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SSB-7  
“Harmless Actions”  
**Short Story**  
**Second Prize**  
**Grades 9 & 10**

### Harmless Actions

Six simple, continuous beeps alerted the surgeon at Mountainside Hospital he was needed. Six beeps from his pager meant someone was in a serious accident with a life threatening injury. Over the years, that small irrelevant object saved people lives. Without his black pager, the doctor may not have been able to rescue several victims of shootings, or car accidents. The pager, a diminutive object, looks absolutely inconsequential to an average person the doctor passed. Everyday people saw the pager and didn't take a second glance at it. So when Spencer Manning saw it, he thought nothing of it like everyone else.

Spencer and his friends hopped on the unkempt Chicago subway in the late afternoon. The group was used to getting nervous looks from others as they all wore grungy clothes and scowling looks. Garbage was swept across the ground, carelessly thrown for someone else to pick up. The 15 year old boys were looking for something to cure their boredom, and the leader of their group Eric had suggested pick-pocketing on the underground.

Inside, the subway was crammed with people from business men to beggars. Spencer's fair skin was heated as soon as he stepped on. He blew back his ratty dark hair and removed his sweater, which was at least three sizes too big. The advertisements concealing the walls were too vibrant for such a dark place. One sky blue weight loss centre ad displayed podgy man, pigging out on various junk food made Spencer smirk. To the right of the man was a peek into the future for the guy, an older, obese version of himself. “Think twice about the present, so you don't dread the future.” was written cursively below the illustration. Staring intently at the quote, Spencer did not understand. His life consisted of living in the moment, never second guessing his actions. What's the worst that could happen?

The silence which once existed on the car had immediately been broken by Eric's gang. All four boys rowdily pushed their way through the people in

search of a handle or pole to grasp during the shaky ride. Spencer positioned himself next to Miller, a stocky dark boy who had recently joined in on the groups crimes. Eric made eye contact with Spencer, his crystal blue eyes and light hair appeared perfectly innocent on the outside. Another boy, Vince, and Miller, scratched their heads, secretly telling the others they could not sight a suitable victim. One glance at their gruesome smiles made their history together obvious. Like opening a book and reading away, the sickening smiles practically turned the pages for you.

Spencer scanned the subway from his point of view. He searched for bulky wallets. A burly man stood directly in front of him. Spencer knew his face shined with anxiety once the man shot him a suspicious glance. He forced an unpromising smile to the man, unconvincingly. He glimpsed to his left and saw the never ending list of advertisements. Colourful images of travel websites, liquor stores, and restaurants were all very contrasting to the dingy subway car. Below that were two thirty-something women carrying gym bags next to Eric.

Eric tugged at his ear --- he found something. Spencer didn't need the private signals from Eric, the smug grin on his face proclaimed to the world he had found a prize. Out of his jeans pocket peeked a couple of twenty dollar bills. Spencer wondered who would get off the subway that day, eventually realizing they were short forty dollars. Was it the gym bag girls? Or the mother with her two kids busying playing with a toy car and Barbie? Upon seeing the cherry red toy mustang Spencer smiled. His brother had dreamed of owning that car for sometime now. Spencer didn't doubt him for one second; he always knew he'd be successful. His little brother didn't agree with Spencer on much. Repeatedly telling him swiping things from other people was more than just a harmless action.

As the train halted, Spencer noticed a tiny black pager clipped loosely on a man's belt. The man stood up, politely pardoning himself through the crowd and heading for the doors. Spencer saw his chance. The fifty or so year man was going to parade right past him. The thrill of the situation sent chills crawling down Spencer's back. The worn lights were flickering, and wheels decreasing speed. The man was 4 feet away, three feet, two feet until he faced Spencer at the door. Thinking quickly, Spencer collided with the person and the train swayed other passengers. Spencer's pulse shot up, his palms became sweaty. His breathing was shakier than leaves in the wind. He dastardly unhooked the pager from his belt. He tossed it in his own

pocket and apologized to the man. Spencer's hands shook as he grasped the pole again. The man thought nothing of the act, assuming the daft cars had thrown Spencer right off his feet. He awaited the dingy subway doors to open and step onto the platform. Vanishing within the crowds of riders.

When he finally looked up, the eight eyes of his friends were glaring down at him. A long calming breath released from his lips as he pulled one quick tug on his earlobe. He saw the others smirk. Now they wait. Wait three more stops until they would escape the tunnels of the underground. Three more sets of screeching wheels on rickety tracks. The doors opened to what seemed wider than the sea, and the boys leaped off the subway car with newly collected items.

The teenagers laughed with glee, the thrill of being rebellious had not yet worn off. As they stepped out into the sunlight of the busy street, Spencer felt the pager beep, beep, beep six times. He searched for the power button, and he cut off the almost lifeless person in need. The excitement and pride created by the object was the only thing Spencer wanted.

After saying bye to his friends, Spencer nonchalantly shuffled home, dragging his once white shoes across the pavement. He arrived at the end of his street, something seemed different about his house. A place usually welcoming was now dull and silenced. The street lights turned on as he walked up his drive way and through the front door.

As soon as he stepped in the door, a most horrible feeling swept over Spencer. His stomach was twisting like a captured fish, squirming desperately to escape. He heard soft sobs coming from his kitchen. The only room in the house lit.

“Mom?” Spencer practically whispered. As he edged closer to his crying mother, he saw the members of his extended family, gathered around his mother. Uncles, aunts, grandparents and cousins all looked at Spencer sympathetically as he entered the chilly room. She stood up as soon as she saw her son. Spencer sat down on the wooden chair across from his relatives, contemplating the reasons for the gathering. He checked to make sure all his grandparents were there ; did one of them get sick? He then realized who was missing, and his stomach stopped squirming and dropped dead. Mrs. Manning pushed her long dark hair over her shoulders. She

looked directly into Spencer's eyes, and Spencer suddenly felt like nothing else mattered.

The unbreakable fix on his mother made him even more nervous. She gently held his hand and told him there had been an accident. The feeling that erupted inside of him was unbearable, his insides were slowly melting away to nothing. His mother continued, she tells him that his little brother was in a car crash on his way home from baseball. When they got him to the hospital, surgery was required immediately but the doctor on call had not answered his pager. By the time the next doctor had arrived it was too late.