

**MARVIN
AND
THE MOTHS**

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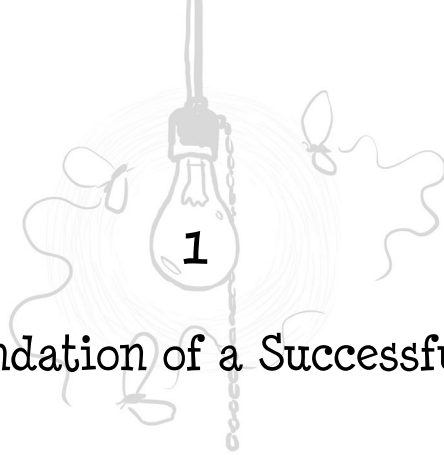
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The Foundation of a Successful Life

Marvin Watson stared at the thirty feet of rope hanging from the steel beams of the ceiling and wondered what scheduling god he had offended to get gym as his very first class of the year. When he got up that morning, Marvin's two biggest concerns were making sure he didn't wear anything funny-looking and that he didn't do anything to embarrass himself on his first day of middle school. Here, fifteen minutes after entering the building, was the opportunity to do both.

“What's the matter, couldn't afford a new uniform?” asked Marvin's cousin, Little Stevie Upton. Marvin's gym shorts from the previous year were riding a little high, and his T-shirt had the words “GO PIGLETS!” above the face of a shy little piggy, which was the mascot of Butcherville Elementary School. Everyone else was wearing new red-and-gold gym uniforms that featured the emblem of the Crashing Boar,

which was the middle school's symbol. Little Stevie had even accented his uniform with a custom-made gold-trimmed tracksuit with his name monogrammed across the chest. The gold trim may have been actual gold, and it appeared that the large boar logo on the back of the jacket had diamonds for eyes.

"This track suit costs more than your house, Watson," Little Stevie said. "And it probably smells better." Marvin was used to his cousin, Stevie, tormenting him at family functions, but being tormented by him at school was a new experience. Until this year, Little Stevie had attended Swineheart Academy, a private elementary school.

"My mom didn't have time to take me shopping," Marvin said lamely. "You know, because of Baby Harry."

"It's been three weeks since he was born. Don't blame the kid for your problems, Watson," Stevie said.

Marvin stared down at his uniform, the bashful piglet on the T-shirt riding slightly above his belly button. The pig looked the way Marvin felt.

Pigs were big in Marvin's hometown of Butcherville. All the school sports teams were named after pigs—the

Piglets for the elementary school, the Crashing Boars for the middle school, and the Trotters for the high school. Just as a city like Atlanta is flush with streets named for peaches, many of Butcherville's roads and byways were named after cuts of pork, like swanky Loin Lane and the unfortunately titled Butt Boulevard.

It was all because Butcherville was the home of Pork Loaf International, makers of the world-renowned Pork Loaf Log Roll. Butcherville was a company town, proud of its heritage, and the type of place where the flagship product in the company's line of processed, enriched meats was often served at all three meals.

Lunch was already on Marvin's mind. He was finding it difficult to concentrate on his physical education as the smell of cooking food wafted out from the kitchen and into the cafetorium where gym class was held. As soon as class was over, the janitors would start setting up the room for lunch. Marvin was counting the minutes.

He tried to pay attention as Mr. Franco, the gym teacher, began explaining the feats of strength they would be expected to perform. "Welcome, class. In this room, over the next three years, you will make the

