melissa, Mrs. Miyasaki keeps her class in order, at least she did when I was in second grade. Either she's getting soft, or something's going on.

Melissa looked around the room to see who was 'it' in this game of keep away. It wasn't hard to tell. One kid in the room was several inches taller than the rest and had out a red marker. Melissa realized with horror that most of the kids already had a red "X."

Melissa clicked her interleukin radio. "We've got a mess in Miyasaki's room. An invader has marked up most of the kids. Get some Germbusters here on the double. Maybe we can save a few kids."

"I'll be right over," crackled Jennifer's voice. "Me too," crackled Carl and several other Germbusters.

"Not everybody," said Melissa. "Let's not make the same mistake twice."

Melissa burst into Mrs. Miyasaki's room. "Okay, stop right there. I'm a Germbuster and I'm going to scan you."

All the kids cheered, and Mrs. Miyasaki smiled.

“Good to see you, Melissa. I almost lost the whole class.”

“Sorry I’m a bit late,” said Melissa. “We were nabbing another invader.”

“Did you get it?” asked one of the kids.

“Yeah, it was a streptococcus bacterium, the kind that gives you sore throats. He’s history, locked up in Miss Johnson’s room.” Melissa smiled at the invader. “And that’s where you’re headed too.”

“We’ll see about that,” said the invader, a slender girl with black eyes and hair, who looked to be in fifth grade.

Melissa ran her scanner. No beep. “Guess you’re not a polio virus.”

“You’ve got that right,” said the invader and whipped out her marker. All the kids scattered. Just then Jennifer and Carl burst in the door.

“Back off, you vile germ!” said Carl. “We’re the Germbusters. Your time is up! Scan her Jennifer!”

Jennifer ran her scanner and got a beep. “Another streptococcus bacterium! Looks like the Bonita School wants to give us a sore throat! Haul her off Carl.”

Carl proudly displayed his Mighty Macrophage T shirt, snatched the red marker, and led the invader off to Miss Johnson’s room.

“How many kids got marked?” asked Melissa.

“I don’t know,” said Mrs. Miyasaki. “But I think most of them.”

They counted and found that 20 of the 32 kids had been marked.

“Hmm, that means they only need 29 more kids to win,” said Jennifer. “We’d better get to work.”

“See you later, Mrs. Miyasaki,” said Melissa as she and Jennifer hit the door.

“Good luck!” Mrs. Miyasaki called back.

Melissa and Jennifer stepped outside and their interleukin radios squawked.

“I’ve got another streptococcus bacterium over here in Mr. Hernandez’s room.” It was Ann. “I need a macrophage to grab the invader.”

“Be right over.” It was Billy.

Melissa clicked her radio. “Did anyone get marked?”

“Yeah,” said Ann. “We’re counting them now. Hold on a second. Okay, it looks like we’ve got 13 kids marked in here.”

“Uh oh,” said Melissa over the radio. “We’ve got 20 marked in here. So they’ve already marked 34 of our kids. 16 more and we lose.”

“Well, we’ve already gotten three invaders so far,” said Ann. “There’s probably only one or two left.”

“Back to work,” said Melissa. She and Jennifer split up. Jennifer prowled the first grade building and Melissa headed for third grade. When she arrived she found Andrew on the prowl.

“Seen anything?” asked Melissa.

“Not here,” said Andrew. “But I think I saw something moving in those bushes by the fence. Check it out. See anything funny?”

Melissa carefully peeked around the corner, and scanned the row of bushes. “I can’t see anything, but someone might be there. Those bushes are a great hiding place.”

“Think I’ll check it out,” said Andrew.

“Okay,” said Melissa. “I’ll stay here and keep watch.”

Andrew snuck to the bushes and hesitated. The row was so long there were plenty of places to hide. Andrew poked around.

Someone darted from behind the bushes marched over to Andrew and marked him with a big red “X.”

“Hey! You can’t do that,” said Andrew. “An invader can’t mark a Gembuster!”

“There’s been a change of plans,” said the invader. It was a skinny boy, but he seemed confident. “I have a note from my school principal addressed to Miss Johnson which explains everything. You’re dead man. I’ve got you. Take me to Miss Johnson and I’ll show her the note.”

