

Freeze Tag

Hannah felt wonderful. Spring was in the air, a spring was in her step, and *spring* was on the spelling test that she'd studied for.

Hannah stood at the window in the classroom at the end of the hall, looking out at the signs of spring. She spun the globe. She touched the bones on the science shelf. She ran her thumb over a pinecone, jabbed a finger in the bird's nest, and pressed her palm on the computer keyboard. Reaching into the guinea pig cage, she stroked Miss Nosewiggle's orange fur and touched her wet nose.



After dipping her fingers in the aquarium, she held the conch shell to her ear and heard the *Shhhhhhhh!* of a hundred scolding teachers.

At last Hannah headed toward her desk in the fourth row. On the way, she patted Alex on the head, poked Tanya in the armpit, pinched Paul's arm, and pulled Kimberly's bandana. The classroom filled with complaints.

“Cut it out!”

“Don’t touch!”

“Paws off, Hannah!”

“Ewww, cooties!”

The tall teacher stood up from his desk. He pointed to the four rules posted above the blackboard.

“Keep your hands to yourself, Hannah,” he warned. “That means don’t pat, poke, pull, or pinch.”

Hannah placed her hands on her desktop. But while the teacher wrote her name in the doghouse, she reached into the aisle and yanked Loren’s shoelace.

“Hands to yourself, Hannah,” the tall teacher repeated. “Don’t tug, tap, touch, or tickle.”

Hannah swirled some desktop eraser crumbs with a finger. She didn’t know why she liked to touch things; she just did. Her hands needed to keep busy. Nothing seemed real until she touched it. The softness of a sweater, the bumpiness of a plastic ruler, and the coolness of a metal desk bottom were irresistible.

“In school we do hands-on math and hands-on science,” Hannah told herself. “That’s why I call myself Hands-On Hannah.”

Up front, the tall teacher dropped a large block of red clay onto the art table. Holding a length of wire between his hands, he sliced the clay into small cubes.

“Today, class, we’ll make clay coil pots,” he announced.

Hannah was delighted. She loved molding clay as

much as she loved finger-painting or working with papier-mâché. She liked the cool, tacky touch of clay. She liked to squish the clay between her fingers and punch it with her knuckles.

The moment the tall teacher plopped a clay cube on her desk, Hannah went to work. She pounded the lump into a flat pancake. She peeled off the disk and rolled it into a tube. The tube became a long worm.

“Now I’ll roll my clay into the smoothest ball possible,” she announced.



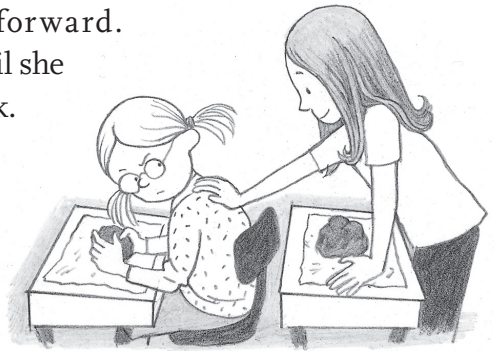
As her hand went round and round on the clay, her eyes fell upon Myra, sitting in front of her. A black ant was crawling across Myra’s red sweater. Oh, how tempting! Hannah loved the ticklish feel of ant feet flitting across her skin.

“Here, ant!” she said, and she pressed her palm against Myra’s back and waited.

Myra leaned forward.

She turned her head until she could see down her back. There was a clay hand-print on her sweater.

“What did you do, Hannah?” she screamed.



The tall teacher stepped to the fourth row. He looked at Myra's back, and his ears glowed red.

"Go wash your hands and sit in the time-out chair, Hannah," he said. "That will be all the clay work for you today. You must learn to keep your hands to yourself."

Hannah sat on the chair in the back corner. She wedged her fingers under her bottom.

"My hands get me in trouble," she said. "So I'll sit on them for the rest of third grade."

But even without leaving the time-out chair, Hannah was soon touching things. She began pulling staples off the bulletin board with her thumbnail and writing words on the steamy windowpane with her pinkie.

"I'm Hands-On Hannah," she said. "I can't help using my hands."

Finally art period was over, and the tall teacher dismissed the class for recess.

"I hope missing art taught you a lesson, Hannah," he said. "Don't grab, grasp, grip, or grapple. Keep your hands to yourself."

Hannah tugged on the teacher's pant leg. "I'll never touch anything in class again as long as I live," she promised.

On her way out to the playground, Hannah went to the coat closet to get her morning snack. At the end of the dark, narrow room sat a battered cardboard box with LOST AND FOUND printed on its side. Whenever the third-graders found something that looked lost, the box



was where they dropped it. Hannah often checked the box for interesting things to touch—a fur hat, a pencil case, maybe a fuzzy tennis ball. Now when she peered into the carton, she found something new, along with the baseball cap, black banana, and dirty sock left from yesterday. The new item was a single wool glove, knitted with stripes of every color in the color wheel. When Hannah picked it up, it felt so soft that she couldn't help putting it on.

