

{Here's how editing works at OTP. Comments to the author are blue, bold, italic, and in curly braces. Suggested deletions of your text are grey and struck out. Suggested replacement text is bold and red. All edits are suggestions, except in cases where we are correcting obvious typos and such.

*{Also, don't get discouraged. Your story is strong enough that we're happy to publish it. We just want *all* parts of this story to be as good as *most* of them are.}*

THROWN OFF THE TEAM

{We didn't like the title at first, but now we "get it" and like it. We're just wondering if "Thrown Off," by itself, would be more elegant.}

When Ginny reviewed her accomplishments over the past three years—which she did more often than most college students brushed their teeth—she felt her legacy to Thompson University was having reinvented the cheer squad. Under her tenure, it had soared from four female cheerleaders who considered cheering a hobby to a fully committed team of seven men and seven women who practiced almost daily. And one lousy mascot. *{We don't think "lousy" is strong enough. What else have you got?}*

The grungy, ragamuffin costume haunted her dreams. *{"haunted her dreams" strikes us as cliché. We think you can do better.}* No matter how spectacularly her cheer squad performed, the photographers, fans, and alumni focused on Opie the Octopus. The eight-legged, beat up, lavender and pistachio contraption just had to make an appearance and the crowd roared. Her cheerleaders could beg for forty-five minutes and not hear a crowd-enthused peep. Worse, when Opie ran off with the cheer squad's poms or bungled their dance routines by walking through them in his own private game of dodge-the-

cheerleaders, the crowd cheered for him! ~~—they encouraged him!~~ And they booed Ginny's cheer squad for not playing along.

With the thought, "When you can't beat them, join them," *{Is there room here for a smart-ass line allowing "beat" to mean "hit with"? When you can't beat them over the head, join them...}* Ginny had invited Opie to ~~spend more time with her cheerleading squad~~ learn the **cheerleading squad's** routines, dance with their songs, and participate in their stunts. But Justin, the slacker inside the costume, laughed her off. *{Missed opportunity alert. "Laughed her off," first, seems too energetic to me for a real slacker. Second, it seems weak. What's the best way you can think of to describe someone who's downright insulting in how he refuses to take an idea seriously, especially because the idea requires effort? Look for a word or short phrase that implies both lazy and rude.}*

Getting rid of Justin and introducing a proper mascot would be the finishing touch on her legacy. Then the cheer squad would be perfect. Ginny had begged the athletics department to put the school mascot under her jurisdiction as cheer squad captain. She even **posed as various disgruntled alumni to write** ~~wrote anonymous~~ *{they're not anonymous letters if she's signing them as an alumnus}* letters to the school newspaper ~~—posing as disgruntled alumni—~~ declaring **denouncing** Opie **as** ~~to be~~ a disgrace to Thompson University and hinting a new costume would be bought if Opie became a solid member of the school spirit team. But the newspaper editors never printed her letters, and the athletics department said Justin was in charge of who wore the mascot costume until he graduated or no longer wanted to be play the Opie role.

One year ~~still~~ **remained** ~~ing~~ until they both graduated. Ginny was not ~~willing to be~~ that patient.

~~There were t~~Thousands of students at ~~at~~ *{We suggest finding some active verb to put here: something better than “lived at”}* Thompson University: nerds, party animals, future politicians, future farmers, geeks, Greeks, jocks, elitists, ~~all sorts of people~~ *{How about something like “and too many other kinds to mention” or better, something that categorizes Justin somehow: “etc., etc.” or “and other miscellaneous weirdos”?}*. Justin saw them every day—eating in the cafeteria, sitting in lecture halls, walking around campus—and he realized just one thing made him different from the bland, faceless masses. *{But are they really faceless? He can tell them apart, as evidenced by the first sentence in this block.}* He had a face, or rather, a mask. He was Opie the Octopus.

