

“Happy birthday, Alexander!”

White clouds streaked the baby blue sky as the sun streamed through the leaves and created a shadowed pattern on the sidewalk. Pale orange leaves were scattered across the close-cropped, grassy green field. It was the perfect day for my brother’s seventh birthday party.

It had been my father’s idea to host a Nerf gun battle for the party. Alexander had a huge collection of Nerf guns that each child could use. The massive green field would be perfect for the battle. We would also set up some homemade barriers for people to hide behind. The party would be great!

Now, my father stretched a line of bright yellow yarn around four nails to create a rectangle. This would be the area where the battle would be held.

“It looks great so far!” I remarked. “Let’s set up the barriers now.”

The barriers had been easy to make. We simply took some plumbing pipes and attached them together to create a sort of upside down U shape. Then we took some black cloth and stretched it across the sides and taped them down. I handed my dad a barrier and, snatching up his hammer, he began pounding it into the ground.

After a few seconds of furious pounding, he let go of the barrier and frowned as it toppled over. “The ground here is too rocky,” he said. He picked up the barrier and carried it over to a patch of ground where the grass had been worn away and the dark soil showed. “Emily and Alexander, come over here and hold the poles steady while I hammer it in,” he instructed.

I crouched down and held one pole firmly while my brother held the other. My dad whacked at the barrier with his hammer, and I could feel the vibrations shaking my hand and rattling the loose dirt on the ground. Finally he told me to let go, and this time the barrier stood up on its own.

“Well, that’s one down,” I pointed out, attempting to be positive about the situation. I glanced back at the pile of barriers strewn across the field. “About twenty more to go.”

My father picked up another barrier and placed it at the corner of the rectangle where the dry, soft soil could be seen beneath the thinning grass. He began hammering while Alexander and I clutched the bottom of the poles to hold them in place. Once the barrier stood upright and was buried firmly into the ground, we moved on to another one. We repeated this process until the rectangle was scattered with barriers.

“It’s ready!” Alexander exclaimed.

“Wait a second!” Glancing across the field, I realized some of the black fabric was coming off the poles and the clear duct tape was peeling off, causing the entire barrier to fall apart. “The tape is coming off some of them!”

My father stared dismally at the barriers. Grabbing the roll of duct tape off the grass, he ripped off a large strip and wrapped it around the poles and the cloth. But the tape refused to stick. I scrambled over to help and pressed the tape again to the cloth, but it didn’t hold. I heaved a tremendous sigh and wondered aloud, “Everything is falling apart. What are we going to do?”

“I don’t know,” my father admitted. “We’re running out of time.”

“When does the party start?” I questioned anxiously.

“Eleven o’clock,” he replied.

I glanced at my watch and felt a twinge of worry. It was already 10:45. Guests would start arriving in fifteen minutes. I swept my eyes across the lousy battlefield, with the barriers leaning, unraveling, and on the verge of toppling over. “We had better hurry, then,” I said.

My father tried to fix the unraveling barrier again with a new chunk of duct tape, but the only result was another fail. “It’s not working!” I fretted.

“Hang on . . . don’t you have some colorful duct tape that you bought that sticks to cloth?” my dad wondered.

“Oh! I do!” I exclaimed, new hope surging up inside me. “Let me go get it!” I sprinted across the field to my house, flung off my flip-flops, flew up the staircase, snatched open the art supplies box, picked out two rolls of colorful duct tape (one neon green and the other pale blue), closed the box, bounded down the stairs, slipped my feet into my shoes, dashed across the field, and arrived, panting, at the rectangle, clutching two rolls of duct tape.

“Great!” my father remarked, taking the green roll from me and tearing off a long strip. He wrapped it around the poles next to the clear tape that was peeling off and pressed it on firmly. This time, the tape stuck securely and the barrier was finally fixed.

We hurriedly moved on to the other unraveling barriers, securing the parts of cloth that were falling off with pieces of duct tape. I checked my watch. 10:55.

After the unraveling issue was taken care of, we proceeded to straighten the few barriers that were leaning and threatening to fall by hammering them more firmly into the ground. Several barriers had toppled over completely, so we picked those up and stuck them into an area with softer ground.

