

# Hunt the Witch

JENNY PAUSACKER

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## CHAPTER ONE

Syl and Chris were best friends.

Syl was really called Sylvia and Chris was called Christabel. But these names were very long, so every one called them Syl and Chris.

Syl and Chris lived in a big house with Syl's mother, Josie, and Chris's mother, Eileen. Syl's father, Rick, and Chris's father, Tom, and Caroline and Sue and Frank lived in the house too.

So Syl and Chris said they had lots of mothers and fathers. The kids at school stared at them and sometimes they laughed. Then Chris sat on the kids who laughed.

"Josie and Eileen and Rick and Tom and Caroline and Sue and Frank *all* like me and look after me," she told them. "And that's what mothers and fathers do. Okay?"

Most kids said "Okay!" to Chris pretty smartly. And if they didn't, Syl sat on them as well. Then they said "Okay".

The kids at school liked Syl and Chris, because they knew lots of things to do. They made up games and they talked back at the teacher and they had funny ideas.

Syl was the one who made up the games. Then she told Chris and Chris told the other kids. After that everybody played Syl's game for weeks, until she made up a new game.

One day all the kids were playing 'Outer Space'.

"What is this planet made of?" yelled Chris.

"This planet is made of chewing gum," answered Syl.

Chris walked around as if she were walking on chewing gum and the other kids

followed her. Syl giggled — they looked so funny.

Then she said, “The chewing gum’s gone hard now. Everyone’s stuck to the ground. Only Jack and Chris have special suits on. If Jack touches you, you’re un-stuck. If Chris touches you, you’re stuck again.”

Jack started to run. As soon as he touched the other kids, they ran too. But Chris ran after them and touched them and they stood still again.

At last only Jack was left. He and Chris raced around the yard, while the kids shouted, “Come on, Jack! Come on, Chris!”

Syl was sitting in a tree and watching. Up in the tree she couldn’t get stuck on the chewing gum planet.

“Okay,” she shouted. “We’re leaving this planet and going to another one. Vroom!”

“Vroom!” shouted the kids in chorus.

Chris ran up, puffing and panting. “What is *this* planet made of?” she puffed.

Syl thought for a moment. “This planet is a giant trampoline.”

Chris bounced up and down and all the kids bounced with her. Then the school siren went.

“Rats,” said Jack. “We always have to stop, just when the game’s getting good.”

“Well, we can go on later,” said Syl. “Now we have to go to Planet School. Vroom!” They all vroomed into the classroom.

## CHAPTER TWO

The teacher, Miss Vlakos, was waiting for them.

“This afternoon we’re going to do something nice,” she said. “We’re going to make up a play about a wicked witch and a beautiful princess and a handsome prince and —”

Chris jumped up. All the kids looked at each other and grinned. Chris was going to talk back to the teacher again.

“Excuse me, Miss Vlakos,” she said, “but that isn’t nice at all. Everybody says witches were wicked but they’re wrong. Witches were good people. So we won’t make that play.”

The kids all stared at Chris. She always had funny ideas but this was funnier than most. How could she say that witches were good?

“That’s stupid,” said Sharon. “Miss Vlakos has read us stories about witches before and they were all wicked.”

“That’s what I said,” Chris pointed out. “Everyone says witches are wicked. And everyone is stupid.”

“I’m not stupid,” growled Sharon and Alex said, “Why should we believe you? Who told you anyway?” Alex wanted to be the handsome prince.

“Josie and Eileen told me,” said Chris triumphantly. “And Rick said they were right and he’s a history teacher.”

Alex groaned. “Oh, them,” he said. “Your mothers and fathers.”

“That’s right,” said Chris. Her eyes were sparkling. She liked a fight. She couldn’t sit

on Alex in the classroom but she could still fight with words.

Alex saw the sparkle in her eyes and shut up. But even Jack, who was Chris's friend, thought she was wrong this time.

"Chris," he said, "if a witch isn't wicked, then she isn't a witch. That's what witches are — wicked."

"No, they're not," said Chris. "Witches are just smart. That's why everybody hates them." She made a witchy face at Jack.

All the kids started shouting at once. "Yes, they are." "No, they're not." "Chris is always right." "Chris is a witch."

Miss Vlacos banged the table. "All right, all right," she said. "Let's talk about witches properly. Chris, why are witches good?"