“You bet I will!” said Andrew. “I don’t like this one bit. The stakes are too high for someone to mess around with the rules. A trip to Disneyland is on the line.” The two marched off to Miss Johnson’s room.

Melissa wasn’t able to overhear this conversation, but she didn’t like what she saw. She stayed out of sight and followed the boys to see where they went. She snuck from corner to corner until the boys entered Miss Johnson’s room. She snuck to an open window and listened in.

Andrew was speaking. “Yeah, the red mark is right here. He can’t do that! I was going to get him when he marked me.”

“That’s against the rules, you know,” Miss Johnson said to the invader.

“Not any more,” said the invader. He pulled out an envelope and handed it to Miss Johnson. “My principal gave me this note for you.”

Melissa watched Miss Johnson’s face as she read the

note. At first she looked puzzled, then she smiled. Finally she folded it and faced the invader.

“I see,” she said. “The note says your name is Jonathan. Okay, you’re free to go Jonathan. Andrew, I’m afraid you’ve just been eliminated from the Germbusters. You’re dead now.”

“Oh man!” said Andrew. “What’s going on here?”

“I’ll tell you when it’s all over,” said Miss Johnson.

Jonathan headed for the door. Melissa scurried back along the wall and around the corner—just in time. Jonathan exited the door and strode off. Just then Jennifer popped around the corner right in front of Jonathan. Melissa wanted to shout a warning, but that would reveal her own position. So she kept silent and watched in horror as Jonathan casually strode up to Jennifer and slapped a big red ‘X’ on her arm. Jennifer was surprised.

“Hey! You can’t do that!” said Jennifer.

“Let’s go see Miss Johnson and see if I can’t,” said Jonathan with a smile.

“You bet!” said Jennifer, and the two marched back to Miss Johnson’s room.

Melissa waited behind the corner, glancing around. A minute later Jonathan opened the door, a big smile on his

face. He headed for the playground. When he was gone, Melissa slipped along the wall to Miss Johnson's room, and ducked inside.

"Miss Johnson, what's going on here? How come you're letting that invader kill off the Germbusters? That's against the rules!"

"The rules just changed a bit Melissa," said Miss Johnson. "It's going to be a lot tougher to win now."

"I don't like this!" said Melissa.

"I don't either!" said Jennifer.

"Well it's no use complaining," said Miss Johnson. "You'll have to play by the new rules."

"What can we do to win now?" asked Melissa. "If that invader can kill Germbusters, soon there won't be Germbusters left to protect the school. Then we lose big time!"

"That's right," said Miss Johnson. "You must figure out a new plan."

"Well I'm getting on the radio and warning the Germbusters!" said Melissa.

"Good idea, Melissa," said Miss Johnson. "But first you'd better leave before Jonathan returns and finds you here."

“Right,” said Melissa and headed for the door.

“Stop!” shouted Andrew. “He’s coming back. And he’s got Ian!”

Melissa searched the room for a place to hide, but couldn’t find any.

“Over here,” called Miss Johnson. She opened up a cabinet under the sink. There was enough room for Melissa, so she scrambled in. Miss Johnson shut the cabinet just as Jonathan entered the room with Ian.

“I’ve got another Gernbuster!” Jonathan said cheerfully.

“What’s going on here?” asked Ian. “Why are Jennifer and Andrew in here?”

“Sorry Ian,” said Miss Johnson, “but there’s been a change in rules.”

“That’s not fair!” said Ian.

“Well, sometimes the rules change in Nature as well,” said Miss Johnson. “Creatures must adapt to the new rules or become extinct.”

“Yeah,” said Ian. “But this is more important than extinction. I mean, we’re talking a trip to Disneyland!”

Miss Johnson smiled. “Well I think you’ve got some mixed priorities, Ian. But the new rules stand. And you’re

officially dead as a Germbuster. You must stay here for the rest of the contest.”

“Oh man!” said Ian, and dropped himself in a chair.

Jonathan headed for the door and said with a cheerful voice, “Be back in a minute!”

“Give me a break,” Andrew said. Andrew went to the window and watched for a few seconds. “Okay, all clear!”

