

# GUYSI READ



**FUNNY  
BUSINESS**

EDITED BY  
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## BEST OF FRIENDS

BY MAC BARNETT

**E**rneſt was a nerd, but it was fourth grade: we were all nerds. Even the beſt of us were shackled to ſome fatal flaw. James, who was the faſteſt kid in the claſs, was alſo the laſt one to carry a lunch box. Jean-Pierre had already ſtarted cutting the ſleeves off his gym ſhirts, but he hadn't yet ſtarted going by J.P.: even little Tim Houſton waſn't afraid to put on a French accent and ſay "Jean-Pierre, *oui oui*" when they ſtood next to each other in line. And me? I was terrible at ſports, laſt picked for everything. At recess I hung out on the ſidelines of the baſketball court and bet kids quarters that they couldn't make free throws. (I uſually cleared a few bucks a week.) It was there, on the ſidelines, that I would ſometimes talk to Erneſt.

Ernest looked more ninety than nine. He had thick-lensed glasses that were attached snugly to his face by a cloth band that wrapped around his head. Our school had uniforms, and he was the only kid to opt for the cardigan instead of the sweater. Twin deposits of dried spit lined either side of his mouth; he always looked like he had just eaten lots of vanilla frosting.

Sometimes you'd feel bad for Ernest, but he'd always do something to mess it up. Example: in kindergarten I'd let him sit next to me in art. One day I was drawing a picture of a veterinarian, and in the middle of our conversation, Ernest leaned over and drew a long oval in between the guy's legs. I was dumbstruck.

And so I missed Ms. Maxwell coming up behind us.

"Lovely picture, Ernest," she said. He'd drawn Freddy Krueger battling Jason battling a Ninja Turtle underneath a fleet of stealth bombers. All the guys in his drawing had too many muscles—it looked like they had three biceps on each arm.

And then: "Dean, what's that?"

Ms. Maxwell's tone was strange, like her throat was tight.

I tilted my head straight back so I was looking right up at Ms. Maxwell's chin. She was looking down at my paper.

"It's a veterinarian?" I said. "You know, a vet? Someone

who takes care of animals?"

"I know what a veterinarian is, Dean," said Ms. Maxwell. "What's that?" She frowned and pointed to Ernest's contribution to the piece.

"Oh," I said. "He dropped a hot dog."

"A hot dog?"

"Yeah, he was eating a hot dog and he dropped it. So now it's falling to the ground." I started to draw a hot dog bun in the hand that wasn't holding a stethoscope.

"Oh," said Ms. Maxwell. "That's very silly." She believed me, but I think only because she didn't want to believe the alternative.

Ms. Maxwell moved on to another table. Ernest collapsed onto folded arms, giggling. As he shook with laughter, the end of the cloth band wriggled like a tadpole's tail on the back of his head.

Ernest.

Things hadn't changed much since then. That was the thing with Ernest: as soon as you tried to be nice to him, he made you regret it.

But before I keep going about what Ernest did, I have to tell you a little bit about the first-best television commercial that year. In case you're wondering, the third-best television commercial was for some sort of G.I. Joe watercraft. The kids





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