"Urn," said Chris. She knew witches were good, because Eileen and Josie had told her so. But she couldn't remember everything Eileen and Josie told her. She just liked a fight.

Syl put her hand up and Chris sighed with relief. "Syl will explain," she said to Miss Vlacos.

Miss Vlacos smiled. "Well, Syl?"

"In olden times witches were like doctors," said Syl. "They made medicines for sick people out of herbs and things. Then doctors came along and said witches were bad, so everyone would go to the doctors, not the witches."

Everyone looked hard at Syl. Then they looked at Miss Vlacos.

"You're right," said Miss Vlacos, looking surprised. "Before doctors came along, people did make medicines out of herbs. And picture book witches always have big pots full of spells. Maybe they were really big pots full of medicines."

Sharon scowled. "Don't you *know*, miss?"

"Teachers don't know everything," said Miss Vlacos. "We learn, too, by reading books. I'll read a book about witches and then I'll tell you some more."

"Teachers ought to know everything," grumbled Alex. "Besides, we still have to make up a play. And we have to have some baddies."

"Oh, there are lots of baddies," said Syl. "In olden times, people punished the witches. They had this test. They threw people into ponds and if they sank, they weren't witches and if they floated, they were witches. And then they burned the witches."

Everyone was silent. They looked at Syl. Her face was very pink.

"Those people were the baddies," she said in a shaky voice. "Not the witches."

"You mean, witches were *real*?" said Sharon. "Not just something in fairytales?"

Syl nodded. She looked as if she was going to cry.

"Well," said Miss Vlacos, "Syl's right again. Have you ever heard of a witch-hunt? A witch-hunt is when people don't like something so they say it's wicked, as a reason for stopping it. And back in the Middle Ages, in countries like England and France and

Germany, people really did hunt witches, because they said they were wicked.”

“And put them in ponds,” said Chris loudly. “We can make a play about that. I want to be the witch.”

Alex looked cross. He always wanted the best part. “Oh, well,” he said. “I’ll be head of the baddies.”

“You are already,” Chris said smartly.

## CHAPTER THREE

After school, Chris hurried Syl home. Rick and Caroline were school teachers and Josie was a gardener and Sue and Frank were office workers, so they were all still at work. But Eileen and Tom worked at night, cleaning up supermarkets, so they were sitting at the kitchen table and drinking cups of tea.

“Mum, we need your book on witches for Miss Vlacos,” said Chris. “She wants to do a play about wicked witches and we have to stop her.”

“Sorry, Chris,” said Eileen. “Syl’s grandmother has asked you to dinner and I have to drive you over there now, before we go to work. I’ll find the book tomorrow.”

“Rats,” said Chris.

Tom grinned at her.

At dinner, Syl’s grandmother said to Syl, “There’s a big Summer Fair in the park tomorrow. Would you and Chris like to go?”

Chris frowned at Syl. But Syl liked Gran. “Yes, please,” she said.

“Syl, we have to read that book,” hissed Chris.

“We can read it on Sunday,” said Syl, surprised.

“I want to read it now,” wailed Chris. Everyone laughed.

“Rats,” said Chris again.

Next morning Gran took them to the Fair. Chris was still grumpy but she cheered up when she saw all the rides and the stalls and things to see and do.

Gran bought them some hot dogs. (“They don’t look like dogs to me,” said Chris. “They’re sausage dogs,” said Syl.) And they bought plum jam and apple jelly for Josie

and Eileen.

Then they rode on the dodgems. (Gran was a mean dodgem car driver.) And Chris and Syl rode on the merry-go-round by themselves, because Gran didn't like going up and down.

Then they listened to a rock band and some people singing Italian songs.

"Later on they're holding a medieval tournament," said Gran.

"Huh?" said Chris. "What's that?"

"Some men dress up as knights from the Middle Ages and ride at each other carrying long spears," said Gran. "They try to knock each other off their horses."

"Why?" said Chris.

Gran thought for a moment. "I don't know," she said with a grin. "Let's watch them and try to work it out. Now, I need a —"

"Nice cuppa tea," said Chris and Syl together.

"So why don't you go and look round the Fair? But come back in an hour or I'll —"

"Tickle you into the middle of next week," said Chris and Syl. They liked Gran, because she always said the same things.