Melissa crawled from the cabinet and headed for the door.

“Good luck!” called Miss Johnson.

“Thanks!” said Melissa, and slipped out. Everything looked clear, so Melissa snuck to the bushes and whipped out her interleukin radio.

“Hey Germbusters! We’ve got trouble. Stop everything and listen. If you see a skinny invader with black hair and brown eyes, don’t scan him. He’ll mark you and you’re dead. The rules have changed.”

“Too late.” Willy’s voice crackled over the radio. “I just tried to scan him and he got me. We’re headed to Miss Johnson’s right now.”

“Sorry Willy,” said Melissa. “I just found out myself. I tried to tell you guys as soon as possible. Willy, turn off your radio so Jonathan can’t hear what I tell the others.”

“Okay, Melissa,” said Willy. “Signing off. Good luck you guys!”

“Billy, Ann, Elizabeth, Carmen, Carl, and Juan, listen up,” said Melissa. “We’re the only Germbusters left. Don’t go near the skinny invader with black hair or he’ll get you. You can’t get him. I don’t know why, but that’s the new rule. We’ve got to protect our school for ten more minutes. Anyone have an idea?”

“Can the other invaders get us too?” It was Carl.

“I don’t know,” said Melissa. “We have to be careful.”

“Maybe we should give up,” said Elizabeth. “We can’t win if the invaders can mark us. We can’t protect the school if we’re at risk ourselves.”

“It sounds bad,” said Juan. “But I don’t want to give up Disneyland.”

“Me neither,” said Billy. “I’ve only gone four times before. I feel deprived.”

“Poor boy,” said Carmen. “I’ve only been three times. But I’ve got an idea that I’m sure will work.”

“What’s that?” said Billy.

“Just a minute,” said Carmen. “I’m not giving up this idea for free. You’ve got to all promise me that if the idea works you’ll each chip in and buy my lunch at Disneyland.

Then I can use my lunch money to buy souvenirs. Deal?”

The radios were silent.

Melissa sighed. “I guess buying Carmen’s lunch is better than not going to Disneyland at all.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” said Juan. The others reluctantly agreed.

“Okay,” said Carmen. “But we’re not talking a cheapy lunch, just a hot dog or something. I want a double cheese-burger, large fries, large coke, and a chocolate ice cream. Deal?”

“This better be some good idea,” said Melissa, “and you’d better tell us now, or Disneyland is history and your lunch is a dream.”

“Okay, here it is,” said Carmen. “It’s simple. If they change the rules on us, we change the rules on them. Fair’s fair. We close all classrooms and lock the doors. Then the invaders can’t get in and mark us or the others. We wait behind locked doors for time to run out. Piece of cake.”

“That is simple,” said Melissa. “It just might work. We’d better get going.”

Everyone agreed.

“Then here’s what we do,” said Carmen. “There’s seven buildings, first through sixth plus kindergarten, and

there's seven of us. We each take a building and make sure its three rooms are locked. Then we each check the building to the left of the one we locked, just to make sure there's no problems. All right?"

This sounded reasonable, so they picked buildings and took off. Melissa headed to the kindergarten building. First she went to Mrs. Wilbur's room and peeked in the window. No problems, so she slipped inside.

"Hi Melissa," said Mrs. Wilbur. "How are we doing in the contest?"

"Well it's close, and the invaders from Bonita changed the rules so they can eliminate me too."

"Oh my!" said Mrs. Wilbur. "That will make it tough to win."

"It sure will," said Melissa. "We have a plan that might work. I'm leaving in just a second. When I leave I want you to lock the door to the room, just for the next, oh, ten minutes. That way the invaders can't get in. After we've gotten all the rooms locked, we'll lock the Germ-busters safely in as well. We'll win because they can't get in."

"Sounds a bit like cheating, but I guess all's fair in war," said Mrs. Wilbur. "We'll do our part and protect all

these thyroid cells in here.”