My father and I finished at precisely 11:00, which was just in time. Cars were filling up all the parking spaces beside our house and familiar friends poured out and sprinted toward the battlefield in awed excitement. We all paraded up to Alexander's room to gather all the Nerf guns he had collected and brought them downstairs back to the field, along with several boxes of foam Nerf bullets. Some of the adults who had arrived with their kids were setting up a couple of tents with plastic tables underneath. We laid down all the Nerf guns on the table closest to the battlefield. The children crowded around anxiously, grabbing for the best guns. Through the frenzy of snatching hands, I picked up a tiny neon orange gun with the word "Jolt" across the side above the trigger. Putting in a foam bullet, I pressed the trigger and watched the bullet in surprise as it whizzed through the air and finally landed somewhere very far away. "I'll take this gun," I announced, tucking it into my jacket pocket.

"Has everyone gotten their guns?" my father asked after everyone was satisfied with their choice.

"Yes," they chorused.

"Now, we're going to divide everyone into two teams," my father said. "How should we divide them?" he asked thoughtfully.

A flurry of excited suggestions filled the air, until someone said, "What about boys versus girls?"

All the girls glanced at each other for a moment and protested, "But that's not fair! Boys are more experienced with Nerf guns *and* they have more people on their team!"

"Yes, but you girls are older," my father pointed out. "Alright, then. Boys versus girls it is!"

We flooded out onto the field. "Girls will have this side," my father decided, gesturing to the right, "and boys will have that side." He pointed to the left.

The children obediently split up and went to their side. The girls mingled together and argued in hushed voices to find a plan. "Why don't we stay on our side and wait for the boys? You know how aggressive they are, they'll come right to us, and we can shoot them then," my friend named Rachel suggested.

We all agreed that was a sensible plan and I found a sturdy barrier on the side to hide behind. When my father announced for the battle to start, I peered out from behind the safety of my barrier and glanced around. Overconfident as always, the boys sprinted forward, shrieking threats while us girls stayed in place. When a boy named Brandon dashed toward me aiming his gun, I yanked my preloaded Jolt out of

my pocket and pulled the trigger. The orange bullet flew through the air before Brandon had time to react and landed straight on his stomach. I sprang to my feet, hollering at the top of my lungs, “You’re *out*, Brandon! You’re *out*! I shot you!”

He glared at me as if he wanted to protest, but slunk over to the sidelines to wait until the battle was over like all the “dead” players were supposed to do. “I’ll get you next time,” he threatened, and I held his stony glare.

“Not if I get *you* first,” I snarled back.

Inside, I felt a surge of victory and satisfaction at my first “kill.” But I quickly returned to the battle, and realized Alexander was pointing his gun right at me from behind a nearby barrier. In a flash I was rushing across the battlefield to the safety of another barrier where Alexander couldn’t get me. His bullet missed by a mile.

There was no time to catch my breath as I snatched up a bullet from the ground and stuffed it into my Jolt. I scanned the field, looking for my next target, and focused on an older boy who was about my age named Jonathan. I was just pressing the trigger when I felt the soft thump of a bullet hit my shoulder. As I whirled around, my bullet flew off in the wrong direction and missed Jonathan.

It was Alexander again, shrieking and pointing at me. “My bullet hit you! It did! It did!” he accused.

“Fine,” I admitted grumpily, and stalked off the battlefield holding my Jolt. Along the sidelines, I waited until the battle was over, watching bullets fly in the air. There was only one girl named Jennifer left on my team, and a horde of boys rushed forward and sent their bullets right at her. Unable to dodge the flurry of orange darts, Jennifer was hit several times and the boys screamed their victory as the last girl was eliminated.

“Round one,” my father announced, “the boys win!”

I groaned inwardly as I watched the boys rejoice at their easy victory. I went back to the girls’ side to join them as they formulated a new plan. “How about this: most of us stay here and defend, but a few of us go and attack?” I suggested.

“Alright then,” Rachel agreed. “We’ll do that then.”

The next battle round began. Several girls crept forward stealthily to attack while the rest of us, including me, crouched low and waited for the boys to come. A fierce threat and the *ping!* of a bullet alerted me. It was Brandon again, pounding straight toward me, ready to get me out like he had promised after his defeat in the previous round.

I whipped out my Jolt, armed and ready to fire, and pulled the trigger without even bothering to aim. My bullet missed. I grabbed up another bullet from the ground and stuffed it into the tiny gun while trying to dodge the flurry of bullets Brandon sent at me. His fully automatic battery-powered Nerf gun was no match for my miniature pistol, so I sprinted out from behind my barrier and fled to a large barrier that multiple other girls were already hiding behind.

“Watch out!” I cried, as Brandon scrambled toward us firing his bullets in all different directions. Cowering behind the barrier, I aimed my gun carefully and pulled the trigger. The orange Nerf bullet hit Brandon straight in his screaming mouth. “*Ha!*” I shrieked victoriously. “You’re *dead!*”

My father, who was supposed to be the referee of the battle, was watching us and called, “You’re out, Brandon. Come here and stand along the sidelines until the battle is over.”