The faded pastel octopus looked ridiculous heaped in a corner of his room and even sillier actually on him. The costume had two long legs, one purple and one green, and two sleeves, also one purple and one green, and the other four octopus appendages were padded wiring attached inside the torso so the fake arms moved when the person inside the costume maneuvered his real ones. The whole thing was topped by a purple felt head wide enough to fit two human heads inside. Two large green eyes hid the slits where he actually looked out of the mask, just a few inches above a hinged jaw painted with a bright red smile and sporting a faded pink felt tongue.

Each time he put on the costume, Justin promised himself he'd wash it after the game. Once a semester or so, he actually did. The easiest way was to jump in the

shower—in full costume—and lather up with a strong shampoo. Justin figured the dandruff kind might even kill bugs hiding in the costume’s folds. Drying the suit was more difficult. He’d tried drying it inch by inch with his hair dryer, but the room quickly smelled like wet burnt dog hair, and he was worried he’d scorch the costume. The whole ensemble was too big to fit in a laundry room dryer. And he couldn’t hang it out his window—that was no way to keep a secret identity. So, he tossed the dripping costume over the backs of two chairs, wrung it out as much as possible with some bath towels, and let it air dry for a few days. If he sprayed lots of deodorant around the costume, it almost didn’t stink up the room. *{We love this paragraph. This is the kind of detail about mascots that very few people could get right, and it greatly improves the story.}*

{That said, what is the purpose of this story block? It introduces Justin, but possibly not well enough. How about closing this block with a line or two that shows Justin likes being Opie and isn’t about to stop? That would make the upcoming conflict between him and Ginny clearer, and prepare the audience.}

Ginny’s one and only goal for senior year was to ~~put the final crowning touch on Thompson University’s spirit team—and that would mean converting Opie, one way or the other.~~ *{In our view, cutting this line down to its most basic elements strengthens it and improves the humor. Why let Ginny weaken her desire by relating it to her legacy? At this point, she just wants Opie to fit in or butt out.}*

~~A plan in mind,~~ Ginny went to Justin’s dorm room the day before classes began. “We need to talk about working together, cheerleaders and mascot. Look, I’m just thinking about posterity.”

“Posteriors?”

“Posterity. What’s going to happen next year, when you’ve graduated? You do plan to graduate, don’t you?”

Justin shrugged ~~with a sheepish grin~~ *{that might make him too likeable, diffusing the conflict/tension}*, ~~leaning~~ **and leaned** *{because the gerund form, in my personal view, seems less active than the past tense form, at least here}* his thin body against the doorframe like he didn’t have the strength to stand and hold his body up himself. *{great descriptor}*

Ginny tried again. “You need to find a—what do you call a baby octopus? Someone you can train so he or she can take over next year.”

“Sounds like too much work. I’ll just let the athletics department take care of it when they get around to it.”

{A short beat here about Ginny’s struggle not to get angry, strangle him, etc., might work here.} “Oh, well, yeah, it’s a ton of work. I know because I’ve organized cheerleading tryouts each year, and it’s tough. So, the cheerleaders want to help. We’ll organize a tryout to find your substitute.”

“Why?”

“We want to make sure the school gets the best spirit squad it can possibly have.”

Justin arched an eyebrow. “Ever thought that maybe you have too much school spirit?”

Ginny tried again. *{Careful! “tried again” is, verbatim, what she did last time. “...tried one more time” might work.}* “You missed seven football games this season. You only hit three men’s basketball games last year, none of the women’s games. And I

don't want to hear the crowd asking, 'Where's the mascot?' at every game. You *need* a substitute. And we need you to agree to it." *{A couple of concerns. First, most college football teams don't have more than seven home games, so if this school had seven, he missed *all* of them. Most college basketball teams play 32-35 games, so if he only went to three, again, he's hardly ever there at all. Would the crowd even know he exists? I think he needs to be at more games.*

{Here's a second reason. Right now it seems like he could care less about being Opie. Imagine how the tension would increase if he loved being Opie, showed up for all the games, and that's how he became such a fan favorite. But he always shows up late or something, because he's still a chronic slacker. The fans would start chanting for him and he'd finally show up in the second quarter or something, disrupting everything.