“Good,” said Melissa. “See you later.” She peeked out the window, then slipped down to Mrs. Larkin’s class. No problems in Mrs. Larkin’s class either, and Mrs. Larkin locked the door behind Melissa when she left. Finally, Melissa headed to Mr. Norman’s class. Again no problems, and Mr. Norman locked the door behind Melissa. She then headed for the building to her left, first grade. The first two rooms were secure. Melissa snuck toward the third room. It’s door opened. Melissa ducked around a corner. She saw Jonathan step out with Juan. Juan had a big red ‘X’ on his arm. Another invader stepped out with them.

“Okay,” said Jonathan, “I’ve got this one and I’m taking him to Johnson’s room. Give this class a little taste of staph infection. Once you’ve infected all the kids in this class, I think we’ve won! Disneyland, here we come!” He laughed, and walked off with Juan. The other invader went into the classroom.

Melissa got on her interleukin radio. “Ann and Carl, get over to Mr. Nelson’s class right away. We’ve got a staphylococcus infection here that could lose us the whole contest!”

Melissa trotted to the door and slipped inside. The

invader had put big red 'X's on nine of the first graders, and was about to get a tenth.

"Stop right there!" said Melissa. "I'm a Germbuster, and I'm going to scan you." Melissa knew, from overhearing their conversation, that this invader was not a polio virus, and that her scanner would not beep. But she was delaying until Ann, who had a staphylococcus scanner, and Carl, who was a macrophage, could get there and take care of him.

The invader halted. Melissa sauntered over. She slowly pulled her scanner. "It's curtains for you!" she drawled.

"We'll see about that," said the invader. "Do your scan. Hurry up!"

Melissa slowly ran the scanner over the invader's arm-band. No beep.

"Aha!" said the invader. "It's not curtains after all. I think I'll get back to infecting here."

The first graders backed away.

"I don't think I did the scan right," said Melissa. "I'm going to try one more time."

"Hey look," said the invader, "Let's cut through the nonsense. I'm a staph bacterium. Is yours a staph scanner

or not?”

“Uh, no,” said Melissa. “It’s for polio.”

“Then I’ll do some infecting here. A couple more and we win the contest!”

The invader marked a big red ‘X’ on one first grader, then a second, and headed for a third. Melissa plopped into a chair, dropped her head, and closed her eyes. She couldn’t stand to watch her trip to Disneyland get X’d away. Mr. Nelson gave her a comforting pat on the shoulder.

Carl burst through the door, followed by Ann.

“Stop right there, you vile bacterium!” said Carl in his most menacing voice. “Ann, scan this disgusting vermin!”

Melissa smiled as Ann marched over and ran her scanner. There was a loud beep, and all the first graders cheered as Carl reached over and took the red marker from the invader. Carl looked at his watch.

“We’ve got one minute left in the contest!” he said. Everyone waited until there were ten seconds left. They all counted down. “Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one. Yaaaah!” They hooted and shouted and jumped around. Mr. Nelson smiled.

“I think we’ve won,” said Carl. “Let’s take this foul

infector to Miss Johnson's room and find out for sure."

Melissa, Ann, Carl, and the invader all walked over to Miss Johnson's room. They met the rest of the Germbusters coming back.

"It's over!" said Melissa. "Were all the rooms locked—no infections? None? Alright! I think we won. We'll find out from Miss Johnson for sure."

They entered Miss Johnson's room and were greeted with cheers. The only unhappy faces were those of the captured invaders, and especially Jonathan.

"Sorry, chump," Carl said to Jonathan. "Sorry to wreck your nasty plan. I'll be thinking about you sitting in class doing math exercises while I'm flying Star Tours, riding Pirates of the Caribbean, and driving Autopia. On second thought maybe I won't think about you."

"You're so gracious in victory, Carl," said Miss Johnson. "But I wouldn't count your E tickets yet. This competition is too close to call. We must count the red 'X's before we announce a winner."

"What's an E ticket?" asked Carl.

"Oh," said Miss Johnson. "That was before your time. Never mind. Let's just say you shouldn't count your chickens before they're hatched."

“Yeah, chump,” said Jonathan.

“Well before we count ‘X’s, Miss Johnson,” said Melissa, “I want to know about this change in rules, and why you agreed to it. It made our job much harder.”

“I know,” said Miss Johnson. “But I went along because I knew it would teach you something critical, something that could save your lives.”