He thrust me a glare and sputtered, “But . . . headshots don’t count!”

“Yes, they do!” I protested.

“Emily’s right,” my father said more firmly. “Now come here and wait until the battle is finished.”

Struggling to hold his heavy plastic gun, Brandon stalked off the battlefield with a growl of irritation.

A sharp *ping!* made me whirl around and I realized a ferocious horde of boys were edging toward our side, firing their guns all at once. Springing forward, several other girls and I fired back, eliminating multiple boys at once until Alexander was the only boy remaining. Outnumbered, he tried to scramble back to safety on his side. As he was running, some girl sent a bullet right in his rear end, getting him out and causing the girls to erupt into howls of laughter. Alexander squealed and dashed off the battlefield, clutching his bottom in pain.

“Girls win!” my father shouted.

So far, the boys and the girls were tied 1-1. This would be the final round. I hurried over to the rest of the girls as they argued over the best plan that would let us win. “This has to be a good plan,” my friend named Maria pointed out. “This round will determine whether we win or lose.”

Suddenly an idea floated into my mind. “Oh!” I blurted eagerly. “I know what we could do!”

All head twisted toward me hopefully. “What?”

“Well, we could pretend to drop some bullets on our side. Obviously the boys will run forward and try to collect the bullets, so we can shoot them,” I whispered, thrusting a suspicious glance over my shoulder to see if any boys were eavesdropping.

“That’s great!” Jennifer remarked excitedly.

The third and final round began. All the girls huddled behind separate barriers, alert and ready. I crept forward, one hand clutching a fistful of bullets and the other holding my Jolt. Pretending to rush across to the girls’ side, I purposely flung all the bullets onto the ground and called loudly, “Oops! I seem to have dropped *all* my bullets!” Then I sprinted back to my position behind the barrier in the back corner.

Rachel stumbled forward and dumped her bucket of ammunition onto the ground. “Me too!” she cried, stifling a giggle.

Several boys dashed forward toward the “dropped” bullets and began snatching up handfuls of the ammunition. The girls and I were upon them in an instant, shrieking and firing our guns rapidly. The boys shrank back in surprise, flinching at the wave of bullets that hit them. “You’re *out!*” I sang gleefully, shoving them off the battlefield.

The other boys who hadn’t gone for the dropped ammunition were staring in bewilderment. Seizing the opportunity, all the girls flooded forward, overwhelming their remaining players. It was a blinding flash of whizzing orange foam darts and excited screams. I jammed bullet after bullet into my Jolt and pelted the boys with it. Moments later, all the boys were standing along the sidelines with bullets clinging to their clothes.

“Girls win!” my father yelled.

Our team greeted the announcement with victorious cheers, and the boys glanced grudgingly at us as we celebrated. We had beaten the boys, despite them having far better guns and more experience than us. My mother whipped out her camera and we all clustered together and held up our guns, grinning, as she took the photo.

Next it was time for cake. All the children rushed eagerly toward the table with the large rectangular box on it. My parents popped open the box to reveal the gooey chocolate cake, topped with thick white frosting with the words “Happy 7<sup>th</sup> Birthday Alexander” on it in green icing. Instead of candles, there were seven foam Nerf darts surrounding the swirling green words. We all sang “Happy Birthday” to Alexander while he grinned up at us, blushing and singing along too.

After the song, we all settled down for the cake. All the children argued over which piece of the cake they would get while my parents frantically handed out slices of cake, attempting to satisfy everyone. I scraped my fork across the top of my slice, scooping up all the icing and closing my mouth over it. The sticky sweetness filled my mouth. The cake was delicious.

Once the children finished, several boys and girl sprinted over to the battlefield to play another unofficial round. I joined in too, laughing and dodging bullets. My miniature Jolt pelted bullet after bullet at people, and a few kids shot me multiple times. I almost didn't hear my father when he announced that it was time to pack up. It was so much fun that I felt a twinge of disappointment when adults started folding up tents and carrying away tables.

Soon everything was packed away and families began to leave. I watched the cars go, wishing that they would have stayed longer. I glanced at my watch. It was almost 3:00. I had enjoyed the past four hours so much that it seemed to have passed too quickly.

It had been a terrific birthday party. As I helped gather up all the stray bullets that had gone flying out of bounds around the field, I thought about what a great day it had been. Although we had had a little bit of trouble setting up the barriers in the beginning, in the end everything had turned out perfectly—well, *almost* perfectly.