So Gran sat down at a tea table near the ornamental pond and Chris and Syl ran off to see the Fair. They found a playground near by and swung on the swings for a while.

Then Syl climbed up the slide. At the top of it she stood quite still.

"Silly Syl," shouted Chris. "Are you scared of slides, now?"

"No, I ... It's ... Oh, Chris, come here," wailed Syl.

Chris scrambled up the ladder and stood next to Syl. Syl pointed down the hillside.

Some people were running across the green grass. There were a lot of men in red and blue shirts and in front of them a woman in black, running very fast.

"It's a witch," said Syl quietly.

"It's a witch-hunt," said Chris angrily.

They looked at each other with a big question in their eyes.

"Witches don't happen these days," said Syl in a small voice.

"It's just because we've been talking about witches," agreed Chris.

More people started running after the woman in black.

"We have to go and see," said Chris suddenly.

"Oh yes!" said Syl.

Down the slide they slid. They held hands and pelted down the hill.

"Yaaay!" yelled Chris. "We're going to save the witch."

"They won't get this one," gasped Syl. Her eyes were fierce.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Syl and Chris pounded up to a clump of trees. Three of the trees were gum trees but the fourth had branches right down to the ground.

“Hide in there,” puffed Chris, “and I’ll stop the witch.”

Syl ducked under the branches and Chris waited anxiously. What if the witch went the other way?

But here she came, black skirts flapping, long sleeves streaming behind her, pointed hat bobbing up and down. As she ran up, she smiled at Chris. Oh no, thought Chris. She doesn’t understand. She thinks it’s a game. But they’re hunting her!

Chris crouched down. Then she sprang out in front of the woman in black. She waved her arms and yelled, “Stop!”

The woman swerved and Chris jumped again. They crashed into each other and the woman staggered. Chris grabbed hold of her arm.

“We’ll hide you,” she said and pushed her at the tree.

“No, I have to be chased,” panted the woman.

“But they’re almost here,” said Chris.

From behind the trees they could hear the noise of pounding feet and shouting voices.

“Where’s the witch?”

“We’ll get her.”

“Burn, burn, burn.”

A flicker of fright crossed the woman’s face. Chris pushed her under the tree and Syl pulled her in beside them.

“But — ” she said.

Syl put her hand over the woman's mouth. Chris stared in amazement. Syl was being very bold.

The feet thundered past.

"Catch the witch. Catch the witch," shouted the voices.

The woman wriggled away from Syl and sat up. "Thanks," she said, "but I have to go now."

"But they'll duck you in the pond," said Syl urgently.

She laughed. "Yes, witches always get ducked," she said. "Don't you know that witches are the baddies?"

"That's not true," said Chris. "Witches are good people, who make medicines, not spells. Don't *you* know that?"

The woman smiled kindly. "It's a nice story," she said.

Chris fumbled inside her shirt and pulled out a small green book. "It's not just a story. It's written down here."

"Chris, you took Eileen's book," said Syl, shocked.

"She won't miss it," Chris said cheerfully. "I wanted to read it."

The woman looked at the book. "*Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers*," she read out.

She looked hard at Chris and Syl and they gazed back with pleading eyes.

"Hm," she said. "So you think witches are okay and you want to save me." Syl nodded hard. "Well, I don't know. But it obviously matters to you. And if this is a witch-hunt, I guess I *am* a witch. So let's give them a run for their money."

She lay down on her stomach and looked out from under the leaves. Syl and Chris joined her, grinning at each other.

"I can see the gates of the park," said the witch. "If we get there, we've won. Let's go down the hill. We'll have lots of bushes to hide in."

"And I can see the pond, near the gates," said Syl in a deep voice. "Where they want to duck you."

"And I can see the witch-hunters," giggled Chris. "They look all lost and silly."

"We'll wake them up," said the witch. She pushed her way out from under the tree and stood up straight. "Witches forever!" she shouted at the top of her voice.

The witch-hunters spun around and pointed at the witch. They started to run. And Syl, Chris and the witch turned and ran down the hill.

## CHAPTER FIVE

They hurtled down the hill at breakneck speed. Syl felt as if she could kick her legs in the air and fly away but her legs kept on running.

Chris looked over her shoulder. "They're close behind us. We need to hide again."

