





**MIGHTY
INSIDE**

To my dad, Richard William Tucker, for being my number one fan, and for not letting anything stop you from speaking or contributing to your community, and to my aunt and uncles—Kathy, Steve, and Neil. Thank you for sharing your memories and taking on the elders’ mantle for us. This one is for the four of you.

This is an Arthur A. Levine book

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CHAPTER ONE

Melvin Robinson lay in the bottom of the bunk bed he'd been sharing with his older brother, Chuck, for almost all of his thirteen years. In one week, he thought, I'm dead meat.

He closed his eyes and imagined himself walking through Cleveland High's large wooden doors, saying the names of his friends and teachers in clear and confident tones, hearing himself say over and over, "Hi, I'm Melvin," to kids he met.

"Hi" was a good place for him to start because making the H sound was a lot like exhaling, and he could do that without getting tripped up. Usually.

Before lying down, Melvin had shut both bedroom doors. One led to the kitchen, the other to a short hall and the tiny bathroom all six in his family shared. He had closed the curtains over the two small, high windows to block the bright summer sun. He was trying to stay cool, and he was trying to stay calm.

He clicked on his reading lamp. His eyes roamed the space where he slept—his own private shelter. Over time, he had plastered the wall and the bottom of Chuck's bunk with maps Pops brought from train depots, and photos from National Geographic: Machu Picchu, the great pyramids of Egypt, Hopi caves in cliff walls. Images of

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Roman aqueducts bridging chasms made him think of their own Monroe Street Bridge spanning the mighty Spokane River, which cascaded through downtown in a series of waterfalls.

Pops had told him the largest of these falls had been a gathering place for the area's first people, the Spokane Indians, before they were forced to live on a piece of "no-man's-land" by the government in 1881. Melvin's relatives had arrived in 1900 from North Carolina, and what they found in Spokane was apparently better than what they thought they could have in the South. They settled down, and now here he was, fifty-five years later, facing the biggest challenge of his life thus far: high school.

He stared at the Roman Colosseum on his wall. The stone stadium, with its three levels of arched openings, had once seated fifty thousand people and incorporated a retractable roof that had not been replicated in any of the great American stadiums, centuries later. Here, trained gladiators would take on wild animals and slay them or be slayed. Melvin was determined to see the Colosseum in person one day, but first, he had a battle of his own to win . . . at Cleveland High. Go Tigers.

He looked across the room to where his turtle, Tuck, sat in the small tank on his and Chuck's desk. Words flowed smooth as honey when he talked to his pet. All other times, he could never be sure. Some days he did okay. Other days, it was a nightmare.

Lately, every day was a nightmare.

He walked over to say hi. The turtle was submerged in the water around the little tropical island with the palm tree in the center. Only his snout showed. "I wish I could shrink myself and get in there with you, Tuck. If it were up to me, I'd do school right here in this room. Got my books, my magazines, my study space . . ." He gestured to his

bunk, his place to hide. Like Tuck's shell, he thought. "You. What more do I need?"

He opened the desk drawer that he'd made very clear to the rest of his siblings, especially snoopy Maisy, they were never to pry around in, and pulled out the booklet that had come in the mail just the day before. "This right here, Tuck?" He flapped the booklet in the air. "This is the answer I've been waiting for!"

He went back to his bed, recalling the moment he had first seen the booklet advertised in Popular Science. It had appeared like a miracle, as if God and all His angels were shouting directly at him:

YOU CAN HAVE A HE-MAN VOICE!

His heart had beat a little faster. Eagerly, he had read on:

Send today for FREE booklet "Voice Power & Personal Power"
by Eugene Feuchtinger. Just send your name, address, and age.
Mailed in plain sealed envelope. No obligation. Write today!
PERFECT VOICE INSTITUTE, 325 W. Jackson Blvd., Chicago 6, Ill.

He could sound like a he-man instead of a broken record?

Shoot! Sign me up, he had thought.

With a perfect voice from the Perfect Voice Institute, he could speak up in class without fear. He could smooth-talk Millie Takazawa, the way he'd always dreamed.

He had rushed to his and Chuck's desk right then and there, written out the required information in his best handwriting, and sealed it in an envelope as the ad had instructed.

Now he held it in his hands: the key that would free his tongue from the shackles of the Stutter. "Mellifluous Melvin," they'd be calling him when they heard his smooth, baritone sounds, not only when he sang but when he spoke as well. Melvin stretched out on his

bed, still gazing at the precious booklet with its promise of personal success and voice salvation, and opened to the first page. Testimonials with titles like “His Stutter Vanishes” and “Stammering Stopped” were so powerful, and filled him with such hope, that he wanted to read them again.

“Your instruction changed my voice from weak and pitiful to a free-flowing voice getting richer and stronger every day.”

“I suffered from stammering for years. Four different courses in other methods brought no results. In six months after diligent practice in your wonderful, easily mastered lessons I received compliments on my smooth, clear voice. My inferiority complex has left me. Thanks to you, I am free from the stranglehold of stammering!”

And then this, direct from Mr. Feuchtinger himself: “A good voice! That’s the magic key that opens the door to opportunity. What a glorious moment will be yours when your voice, without effort, soars and swells!”