This caught the attention of the class, and the room became quiet. Miss Johnson turned to Jonathan. “The change in rules is written on Jonathan’s T shirt. Jonathan, go ahead and take off your outer shirt so everyone can read your T-shirt.”

Jonathan stood up and, while all eyes watched, slowly and deliberately removed his outer shirt. Underneath was a white T-shirt with large black letters on the front and back written in a menacing script. They said “HIV.” Jonathan turned slowly so everyone could see.

“If that explains everything,” said Ian, “I don’t get it.”

“Me neither,” said Carl.

“HIV,” said Miss Johnson, “stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” laughed Jennifer.

“Just call it HIV,” said Miss Johnson. “And it is no laughing matter. Here’s why. Remember, when we passed out the scanners, I told you that your immune system can recognize and destroy thousands of different invaders? And that if some invader came along that your body couldn’t recognize and destroy, you’d be in real trouble? Well, I’m sorry to say that this horrible possibility has just become reality. The reality is HIV. The HIV virus has infected the human race, and our immune systems cannot recognize it and destroy it. In our contest, remember that we didn’t have scanners that would recognize Jonathan, so that we had no way to stop him? Well, we ran our contest that way to illustrate this terrible fact: your body has no way to recognize and destroy HIV, once it has entered your body. You see, in the real world there’s been a sudden change of rules, just like the sudden change of rules in our contest. And the stakes are life and death. As far as we know, almost everyone who gets infected with HIV must die—horribly I might add—unless scientists can find a cure.”

“Why must they die?” asked Billy. “I get cold sores on my lips, and my doctor says it’s because I have a virus my body can’t destroy. But I’m not going to die, he said.”

“Good question, Billy,” said Miss Johnson. “I’m afraid the answer is unhappy. You might be able to guess it. Remember when Jonathan played the role of HIV? Who did he attack?”

“I certainly know,” said Andrew. “He attacked Germbusters. And if he’d gotten all the Germbusters, then the school would be defenseless. Invaders could come in and mark everyone, and no Germbusters would stop them.”

“Right,” said Miss Johnson. “So guess what HIV attacks and destroys in your body.”

“The cells of our immune system?” asked Melissa.

“Right,” said Miss Johnson. “And what happens when the cells of your immune system start disappearing?”

“Well,” said Andrew, “I’ll bet your body can’t fight off other viruses and bacteria, and you get sick. In fact, if you lost your immune system, you could die of a cold or a sore throat, since your body couldn’t fight it any more.”

“Exactly right,” said Miss Johnson. “HIV is the ultimate weapon against our bodies. Once it sneaks in, your body can’t stop it. HIV goes around wiping out your ability to fight off diseases. And once your immune system cells are gone, especially your T cells, your body can’t replace them. Eventually you die of some disease your body can no

longer fight, like pneumonia or cancer. And your suffering is terrible. Later stages of HIV infection are called AIDS, which stands for Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome.”

“Why don’t they just make a shot for it?” asked Carl. “Then we can all get a shot, and no one will get HIV.”

Miss Johnson laughed. “If I remember right,” she said, “someone in this classroom wanted to get rid of all shots just an hour ago. Wasn’t that you, Carl?” There were giggles.

“So I changed my mind,” said Carl. “A disease this bad is worth getting a shot for.”

“I wish it were that simple,” said Miss Johnson. “Finding a cure for AIDS is like finding a cure for the common cold. It will take a lot of time and a lot of research, if it happens at all.”

“You mean,” said Ian with raised eyebrows, “they might not find a cure for it?”

“I don’t know if they will,” said Miss Johnson. “The problem is hard enough that there’s no guarantee of finding a cure. We haven’t found a cure for the common cold, and we’ve tried for years. We need bright young minds, like yours, to do research and to look for cures. But before you can do that you’ll have to study, hard and long, subjects

like chemistry, biology, and physics.”

“I don’t like this one bit,” said Melissa. “If there’s no cure now, and there might not be a cure, what should we do? How do we win against HIV?”