She put on extra speed and disappeared round the corner of the hill. Syl and the witch followed more slowly.

"I'll have to stop in a minute," said the witch. "My shoelace is coming undone."

She wears runners, thought Syl. The witch is modern, then.

Syl had been wondering whether the witch had come from the Middle Ages by magic. She was glad she hadn't. Magic was a bit scary.

Syl and the witch pounded into the bushes and stopped for a minute while the witch tied her shoelace. They couldn't see Chris at all. Then she appeared from behind a tree and waved, making faces at them to be quiet. They ran over.

"I've talked to these people," said Chris. "They'll hide you."

The people were an old man and an old woman sitting on a rug with a picnic basket beside them. They looked at the witch in surprise.

"Oh dear," said the old woman. "I thought you'd be another little girl."

"But you still have to hide her," said Chris firmly. "You *said*."

"Yes, but ..."

"Now, Emily," said the old man. "We'll put the rug over the young lady and sit on the grass."

“But the grass might be wet, Harry,” said Emily. “Damp grass is bad for your rheumatism.”

“Oh, quick, quick,” moaned Syl, hopping up and down. “They’re coming.”

“A promise is a promise,” said Harry. He started to get slowly to his feet.

“You’re right, Harry,” said Emily, hopping up like a small bird. “Lie down by the picnic basket, Miss — Miss Witch and curl into a ball.”

Harry was still getting slowly to his feet. Chris pulled at the rug impatiently and he frowned at her.

“All in good time, Missy,” he said. “You can’t hurry old bones.”

The bushes rustled. The witch-hunters were almost there. Syl held her stomach.

Then Harry was on his feet. Emily whisked up the rug and dropped it neatly over the witch. She leant her bottle of lemonade against the rug and sat down beside it.

“Now, girls,” she said, “one of you can sit on the basket and one of you can lean on the rug.”

Syl and Chris jumped into place. Then they looked at Harry, standing next to them.

“Oh, no,” groaned Chris. “He’ll never sit down in time. The witch-hunters will know there’s something funny going on.”

“I’ll sit down,” said Harry grimly. He took a deep breath and his legs shot out from under him. He tumbled down in a heap.

And the witch-hunters thundered through the bushes.

## CHAPTER SIX

“Have you seen a witch?” yelled the leader of the witch-hunters.

“Sure thing. She went thattaway,” Harry yelled back, pointing on ahead.

“Did she look tired?” asked another witch-hunter.

“Oh yes, very tired. And she was limping badly,” said Emily.

“Good. We’ve nearly got her then,” said the leader and all the witch-hunters laughed.

Then they ran off, the way Harry had pointed.

Emily untucked the rug and the witch sat up. Harry poured them all glasses of lemonade.

Emily raised her glass. “To witches,” she said. The witch smiled and drank carefully.

“Not too much lemonade or you’ll get a stitch,” she said to Syl and Chris. “Now, we’d better be off. Do you kids still want to come? We’ve got a lot of running to do.”

“We’ve saved you twice,” Chris pointed out. “You need us.”

“They’re nice little girls,” said Emily to the witch. “You take them along.”

“I will. And thank you,” said the witch.

“It was no trouble,” said Harry. “We’ve never saved a witch before.”

As they ran off, Emily was spreading out the rug and Harry was slowly standing up again.

“You see,” said Syl to the witch. “People like witches, when they get to know them.”

“Uh-huh,” said the witch. “And witches get tired of being hunted. It’s too scary. I’ve changed my mind. I’m going straight to the gates.”

And she ran away from the bushes, across the green grass.

“Oh no,” said Syl. “She shouldn’t do that.”

“Look!” said Chris.

The witch-hunters had split into two groups. One group had gone up the hill and one group was waiting in the bushes. The witch was caught in between them.

She ran down the hill as fast as she could. And one group of witch-hunters ran at her from the right, while the other group of witch-hunters ran at her from the left.

Syl stopped and looked round.

“Come on!” wailed Chris. “At least we can fight the witch-hunters.”

“We can do better than that,” said Syl. “She’s going to the fernery. It’s got little twisty paths — she *might* get away. And we can get there first and help her, if we jump over the creek.”

“Good plan,” said Chris.

They took deep breaths and ran for their lives. As she ran, Syl wondered if the witch had been caught already. But she couldn’t look. She didn’t have time.