Oh, yes! What a glorious moment, indeed. Or as they would say at Bethel A.M.E. Church, “Amen and amen!” May it be so.

He needed it to be so.

The bedroom door from the kitchen flew open and Chuck breezed in, along with the medicinal smell of Listerine. The boy used mouth-wash more times a day than he used the toilet. Melvin shoved the Voice Power booklet under his backside and picked up the issue of Popular Science he’d been reading earlier.

“Hey, bro,” Chuck said, pushing Melvin’s magazine up so he could survey the cover, which read, “Be Prepared! Build Your Own Basement Bomb Shelter.” He let out a dismissive puh.

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Melvin winced at the smell. That Listerine stuff was way worse than any natural breath stink could ever be.

“Don’t tell me you’re falling for this whole ‘The Commies Are Coming!’ craze.” He raised a single eyebrow at Melvin. “Look, I’ll tell you what you really need to know to be prepared—for high school, which, unlike some atomic bomb dropping on us, is actually going to happen. Next week.”

As if Melvin didn’t know.

“In fact, I’ll do you one better, little bro. I’ll make you a list. So you can study it.” Chuck sat at their desk and pulled out some paper and a pencil. “Studying is your thing, right?”

Chuck wasn’t expecting an answer, of course. He had his back to Melvin and was busy writing. Chuck had spent the morning at Curtley’s Cuts barbershop. The vanilla smell of Murray’s Superior Hair Dressing Pomade—much better than Listerine—also wafted from his head. His hair was styled so tight it looked like you could bounce a quarter off it. The edges were pristine. Pops had invited Melvin to go as well, but he’d passed, claiming he didn’t feel well, which was true. His stomach had been on edge for weeks.

They were quiet for the next several minutes, the only sound Chuck’s scratching pencil. When he was done, he walked over and shoved a paper into the space between Melvin’s face and the magazine.

Freshman Dos and Don’ts was written across the top in Chuck’s cramped, tilted lettering.

“Follow my advice, and you won’t end up hanging from a hook by your underwear in the girls’ bathroom.” Chuck jabbed at the column on the left. “Do these things, and you’ll be good.” He ran his finger

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solemnly down the column on the right. "These are the Don'ts. Do any of these, and you're a goner."

Melvin scanned his brother's list:

Dos

1. Carry your books on the side—two max, never a whole stack.
2. Be on time, never too early.
3. Walk into class like you're a king entering your domain.
4. Nod at upperclassmen. They like to be acknowledged.
5. Address teachers with their names.
6. Put deodorant in your locker.
7. Use mouthwash.
8. Get on a sports team!

Don'ts

1. Carry your books in front. Only girls do that.
2. Walk around like you're scared. Upperclassmen are like dogs—they sense fear.
3. Walk around like you own the school. You've got to know your place.
4. Talk to upperclassmen. Unless they talk to you first, in which case, answer them.
5. Sit by yourself in the cafeteria.
6. Talk about chitlins, fatback, or pigs' feet.
7. Bring your accordion to school—ever.
8. Look to me to get you out of any jams.

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“Wuh-why . . . would I talk about chhhh-itlins? I hate chitlins.” Pig guts were one of Pops’s favorites. Why, Melvin would never understand. Whenever Mom cooked them, their house smelled like the lake-cabin latrine for a week.

“Maybe you’d talk about how much you hate them. I’m just saying, don’t talk about them. White kids don’t even know what they are. And if they find out, they’re going to think your family’s weird for eating them.”

As far as Melvin was concerned, he wouldn’t be talking about anything in high school . . . because he wouldn’t be talking. He shrugged. Not because he didn’t care what white kids thought. He knew he did. Shoot. White kids made up practically the whole school. If you didn’t get along with them, you didn’t get along at all.

Chuck crouched so they were eye-to-eye. “Look, I’m trying to help you out . . .”

Melvin fixed on the last Don’t: Chuck had said straight up not to rely on him.

Don’t worry, Chuck, Melvin thought, you’re the last person I’d run to for help. He set the list down and pretended to keep reading his magazine.

“You’ve got to learn to speak up for yourself, Melvin. To stand up for yourself. You’re a runt who plays accordion, and then, with the stut—”

“I know!” Melvin shouted. Shouting routed the Stutter every time, like a surprise attack. And he only played accordion because his mom forced him to. He had no delusions of grandeur, but Mom was convinced he’d appear on television with his accordion one day.

“Easy now.” Chuck gave him a cocked smile. He mock-punched Melvin’s shoulder, but Melvin shoved his hand away.

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Chuck stood. “Like I said, I’m just trying to look out for you.”

Melvin watched Chuck leave through the opposite door. No doubt going to swish some mouthwash—if it’s been more than five minutes since the last time, Melvin thought.

He considered crumpling the paper with the Dos and Don’ts and using it to practice his shot. (Should he go out for basketball? He was way too short!!) Instead, he closed it inside his Popular Science. Then he rolled toward his Wall of Wonders, opened to chapter 1 of Voice Power & Personal Power, and got busy studying how to change his life.