“Right now,” said Miss Johnson, “we are losing to HIV. In the United States millions of people are infected with HIV. Around the world tens of millions are infected. In some African villages everyone has died except children and the aged. Thousands of children are orphans because their parents died of AIDS, and many of these children die of hunger and AIDS.”

The classroom was silent.

“What can we do right now?” Melissa asked again. “How can we win without a cure for HIV?”

“I think Carmen can answer that,” said Miss Johnson. “Didn’t she figure out how to beat Bonita when the rules changed?”

“I sure did,” said Carmen. “And if we’ve won, I get a free lunch at Disneyland, compliments of the Germbusters.”

“What was your idea, Carmen?” asked Miss Johnson.

“Easy,” said Carmen. “We locked up the rooms so Jonathan couldn’t get in. Then we just waited! Simple.

And a free lunch to boot.”

“Good,” said Miss Johnson. “You took three steps. You learned the new rules. You formulated a plan. You told the school about the plan. And your plan is the only one that can work without a cure: don’t let HIV in. Lock it out. Once HIV gets inside you, no one can get it out.”

“So how do we lock HIV out of our bodies?” asked Carl. “It’s so small we can’t even see it.”

“But we know where it is,” said Miss Johnson. “Since HIV attacks the immune system, it’s in blood and other bodily fluids that contain immune system cells. To lock out HIV you must avoid contact with these fluids from the body of anyone who is infected.”

“What if we don’t know whether someone is infected?” asked Jennifer. “Can we touch their blood?”

“You tell me, Jennifer,” said Miss Johnson.

“I guess it would be stupid to take a chance. I mean, your life is at stake. If you don’t know, don’t risk your life.”

“I think that’s wise, Jennifer,” said Miss Johnson.

“I still don’t get it,” said Carl. “How do I avoid contact with fluids from another person? Just be sure not to get their blood on me?”

“That’s one way, Carl,” said Miss Johnson. “Doctors, dentists, and nurses work all the time with people who bleed. So they wear gloves and other protection to keep from getting blood on themselves. You don’t need to wear gloves all the time. But if you ever have to help someone who is bleeding, I would first put on protective clothing and gloves to keep their blood away from your skin and eyes.”

“Sounds easy enough,” said Carl. “Maybe it’s not so hard to beat HIV after all.”

“You haven’t heard the whole story yet, Carl,” said Miss Johnson. “You see, although you can get HIV by contact with blood, that isn’t the way HIV is most frequently gotten. The most frequent way is by having sex with someone who is infected.”

“Yuk!” said Melissa. “Well that’s easy to take care of. Who wants to kiss boys anyway?”

“Yeah!” said Andrew. “And who wants to kiss girls anyway?”

All the kids laughed, and Miss Johnson smiled.

“I know that’s how you feel now,” said Miss Johnson. “And, in fact, total abstinence from sex is one sure way to avoid getting HIV through sex. But as you grow older, you

may decide that abstinence is not the path for you. In that case the safest route is marriage, as long as both spouses are faithful to each other. If one or the other spouse is not faithful, that is, has sex with someone other than the person they are married to, then the risk of getting HIV is greatly increased. This risk can be reduced, but not eliminated, by using condoms.”

“I live in a condominium,” said Carl. “Do I have a reduced risk of getting HIV?”

Several kids chuckled; others looked confused.

Miss Johnson smiled. “No Carl. That won’t help. Condoms and condominiums are not the same thing. A condom is like an uninflated balloon that is placed over a man’s penis, much like a rubber glove is placed over a hand. And just as the rubber glove can keep unwanted fluids away from the hand, as long as the glove doesn’t tear, so a condom can also keep away unwanted fluids, as long as it doesn’t tear.”

“So it really is possible,” said Carmen, “to use my idea to avoid getting HIV. Instead of locking the doors like we did in the contest, you just make sure to stay away from all fluids that might have HIV. That’s the way you lock out HIV. If everyone did that, the disease would stop

spreading and we would win.”

“That’s right, Carmen,” said Miss Johnson. “Our biggest chance for winning against HIV is to educate people around the world about how HIV spreads and how they can avoid it. But with five billion people in the world, the task of educating is large. Education though is not enough. Many people who know what to do still don’t do it. Ignorance and stubbornness help spread HIV. At least now you kids aren’t ignorant. I hope for your sakes you’re not stubborn.”