They thundered down to the creek. Chris jumped straight over. But Syl stopped short.

“I can’t do it,” she whispered.

“Silly Syl,” shouted Chris.

Syl felt really mad. She jumped and splashed back into the creek. “Rats,” she said and scrambled out fast. She was wet up to the bottom of her shorts but for once she didn’t care. She climbed up the bank and looked around.

Chris had vanished.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Syl felt lost for a moment. Then she heard Chris's voice.

"Catch, Syl!"

There was a loud thud and then a man's voice, swearing loudly. Syl looked over at the fernery.

Chris and a small boy were standing at the opening to the fernery. The witch-hunters were jumping up and down in front of them. And the leader was holding his shoulder and groaning.

Chris had thrown a cricket ball at him.

Syl giggled. Then she ran to pick up the cricket ball. She threw it to Chris, who gave it back to the small boy.

"Oh, wow, I'm sorry, mister," Chris was saying. "Did I hurt you? Show me your shoulder. I did First Aid in school and ..."

"Just let me get past, little girl," growled the leader of the witch-hunters.

He pushed past Chris and jogged on into the fernery. The other witch-hunters followed. Chris and Syl stood in their way and slowed them down a bit but at last they were gone.

They shouted as they went. "Where's that witch gone?" "Wait till we catch her." "We'll teach her a lesson."

"They're really mad now," Chris said. "Let's go to the other end of the fernery and wait for the witch to come out. We can make another plan."

Chris and Syl ran around the outside of the fernery and looked inside. There was no witch to be seen. So they looked across at the gates of the park. They were very close now.

“There are lots of trees by the pond. The witch can hide in them. But what if she’s really tired? What if she can’t get to the trees?” Syl frowned.

“We’ll ask some people to hide her, like Harry and Emily did,” said Chris. “Don’t worry, Syl.”

Then the witch was pounding up to them. Her face was wet with sweat. Her pointed hat had fallen off. She was gasping for breath.

“It’s you!” she panted. “I thought I’d lost you. I’m all in. I have to stop and rest.”

“Not here!” cried Syl. “We’ll ask those people to hide you.”

She pointed to the first family sitting on the grass. The witch looked doubtful. Syl and Chris took her hands and pulled her along.

They stopped in front of the family picnic — a woman and two very young kids.

“Help us, please,” said Chris. “They’re chasing the witch.”

The woman looked up. Her brown eyes opened wide and she pointed at the witch.

“*Una strega!*” she said.

“Huh?” said Chris. “What’s that?”

Syl hit her forehead with her hand. “It’s Italian. She doesn’t talk English.”

“How do you know about Italian words?”

“Maria Stratelli can talk Italian and I ask her to talk it to me sometimes,” said Syl.

“Now, come on.”

She tugged at Chris’s t-shirt. The witch swayed on her feet.

“We don’t have time,” said Chris. “What are the Italian words for ‘good’ and ‘bad’?”

Syl hunted quickly through her mind. “*Buono,*” she said. “But —”

Chris turned to the Italian woman. “Her — *strega— buono,*” she said, pointing to the witch. Then she pointed back at the fernery and said, “Men”. She ran at the witch like a witch-hunter and gave a fierce yell.

The Italian woman laughed suddenly and said something in Italian. “*Vuoi salvare la buona strega. Bene.*”

Syl, Chris and the witch stared. Now they didn’t understand. But the Italian woman pulled at the witch’s skirt and made her sit down. Then she pulled off her black scarf and tied it over the witch’s head.

“Oh no,” moaned Syl, looking at the fernery. “Here come the witch-hunters.”

The Italian woman put one of her children on the witch’s lap. “*Nonna,*” she said proudly.

“What does *Nonna* mean?” Chris whispered.

“ ‘Granny,’ ” whispered Syl. “But what does *she* mean?”

Syl and Chris turned to look. Their mouths fell open. Dressed in black from top to

toe, with her head bent to hide her face, the witch suddenly looked like an old Italian woman nursing her grandchild.

Syl grabbed Chris's hand and held it tightly, as the witch-hunters pounded towards them.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The witch-hunters ran straight past the Italian family, without even looking at the witch.

“We did it!” said Chris.