{Final note: presumably this is not a division I-A school, because those are on TV all the time and Justin's actions wouldn't be tolerated. Might want to make that clear. It would help establish that Ginny cares about the squad despite the fact their teams are only on TV, like, once a year or something, and only when some I-A team wants an easy win. She's the guardian of school spirit at a school that really needs it!}

Justin stared across the hall. "Sometimes I don't feel like going to the games, okay? I'm not some cheerleader. I'm not all rah-rah-rah. You know?"

"Look, let's make a deal," Ginny tried a ~~third~~ **fourth** *{count carefully and you'll see it's fourth, and besides, somehow, "fourth" is funnier, we think}* time.

"Cheerleaders hold a tryout. You get to decide the categories—dance, endurance, stunts, whatever. But the cheerleaders act as judges. So, that person we pick gets to be your

substitute when you can't go to a game. And in exchange,—the cheerleaders will put Opie the Octopus at the top of a stunt, just for you.”

Justin grinned. “Nahhh.” *{Plus, he likes being a jerk.}*

“Think about it.” Ginny smiled sweetly. “It would be pretty cool, right? Top of the pyramid, standing on the shoulders of two of us cheerleaders?”

“That, that would make an awesome photo.” He waved an arm into his dorm room. Above the dirty floor and cluttered desk were framed photos of various athletes and public figures. “There’s a photo contest on the Internet I’d like to enter. Opie up that high—that could be a winner.” *{We like the believable justification for his change of mind.}*

“So you’ll do it? Give permission for the tryouts for a substitute Opie and join the cheerleaders for one big stunt?”

“Okay, it’s fine if you want to do the tryouts. Just don’t expect me to help out.”

That would be the day. ~~Ginny tensed,~~ “And the stunt? Come on, wouldn’t that be the coolest thing any mascot has ever done?”

Justin tilted his shaggy head, thinking about it, or perhaps picturing himself as Opie on top of the stunt. “Nahhh. Too dangerous. I’d fall and break my neck. Then I couldn’t be Opie anymore.”

Ginny brightened. “Justin, that’s why we practice. We’re very safety minded—we rehearse each stunt, safety mats on the ground, spotters to catch you before you hit the mats. We’re professionals.” She watched Justin twist his lips and shake his head slightly. “Hey, nobody on my team ever gets hurt.”

“Yeah, but I’m not really on your team, am I?” *{Oh ho! Perhaps on top of being a jerk, he’s jealous and/or feels left out!}*

Ginny’s smile stiffened. “The school needs an understudy mascot. And I want you to feel like you’re part of the team. We’ll hoist you on a pyramid. It’s no big deal—but it’ll look really cool. Just come to a few practices and you’ll see it’s perfectly safe. You’re in good hands.”

Justin laughed slightly. “That’s funny, because an octopus has eight hands.”

Ginny tried to plaster a polite smile on her face. ~~“I know. That’s why I said it.”~~

~~True to his word,~~ *{We don’t think he ever gave his word. Plus, that phrase seems a bit like authorial intrusion to us.}* Justin showed up to the next three practices. Ginny suggested he try the stunt without the costume. The first time the cheerleaders built the pyramid for Justin to mount, he couldn’t stop laughing and wound up breaking the pyramid apart ~~when he’d only~~ **before he’d** climbed past the base level’s shoulders. After a few more failed attempts, Justin promised to be back the next day.

“I have never met someone with so little sense of balance,” whined *{are you sure you want “whined”? Bethany thinks the word works, and I don’t, but it’s obviously debatable}* one cheerleader, rubbing her shoulder, which still carried the imprint of Justin’s sneaker.

“Balance? What about coordination? He may have eight hands, but he’s all thumbs,” griped another girl.

“He may be skinny, but he’s heavy,” *{the last line of dialogue also started with “He may”. How about, “And he’s real heavy for such a skinny guy” or something?}*

added one of the guys who had tried to help lift Justin up the back of the pyramid.