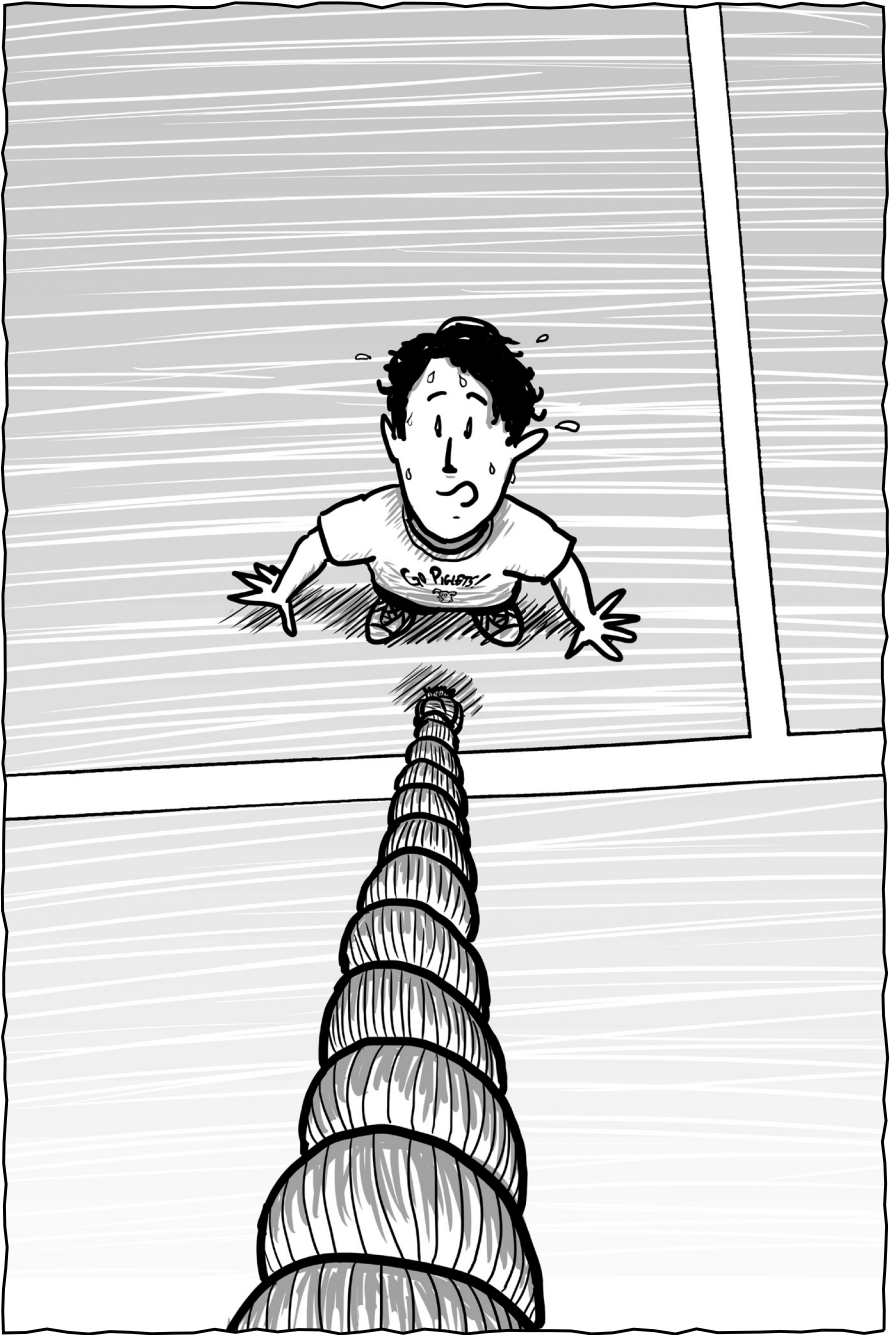
transition from being boys to being young men. Just as Pork Loaf is the foundation of a good sandwich, physical fitness is the foundation of a successful life. Today, we'll start with some baseline fitness tests so we can gauge your progress over the year. It doesn't matter how long it takes you to climb this rope, or how many push-ups you can do, or how fast you can run a mile. It just matters that you try your very best. Now let's get to it!"

The students stood with their backs to the cold, painted cinder-block wall of the cafetorium. They had lined up by alphabetical order to take attendance, and Marvin was thankful his last name put him at the end of the line. He didn't want to have to go first.

"Let's start at . . . *that* end of the line," Mr. Franco said, and his finger slowly swung across the crowd. When it came to rest, it was pointing squarely at Marvin.

"Me?" Marvin said. "But it's the first day of school!"

"Well, then you shouldn't have anything to complain about yet, should you?" Mr. Franco said.



Marvin approached the rope like he would a thirty-foot snake. He turned to Mr. Franco. “What do I do?” he said, looking for some instruction.

“Just try to climb it with your arms first,” said Mr. Franco. “If you need to use your legs, that’s okay.”

Marvin nodded warily. Although there had been ropes in his elementary school gym classes, climbing them hadn’t been mandatory. Marvin had always preferred running, swimming—or just about anything else. So he had managed to dodge rope-climbing until now.

“I’m going to count down from five and then hit the stopwatch,” said Mr. Franco. “Ready? Five, four, three, two, one—GO!” Mr. Franco pressed his thumb down with a click, and Marvin leaped at the rope, which sent him swinging out in a wide arc and back toward the line of students. Stevie, who was next in line, helpfully gave him a hard shove to send him back on his way.

Mr. Franco was beginning to look annoyed. “Come on, quit goofing around,” he said. “Start climbing. Use those arms!”

“I’m using my arms to hold on!” Marvin said as he careened through the air. He couldn’t figure out how to make any progress. If he let go to grab higher on the rope, he’d end up falling.

“Use your legs!” Mr. Franco said.

Marvin brought his legs together and tried to shimmy his way up the rope. He was rewarded for his efforts by the sound of tearing fabric and a collective gasp from the other students, followed by slowly rising laughter. Marvin tried to glance back over his shoulder to see how badly his shorts had ripped, but that just put him into a spin. After what seemed to Marvin like an eternity of struggling, Mr. Franco grabbed him and lowered him to the ground.

“Stop, stop, stop,” Mr. Franco said. “We don’t have time for this. You’re taking way too long.”

“I thought you said that it didn’t matter how long it took,” said Marvin. “Just that I try my very best.”

“You can’t try your best if you don’t have any pants,” said Mr. Franco. “But don’t worry—you can stay after school sometime and make up the fitness test.”

As he was contemplating the prospect of not only

doing this again, but staying after school to do it, Marvin heard Stevie call out, “Nice funderoos, Watson!”

“They’re not funderoos,” Marvin protested. “They’re just regular underwear.”

“Yes, yes,” Mr. Franco said. “We can all see your big-boy underwear. Now get in the back of the line.”

The back of the line was just fine by Marvin. That’s where he’d wanted to be from the start, he thought to himself, as the ventilation fans at the edge of the cafetorium sent a cool breeze through his tattered gym shorts.