“You did it,” said the witch. “And she did it. How do we say ‘thank you’ in Italian, Syl?”

Syl knew that one. “*Grazie*,” she told the witch and they all said “*Grazie*” to the Italian woman. She smiled and waved as they set off again.

“I feel better,” said the witch. “Being hunted is no fun. But I want to beat the witch-hunters now.”

Chris giggled. “We’re running behind the hunters,” she said. “So we’re hunting them.”

For a few minutes Syl, Chris and the witch ran along behind the witch-hunters. Then one of the witch-hunters turned round and saw them. And the hunt was on again.

But they were near the pond now. The witch dashed into the trees, with Syl and Chris close behind her. She ran through the trees quietly and steadily, until she came to another tree with branches down to the ground.

The witch ducked under the branches and hid in the tree. Chris and Syl followed slowly.

“We’re nearly at the gate,” Chris protested.

The witch put her finger to her lips and they sat quietly, as the witch-hunters thundered by.

“Now,” said the witch to Chris, “give me that book. If I’m a witch, I need to know

about witches.”

Chris handed her the book and the witch read quickly for five minutes. “All right,” she said. “Now I know what to say.”

She pushed through the branches and ran down the hill, straight to the pond.

“Oh no!” cried Syl.

“What does she think she’s doing?” growled Chris.

They walked slowly and sadly down the hill. They had saved the witch but then she had gone back to the witch-hunters.

“Hey, they’re not ducking her. She’s shouting at them,” Chris said suddenly. She grabbed Syl’s hand and pulled her down the hill.

Beside the pond a crowd was gathering. They saw Harry and Emily and the Italian woman with her husband and children. And they heard the witch.

“It’s all in this book,” she was shouting. “Witches were persecuted for hundreds of years, because they were helping poor people. I was hunted for a game and I was scared enough. But the real witches were hunted for real. It’s got to stop. You can’t duck me.”

“Come on, Kerry. It’s just a joke,” said the leader.

“Let’s duck her anyway,” said another witch-hunter.

The witch-hunters moved forward.

“No, you don’t,” said Emily, standing next to the witch.

“The young lady doesn’t want to be ducked,” said Harry, standing next to Emily.

“*La strega e buona,*” said the Italian woman, standing on the other side of the witch.

“My wife says, ‘The witch is good,’” said her husband, standing next to her.

The witch-hunters looked at all the people. Then they looked at their leader.

“Oh, heck,” said the leader. “Forget the ducking. Let’s go and do the medieval tournament.”

The witch-hunters turned and marched away. Everybody cheered. The witch hugged her new friends. Then she saw Chris and Syl and hugged them too. Everybody was talking at the tops of their voices and hugging each other.

Suddenly Syl was hugging Gran. “Oops,” she said. “We forgot you.”

“You did,” agreed Gran. “Well, now, tell me all about it.”

## CHAPTER NINE

The next night the witch came to tea. She wore a t-shirt and jeans and she looked like an ordinary person.

“You’re not a real witch, are you?” said Chris sadly.

“Not really,” said the witch. “I’m just Kerry. My brother was in the medieval tournament and they decided to have a medieval witch-hunt as well, so he asked me to be the witch. I’m a good runner and I thought it would be fun.” She shivered.

“But it wasn’t fun,” said Josie.

“It sure wasn’t,” agreed Kerry. “It was fun at first but after Chris and Syl hid me, the guys got mad. They started hunting me for real.”

“Were you scared?” asked Tom.

“I wasn’t,” said Chris.

“Well, I was,” Kerry said. “You know, my brother said he was sorry afterwards. He said they got carried away.”

“Hmm,” said Eileen. “Maybe all witch-hunts start like that.”

There was a knock on the door and Chris ran to answer it. Miss Vlacos stood outside. She wanted to borrow the book about witches. Chris brought her in and she and Kerry and Chris’s mothers and fathers all started to talk about witches again.

Chris was bored. She knew enough about witches now. She wanted to do something, not just talk, so she went to look for Syl.

Syl was sitting on her bed, staring at the wall. “What are you doing, Silly Syl?” asked

Chris.

“I’m making up a new game, Cross Chris,” said Syl. “It’s called ‘*Hunt the Witch*’.”

“Oh good,” said Chris. “Tell me about it. We can play it at school tomorrow.”

And they did.

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