“We just have to heft him up there one time, at one game,” Ginny assured the squad, “and then we’re done with him.”

“No, we still have to put up with him for the rest of his senior year,” replied the girl with the bruised shoulder. “Think about it. So we find him a substitute Opie. So what? Justin is such a slacker he won’t remember to call the substitute and tell him which games to attend or give him the costume or whatever.”

“This is going to work,” Ginny ~~soothed~~ **told** her squad *{...while feeling something}*. “Have I ever let ~~the squad~~ **you** down?”

~~The tryouts were scheduled, a whopping~~ **Seventy**-three students **showed up for the tryouts**. ~~True to their word,~~ **The** cheerleaders took care of everything—advertising ~~the tryouts~~, reserving the gymnasium, coaching the applicants through what would and would not be considered acceptable mascot behavior. Justin sat on a metal folding chair to one side of the judges’ table and watched the proceedings. *{I personally would add a bit more description here. “proceedings with all the enthusiasm of...” or “proceedings like a...”}*

“Man, I’m glad I didn’t have to try out,” he remarked to the male cheerleader next to him. “I never would have had a chance.”

“Yeah.—We know,” the cheerleader ~~said~~ **replied** ~~shortly~~.

~~But~~ Justin didn't catch the slight. He watched applicant forty-two trot into the gymnasium. Dressed in the costume, they all looked alike, but Justin enjoyed guessing which *{which what? which number, or which candidate?}* would be his substitute.

When Ginny turned on the dance music, Opie trotted across the gym, dancing with all eight legs. He turned an eight-legged cartwheel, and then popped upright and waved all eight arms to the imaginary crowd. A few of the cheerleaders gasped and clapped.

"This is what we're looking for," Ginny murmured loudly. Her peers jotted their scores on their tally sheets and smiled at each other as contestant forty-two returned to the locker room to hand off the costume.

"Who was that?" one of the cheerleaders asked, bending over the judging table so he could see Ginny.

"I think I know, but everyone's anonymous in costume—at least till tryouts are over." Ginny smugly penciled a smiley face onto applicant forty-two's score card.

Quickly the others guessed, "Is that your sorority sister? Is that Susan? Why didn't she try out to be a cheerleader?"

Pretending to resist the questions, Ginny sighed, "Well, I don't know who that was, of course, so I don't know if number forty-two was Susan or not. She did cheer in middle school but was strictly into dance and gymnastics—no cheer—throughout high school."

"But why would she want to be the mascot?" pressed the guy next to Justin.

"Thompson University doesn't have a dance team. And have you seen the gymnastics group? Amateur. Very amateur." Ginny tilted her chair back and gazed toward Justin. "I think you can leave now if you want."

Justin snorted. “Your sorority sister? I thought this was a real tryout, what a joke. When you said it was all about school spirit, I believed you.” *{I see his point, but she did a great job being Opie. It’s not like Ginny’s rigging the event so her best friend, who sucks, wins it. Her best friend is also the best person anyone’s seen so far. Justin’s acting like he thinks Ginny cheated. Perhaps he could point out there was little value in having the 71 other contestants when Susan’s so clearly the best choice.}*

Ginny stood and yelled back, “It is totally about school spirit. You wouldn’t understand. You are a joke. A real joke. You don’t do anything. Opie the stoner mascot. *{I love that line!}* I’m glad you don’t go to the games, because now we’re going to have a real mascot, a professional, a part of the team!” The gym door squeaked open as contestant number forty-three made his entrance—waving Opie’s six upper arms excitedly—but the cheerleaders’ eyes were all on Ginny and Justin.

“Whatever.” Justin’s chair fell over as he twisted away from the table and strode toward the exit ~~door~~. *{We can guess it’s a door.}*

Ginny ~~watched with smug satisfaction then~~ raced after him. *{Why? Does she feel bad for some reason? This action needs explanation, we think.}* “Wait! Justin, wait!”

“What?”

“I’m sorry. Look, I didn’t mean it that way.”