“Who? Me? Stubborn?” asked Carl, and everyone laughed. “Well, I may be a little stubborn, but I’m not stupid.”

“That remains to be seen,” said Carmen. “But anyway, I want to find out if we’ve won or not. I want my free lunch and trip to Disneyland.”

“Me too, Miss Johnson,” said Melissa. “The suspense is killing me. Can we stop talking about HIV, and figure out who won? I want to know if I’m going to Disneyland.”

“Yeah!” shouted Miss Johnson’s class.

“Okay,” said Miss Johnson. “Let’s count how many people were marked.”

“In Mrs. Miyasaki’s room they got 20 kids,” said

Melissa. The girl who invaded Mrs. Miyasaki's room smiled proudly. Melissa scowled back at her.

"They got 13 kids in Mr. Hernandez' class," said Ann.

"They got 12 kids in Mr. Nelson's class," said Carl, "before I stopped them cold."

"20 plus 13 plus 12," said Miss Johnson. "That totals 45, which is less than the 50 they need to win."

"Don't forget!" said Jonathan with a smile. "I got a few Germbusters."

"How could we forget," said Melissa. "Let's see, he got Andrew, Juan, Jennifer, and, um, Ian. That's four more. So the total is 49 and we win!"

"Didn't I get someone else?" asked Jonathan.

"No way, chump," said Carl. "You tricked us once, but you're not doing it twice. Our plan was too good for you, and we beat you fair and square."

"You mean *my* plan," said Carmen. "I figured out the plan, and now you guys have to buy me lunch at Disneyland! I can't wait! A huge coke, a large order of fries, a double cheeseburger, chocolate ice cream. Yum!"

"I think that's everyone," said Miss Johnson. "It was close, but the Germbusters have won, thanks to their quick thinking and their rapid adjustment to new rules. I hope

the world adjusts as quickly to the rules imposed by HIV. And may the world win its struggle against HIV. I'll report the results to Mr. Whacksworth, and he'll arrange our trip to Disneyland!"

"Hooray!" yelled the kids as they jumped up and down, and clapped their hands. Giovanni, Gasparo, and Antonio danced and sang. The invaders, especially Jonathan, looked miserable.

A knock sounded at the door. Miss Johnson opened it.

"Hello. I'm Miss Vincent from the Bonita school. I've come to find out who won the contest and to take my invaders back to Bonita."

"It was close," said Miss Johnson. "Your invaders did an impressive job, and marked 49 of our students. But you needed 50. So it looks like we've won."

Cheers rang again throughout Miss Johnson's class. Then, in good sportsmanship, the Germbusters shook hands with the invaders, congratulating them on a good contest. As the invaders filed out to their bus, Miss Johnson called the principal, Mr. Whacksworth, with the good news.

"Giovanni!" said Jennifer. "We won! Isn't that

great?”

“Great indeed!” said Giovanni. “I am, however, concerned about HIV. I composed a limerick on the subject. Shall I say it?”

“Sure. Go ahead.”

Giovanni cleared his throat.

*A virus they call HIV,  
Wreaked havoc on humanity.  
While no cure was found,  
They passed it around,  
'Til people were rare as could be.*

“Oh Giovanni!” said Gasparo. “Think positive! We have just won the contest. Perhaps we will win against HIV.”

“It will take more than positive thinking to find a cure for HIV.”

“Most assuredly so,” said Gasparo. “But negativism robs us of the energy we need to search for a cure. I prefer this limerick:

*A student of biology,*

*Worked hard to destroy HIV.*

*Because she endured,*

*The people were cured.*

*The virus is rare as could be.*

“Well,” said Giovanni, “at least your limerick has got the hard work and enduring part right. You might have added something about cleverness, intelligence, inspiration, teamwork, serendipity, and divine providence. The search for a cure will probably require all of these.”

“Indeed,” said Gasparo. “But cram all that into one limerick? If you can do it, please be my guest.”

The lunch bell rang. Pandemonium reigned as kids grabbed lunch bags and dashed from the room.