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“The Follower”  
By Jack Gantos

My mother said he was trouble the first time I met him. His name was Frankie Pagoda and he had just been catapulted across his yard like a human cannonball and landed badly in ours. He was moaning as I stood over him, not knowing what to do. He was on his back and at first he wasn't moving, but slowly he began to gyrate his arms and legs like a stunned crab.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Frankie . . . P—" he slowly replied. "Frankie Pagoda."

He was in a lot of pain, and here's what was going on. His older brother, Scary Gary, who had already been in trouble with the law, had made him climb to the very top of a reedy Australian pine tree with a rope between his teeth. Then he tied the rope to the top of the tree and Gary tied the other end to the winch on Mr. Pagoda's tow truck. He winched the tip of the tree all the way down so it made a big spring and then Frankie held on like a Koala bear while Gary cut the rope with a machete. Frankie was launched like the stones the Romans flung at the Vandals.

I was in my bedroom and Mom was in the kitchen; both of us had windows that faced the backyard. Then we heard that first *Whoosh!* of the tree and Frankie hollering, "Ahhhhhh!" That was followed by a thud and a very soulful moan. And this is how we found him—on his back with his arms and legs slowly stretching out.

"Are you okay?" I asked. He slowly turned over onto his hands and knees.

"Yeah," he said, wincing. "I've had worse."

Mom pointed at him as if he were a garden pest. "He's a heap of trouble," she said to me. Then she said to Frankie, "If you have to hurt yourself, please do it in your own yard."

He seemed to nod to that and I helped him up and he ran off. A few minutes later we heard, *Whoosh!* "Ahhhhhh!" *Thud!* "Ugh!" He was back.

"Something is messed up with those people," Mom said, chopping up onions that evening. "Something's wrong in their heads."

Maybe there was something wrong with me, too. I was different from Frankie but still, the first moment I saw him in pain, it occurred to me that I wanted to be in pain, too.

That evening my mother came into my room. "If I ever catch you playing with that kid or over at their house, you will be in big trouble. This is just a *friendly* warning," she said.

"Why?" I asked. "He's a neighbor and will probably be a friend."

"You should not be friends with kids who are a danger to themselves and others."

I got some courage up and replied, "That's what I love about him."

She pointed a red finger at my chest. "You are a *follower*, not a leader," she said bluntly. "You are putty in the wrong hands. Don't get me wrong. You're a nice kid, but you are most definitely a follower."

I sort of knew this was true but I didn't want to admit it to her. Plus, a little of me still wanted to believe that I was strong, that I was my own man and a great leader.

But within a week I was Frankie's man, which was pretty scary because he was Gary's man, which made me low man on the totem pole—or pine tree. The first time Gary launched me, I hit a car. It was an old Mercury Cougar parked in their backyard. It didn't have any wheels and sat on its belly like a cat crouching to catch a bird. I hit the roof, which was like a steel trampoline. It dented down and popped up and I went springing off the top. As I was in the air, I kept thinking, *When you hit the ground, roll and tumble and it won't hurt so much.* This is what I had learned from watching *Roller Derby* on TV. It was my favorite show and very violent, but the players always avoided massive debilitating and life-threatening injuries as long as they rolled and tumbled across the wooden track or over the rails and into the rows of metal folding chairs. So, as I flew through the air, I stared at the grassy yard and planned my clever descent. I hit the ground with my outstretched arms and, instead of bouncing as if my hands were shock absorbers, I collapsed into the ground like a piece of space junk.

I dislocated the fingers on my right hand, bruised the side of my face, and sprained my right shoulder. I limped home hunched over like Quasimodo and went straight to my room. A few minutes later I was barking in pain from relocating the joints in my fingers. I was so afraid my mother would see my bruised face that I stole my sister's makeup and powered my bruise. At dinner I couldn't use my right arm. It hung limply by my side like an elephant's trunk. I must have pinched a nerve on contact with the ground that left my arm paralyzed. Perhaps for life. I ate with my left hand and food kept falling down my chin and shirt and onto my lap.

"What's wrong with your arm?" my mother asked.

"Nothing," I mumbled.

She sneered, stood up, and came around to my side. She grabbed my arm and pulled on it like it was the starter rope on a lawnmower engine. Something deep inside my shoulder went *Pop!*

"Arghhh," I sighed. The relief from the pain was heavenly.

"You are as dumb as a post," my mother said. "I'm warning you—don't play with that kid! He'll lead you to your death."

I couldn't help myself. The next day I felt pretty good and my teeth no longer throbbed when I breathed through my mouth. As soon as my mother went into the bathroom I ran over to Frankie's house. His brother Gary had rigged up an electric chair with a train transformer. He ran copper leads from the transformer to chicken wire on the chair seat and duct-taped it down.

"Don't be a chicken," he said demonically when he saw me. "Take a seat."

I did and it was torture at its most challenging. When I got home I looked at my naked butt in the mirror, and it was singed with the same chicken wire pattern that was on the chair. "Wow," I said. "Pretty cool."

The next day my mother did the laundry. She came to me with my pants, which were singed with the same wire pattern. "You don't have to tell me how this happened," she said. "You just have to stop. Whatever drives you to do this stuff is a sickness. So I'm grounding you for a while until you start displaying some sense."

Maybe I was sick. Maybe I was a follower. But I couldn't help myself. I wanted to sneak back for more. I was just thinking of crawling out the window when I looked over at the Pagoda house, and Frankie had his bike up on the peak of his roof. He was poised to pedal down the slope and land in the pool, which was quite a distance from the eaves of the house.

"Go!" Gary demanded. Frankie did. He pedaled as fast as he could and yelled all the way down and then was in the air. My vision was blocked by a bush, and instead of a splashing sound there was the springy metal sound of his bike hitting the concrete patio and clattering around. In a minute Gary was hollering at him to stop being a sissy and to get up and the dent in his forehead wasn't anything to cry over. I rubbed my hand over my forehead. *Perhaps a little dent of my own would look good*, I thought.

The ambulance arrived in a few minutes. After some begging, Mom allowed me to visit Frankie in the hospital, and later, once Scary Gary was sent off to a special program for dangerous boys, I even snuck over to Frankie's house a few times. He recovered just fine. And because he stopped doing dumb things for Gary, I stopped doing dumb things for him. He was a follower too, like me. And when you put two followers together nothing really bad happens. We didn't get hurt for a while or do anything too stupid. About a month went by before I secretly hoped Scary Gary would return home and rescue us from being so dull. I was bored out of my mind.

*Jack Gantos is author of the Joey Pigza books, Jack Adrift: Fourth Grade without a Clue and Hole in My Life.*