Justin rolled his eyes. “Ginny, I think you’ve got too much ‘school spirit.’”

“Yeah, uh, maybe. Look, no hard feelings. You said we could have a tryout, and now you’ve got a substitute Opie. Susan, or whoever gets the highest score, ~~you can call Susan to~~ **will** sub for you anytime you don’t want to go to a game. It’s a win-win, right?”

“Whatever.”

“Please, don’t be like that. We still owe you. You’ll be at the basketball game this Friday, right?”

“Why?”

“Opie’s going to be the top of the pyramid for the first timeout. You said it would be a prize photo.”

“Yeah.” Justin softened. “It’d be one awesome photo.”

“Game starts at 7 P.M. You going to make it?”

Justin grinned. “Cool.”

“What if the slacker *{that phrase has been used already. How about, “El Slacko” or something?}* doesn’t show up?” one cheerleader asked ~~the others~~.

“He will.” Ginny glanced at the clock—ten minutes till game time. “And if he doesn’t, replace the stunt with dance routine number four. Everyone got that?”

~~The teammates nodded. One pointed over Ginny’s shoulder,~~ **One of her teammates pointed.** “He’s here!”

Justin ambled through the gymnasium door, a dirty laundry bag strung over his shoulder. When he saw the cheerleaders, he nodded and walked toward them. “Hey.”

“Justin, it’s ten minutes till the game starts. Don’t you think you need to get ready?” ~~Ginny fumed.~~

“Wow, already? Oh, okay. When are you building the pyramid-wall-thing?”

Ginny balled her fists under her poms, restraining herself ~~from yelling at Justin.~~

“The first timeout. The first time you hear the little buzzer sound and the announcer says

‘Timeout,’ go stand in the middle of the court. We’ll drag out the safety mats and build the pyramid and signal you then.”

“Awesome.”

“Yeah, ‘awesome.’” Ginny seethed. “Now go-get-ready.” *{I like the hyphens here.}* She spun Justin around and shoved him towards the locker room.

“So, dance routine number four?” one of the cheerleaders asked hopefully.

Ginny threw her poms at her megaphone, toppling it over. “No, he’s here. We’re doing this.”

The buzzer sounded, the announcer called for the timeout, and the cheerleaders dragged a set of safety mats onto the basketball court. A few spectators got up to visit the concession stands but stayed in place when they saw Opie the Octopus dart across the court toward the cheerleaders.

Ginny guided Opie to his spot as she plastered *{You used “plaster” last time she forced a smile. What else have you got?}* her spirit smile on her face. Then she let one of the male cheerleaders hoist her to position as one of the top girls in the stunt. She glanced down to see if Opie would chicken out. He didn’t. *{How does she know? What does she seem him doing or not doing? Let us see it too and we’ll figure out he didn’t chicken out.}*

The audience followed the purple *{Is lavender really purple? Maybe “light purple”}* and green cartoon character’s ascent to the top of the pyramid. *{Well, they didn’t literally follow him, right? You mean they watched, but you wanted a stronger*

word than watched, which we commend you for. But try describing it another way and you might get a stronger image.} “Climb, climb, climb!” they chanted.

As Opie planted two of his eight feet on the final two cheerleaders’ shoulders, the crowd screamed with delight. And then with horror—as Opie plummeted down the front of the pyramid, past the startled cheerleaders’ noses, and onto the bouncy mats.

“Dismount!” Ginny ordered over the cacophony ~~of noises~~. The cheerleaders leapt safely to the floor in a synchronized flurry of green and purple.

Several rushed to their mascot, ~~not~~ **who lay** ~~un~~moving on the mats. One real arm and two more costumed arms stirred slightly. EMTs raced onto the court and broke through the ring of cheerleaders. “You okay?” “What hurts?” ~~they barked as~~ **They** searched for the costume’s zippers. “~~Help us with this,~~ **How** do you get this off?”

“I don’t know,” a cheerleader panicked. “The zipper’s on the back!”