"I'll wear this rainbow glove out to recess," she said. "It will remind me to keep my hands to myself." Still, before leaving the room, she couldn't resist flipping the light switch off and on.

Out on the playground Hannah was in luck. The third-graders were playing Freeze Tag, her favorite recess game.

Waving her gloved hand in the air, she shouted, "I'm It! I'm It!" And she began running around the asphalt, trying to touch anyone she could.

"Freeze!" she said, slapping Paul on the arm.

Paul stopped with his arms spread like a scarecrow.

"Freeze!" Hannah called, tapping Loren on the shoulder.

Loren went rigid, posed as if sprinting in a race.

Oh, how Hannah loved Freeze Tag! When else could she tag people without anyone complaining? When else could she use her hands all she wanted without getting into trouble? And that colorful glove, so soft and snug on her right hand, made the game even more fun.

“Freeze!” she cried, whacking Zack on the back.

“Freeze!” she said, smacking Myra’s thigh.

“Unfreeze,” said Tanya, tagging both Zack and Myra.

“Freeze! Freeze! Freeze!” cried Hannah before Zack, Myra, and Tanya could dodge her reach. “I’m Hands-On Hannah! Freeze! Freeze! Freeze! Freeze!

And . . . freeze!”

After ten minutes of nonstop action, Hannah halted. All the Freeze Tag players stood around her in various postures like so many plastic statues.

“Game’s over, everyone,” she called out. “New game, and I’ll be It again.”

But what happened next was a surprise.

Instead of taking off in all directions, Hannah’s classmates remained stiff and still.

“Unfreeze!” she called. “Ready or not, here I come!”

Still no one ran. No one squirmed, scratched, or made a sound.



Hannah frowned. She walked up to Paul, still in his scarecrow stance, and swatted him on the rear.

“Unfreeze,” she said.

But Paul didn’t budge.

Hannah snapped her fingers in his face.

Paul didn’t even blink.

With her bare hand she pinched his arm and pulled a strand of hair. Still nothing; Paul didn’t move. Oddly, his arm and hair felt as cold as an ice cube.

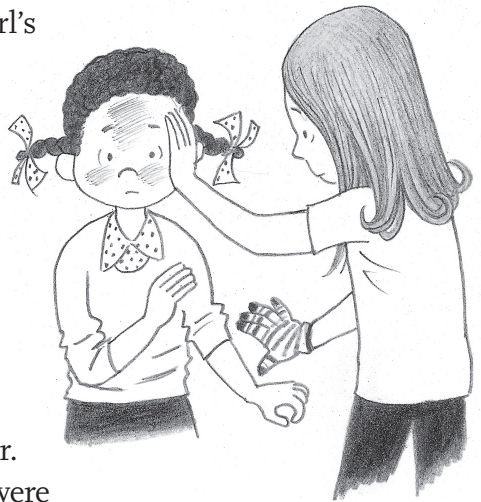
Hannah ran up to Loren. “Unfreeze! Unfreeze!” she shouted. She touched Loren’s cheek with her gloveless hand and jerked it away. “Loren’s a Popsicle, too!” she exclaimed.

Peering into the girl’s face, she saw tiny icicles hanging from her eyelashes and frost filling her nostrils.

“Loren is frozen solid!”

Hannah ran up to Tanya and felt her arm. Frozen! She ran up to Alex and touched his ear. Frozen! Zack and Myra were solid as well.

“It’s as though my class was put into a freezer!” she said. “They’ve all turned to ice!”



Hannah rushed to the slide. A first-grade boy stood on the top rung of the ladder. “Freeze!” she said, touching his shoe with her glove.

The boy froze on the spot.

“Freeze!” Hannah said, touching a girl behind him. And she stiffened, too.

Hannah stared at her rainbow-colored glove. She wiggled her fingers. “Whichever kid I touch with this glove turns to ice,” she concluded. “It’s as if this glove has given me a special power . . . I have the Freeze-Tag Touch!”

Tap! Tap! Tap! Hannah skipped around the playground and touched everyone she passed, and everyone she touched turned instantly to ice. *Tap! Tap!* She patted the kindergartners on the climbing structure. *Tap! Tap! Tap!* She slapped the second-graders playing foursquare, and whacked every fifth-grader on the soccer field. *Tap! Tap!* Soon the playground looked like a video screen with the pause button on.

“Watch out for the Freeze-Tag Touch,” Hannah chanted, running up to the Playground Lady.

The woman was about to blow her silver whistle when Hannah touched her hand. The Playground Lady went as stiff as a snowman.

“With the Freeze-Tag Touch I can touch anything and anyone I want,” said Hannah, “and no one complains or yells at me.”

After she had frozen every single person on the play-

ground, Hannah entered the school. In the hallway she spotted the tall teacher reading the bulletin board. Often she'd wondered how his necktie, thin and black like an exclamation mark, would feel.

