

Friends

by Tim Jones-Yelvington

No one spoke to me. I hid behind my desk coloring neon hairdos on rock stars. When I asked my mother how to make friends, she pulled a framed needlepoint from a bureau: To be a friend is to make a friend. She said, "Never forget that."

I met a boy named Billy, sitting on the snow mounds at the edge of the elementary school parking lot. I parroted my mother's needlepoint and he said, "That's not how you make a friend. To make a friend, you say Hi, my name is Billy. I like to play with Ninja Turtles and slide down the stairway in my snow pants. What do you like to do?"

Billy and I christened the snow mounds the secret nation of Snowvakia. We held a coronation ceremony and named Billy Snowvakia's sovereign. I colored a picture of King Billy and I on the mound, fighting off the dreaded fanged mountain goats of Snowvakia with sabers carved from ice.

The next year, when I said hello to Billy in the hallway, he looked the other way.

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My best friend Scott and I became superheroes. I was Turquoise Man. I wore turquoise sweats, turquoise Converse, turquoise underwear and turquoise socks.

Scott played my loyal sidekick Fireball, but he didn't have a special costume. I imagined he wore bright red spandex. We battled our sworn enemy, the "Big Fat Lunch Lady." The Big Fat Lunch Lady yelled at the kids on the playground, "Be quiet!" I hated her for treating me like an ordinary child.

One day Scott showed up wearing his own turquoise sweat suit and said he wanted a turn as Turquoise Man. I didn't want to tell him his shirt and pants didn't match, so I said, "You should be Fireball. Fireball's cooler. Fireball shoots balls of fire from his hands."

Scott took me to his church one Sunday. Scott was Assembly of God. The pastor asked me to write my phone number on a piece of paper and called me the following Friday to invite me back. "We're Unitarian!" my mother said and slammed the receiver.

Scott moved to Phoenix and never sent a postcard.

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Mike ran for student body president. I was Mike's campaign manager. I made a sign on the computer. I filled the background with vines and leaves and wrote a message: Go for the jungular. Go for Mike!

Mike was rail-thin and anxious. His head resembled a soccer ball balanced on a yardstick. His eyes roved the room like a gazelle's on a nature program, watching for lions. When he lost the election, he blamed it on our classmate Alexander.

One day I found fake blood in the costume cabinet in the high school auditorium. I thought it would be fun to play a prank, so I spilled the blood all over Mike's backpack and left a note: I'm with you. I'm watching you. 666.

Mike freaked so I told him I didn't know who did it. I helped him hack Alexander's email account. I helped him crack Alexander's locker combination. We followed Alexander through the hallway hoping to catch him in an incriminating act.

Our principal called me into his office. He said, "Did Mike pressure you to help frame Alexander?" He placed his palm on my lower back and rubbed it from side to side. He said, "You remind me of myself as a kid, small and awkward. We'd understand if you're helping Mike. You just have to tell us so we can catch him."

Mike was expelled.