“We can’t roll him over to find it—into the stretcher, now!” ~~a third EMT yelled.~~

“Here, the mask comes off like this.” ~~A pair of~~ **Thin** hands plucked Opie’s mask out of the fray. Ginny followed the arms and the voice to a short student bending into the mess with a camera dangling around his neck—Justin!

“Ju—what are you doing here? ~~Who’s there?~~” Ginny screeched with a sick turning in her stomach. She looked back to see the EMTs wheeling away the stretcher. “Who was that?” ~~she demanded of Justin.~~

“I can’t believe it! It was just like I warned you.” Justin rushed past the cheerleaders to accompany the EMTs. Ginny ran to keep up. They followed the EMTs to the health room, off the main locker room. Opie’s costume lay limp and empty in a

corner. A petite brunette in purple and green shorts and T-shirt sat crying on an examining table.

Tears swelled in Ginny's eyes as she gasped, "Oh, Susan, what were you doing in the costume?"

"Are you okay?" Justin asked, then he addressed the EMTs, "Is she okay?"

Susan cried and cried as the EMTs bandaged her ankles. "Little lady here sprained both ankles. That was some stupid stunt, putting a mascot up at the top of a jumble of people. Didn't you practice? Didn't you figure it's not safe in a costume?"

Ginny hugged Susan. "I'm so sorry. We'll find a way to make it up to you."

Susan pushed Ginny off. "I don't want to be the mascot anymore. ~~Thanks to that stupid stunt, I won't be able to~~ **I can't even** walk."

"Just for a month or two," an EMT ~~said~~ ~~tried to console her~~. "After that, you can walk and do some light exercise. Of course, you won't be running around in that mascot costume till January at the earliest."

"But that's all of football and basketball seasons!" Susan burst into tears. *{Which makes sense, but it kind of contradicts the "I don't want to be the mascot anymore" above. Contradiction can be a powerful tool for developing character, or building suspense, or even moving the plot forward--it becomes obvious someone's lying, for instance. But here, we can't figure out why Susan's being shown as contradicting herself. It doesn't seem to fit, so it distracted us from the scene's otherwise strong tension.}*

Ginny turned on Justin. "This is all your fault. Why weren't you in the costume?"

“Hey, Ginny, you sound like you almost wanted it to be me who got hurt,” Justin grumbled. *{Is “grumbled” the best verb here? Act out the dialogue between them, aloud, and see how you voice Justin’s line.}*

“No, I didn’t want anyone to get hurt. But you were supposed to be in the costume, not Susan!”

“I was getting my prize photo. See?” Justin held up the camera. “Opie at the top of the pyramid. That’s all I wanted.” He switched on the viewfinder and stabbed *{to us, “stabbed” indicates anger. Is he angry?}* the buttons with his index finger. “See? Prize photo—no, that one’s blurry. There. That one.” Justin stared at the photo on the two-inch screen. Ginny and an EMT stepped closer to look.

The EMT backed up and took another look at Ginny. “What in blazes would make you do that?” he gasped, his eyes fixed on the cheer captain.

Justin enlarged the photo and saw Ginny’s hand pushing Opie the Octopus’s purple leg off her shoulder. He gaped at the cheer captain.

“Maybe I’ve got too much school spirit,” she replied.

{Our problem with the tone of this ending is, it seems right for the last line of a sitcom, but this situation isn’t funny. I think she needs to have a stronger reaction here. Sadder/wiser remorse would end the story well, but I can’t help thinking there’s a stronger ending somewhere and we’re just not seeing it. Ginny tried to physically hurt Justin. That’s downright mean.}

{Maybe that’s the problem. This is a fairly light story up to now, and now we figure out she’s effectively committed second degree assault. What if Opie hadn’t been pushed, and it was just an accident? Or did you want Ginny to come across as this}

mean? We'd love to find a way to keep the ending as you originally wrote it, plot-wise, without ending the story on such a weird tone. But something needs to change and I'm not sure what it is.}

[end]