"Hands-On Hannah is here," she said, running her bare fingers down the length of the tie while touching his shoulder with the glove.

With an expression of alarm, the tall teacher froze solid.

"I'm Hands-On Hannah with the Freeze-Tag Touch," Hannah cried, skipping into the office.

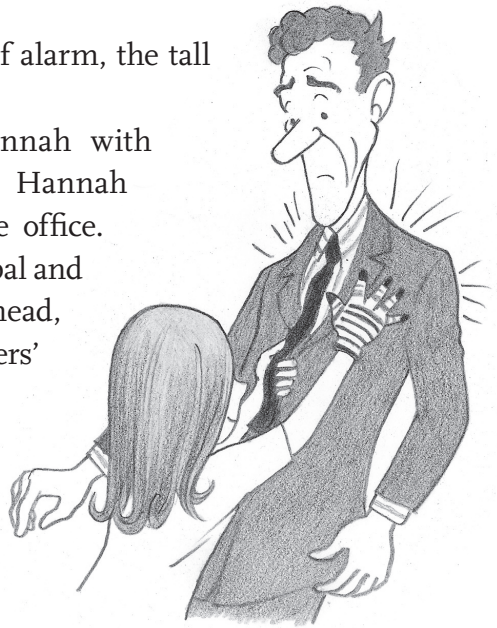
After tapping the principal and the secretary on the head, she raced into the teachers' lounge.

"Hello, teachers. Look at my rainbow glove," she said, shaking hands with everyone in the room. Soon the entire faculty of W. T.

Melon Elementary School were chilly statues.

"Don't touch! Hands off! Keep your hands to yourself!" Hannah recited. "Not for me. I want to touch everything in this school that I was forbidden to touch before."

Under the teachers' frosty stares, she touched the large blade on the paper cutter with her bare hand. She placed



her palm on the copy-machine glass; she pressed the buttons on the coffee urn. Out in the hallway she fingered the fire-alarm box and ran her hand over the painting of W. T. Melon.

“And there’s a zillion things in my classroom I’m dying to feel,” Hannah said.

Waltzing into the classroom at the end of the hall, she picked up the teacher’s coffee mug. She handled the large “Teacher Only” scissors and tapped the round attention bell. *Ding! Ding!*

“I’m Hands-On Hannah, and I want to touch every goeey, prickly, sticky, or scratchy thing in the whole wide world!” she said.

The bean plants on the science shelf felt rougher than expected. The surfaces of the CDs in the music corner felt smoother. The hairs on her arm stood straight up when she pressed her palm on the computer screen, and her thumb could stay on the lit overhead projector light bulb for only a second.

“Now there’s one last thing in the classroom I must touch,” Hannah said.

On a shelf by the coat closet stood a silver trophy the shape and size of a watermelon. The engraving on the trophy read:

W. T. Melon Elementary School Field Day Champions

A faded label below the trophy read:

Do Not Touch



“No one’s ever been allowed to touch that trophy,” Hannah said. “But now Hands-On Hannah can.”

Holding out the pointer finger of her bare hand, Hannah stepped toward the silver award. She liked the way her finger’s reflection, stretched and distorted, appeared in its shiny sides, so she switched hands. Now her gloved finger reflected in a swirl of colors.

“Don’t handle! No touching! Hands off!” Hannah said, inching toward the trophy. “Why not? What are fingers for?”

As Hannah’s finger drew nearer to the silver surface, the glove’s likeness seemed to advance toward her. Closer and closer she stepped. Nearer and nearer the glove got to the mirrored image.

Then . . . touch.

Finger and reflection met, and a chill ran through Hannah’s bones. Pins and needles zipped over her skin. Her limbs stiffened, and her joints hardened.

“Fingers are for touching” were the last words Hannah remembered saying before falling into a deep, dreamy sleep.

Moments later the bell rang to end recess. But the hallway at W. T. Melon Elementary School stayed quiet. The classrooms remained empty.

Minutes passed before Mr. Leeks came strolling up the corridor. He glanced at the frozen tall teacher. Peering out

the window, he studied the ice statues of students on the playground.

“I reckon another game of Freeze Tag got out of hand,” he said. “Good thing I was down in the boiler room, stoking up the furnace. Soon this hallway will be warm and toasty. I’d better carry the youngsters in here so they can thaw out faster.”

The janitor headed toward the playground door. When he passed the classroom at the end of the hall, he spotted Hannah with her rainbow glove pressed against the field-day trophy.

“I should have guessed it was you, Miss Hannah,” he said. “You never could keep your hands off things. I have that glove’s mate somewhere. Took it off a boy a few years back when I found him frozen against the boys’ room mirror.”

Mr. Leeks removed Hannah’s glove. He lifted her by the waist and carried her into the hall. “You’ll have a doozy of a brain-freeze headache after you thaw out, Hannah. But I bet you have learned a chilly lesson. Here at school, hands are for holding pencils and turning pages of books. Use your fingers for the wrong reason once too often, and—*brrrrrrr.*”

