

# The Tail

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School was ending for the year, and Tasha was looking forward to summer vacation. But as she was washing the last supper dish, her mother gave her the bad news. Ma was going back to her job. And, because Tasha was thirteen, her mother thought it was time for her to help out with family responsibilities. Ma wanted her to spend each summer day watching Junior. Suddenly it looked like the worst summer of Tasha's life.



"Oh, no!" I broke the dish with a crash.  
"Not that, Mama." Junior is my seven-year-old brother and has been following me like a tail ever since he learned how to walk. And to make matters worse, there are no kids Junior's age on our block. Everyone is either older or younger than he is.



But Ma had made up her mind. Before she left for work the next morning, she set out the rules—lots of them. Tasha couldn't leave the block. She couldn't have any company, not even her best friend Naomi. She wasn't allowed to let Junior hike in the park, and she had to make him lunch. Ma would call at lunchtime to make sure they were eating. Then Ma told Junior to behave himself. Of course, he promised that he'd do whatever Tasha said.

Ma left, and Junior started bothering Tasha. Then her friend Naomi called. Tasha told Junior to grab his comic books and checkers game. Then they ran down the stairs of their apartment building and met Naomi, who was sitting on the front steps.



## TAKE NOTES

### Activate Prior Knowledge

Describe how you feel when you are told that you must do something you do not want to do.

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### Literary Analysis

**Indirect characterization** is what writers use to show what characters are like through what they think, say, and do. Writers use **direct characterization** to say what a character is like. Which does the writer use in the underlined sentences? How do you know?

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### Reading Check

Why does Tasha have to watch her younger brother? Circle the answer in the story.

## TAKE NOTES

### Stop to Reflect

Why is Junior upset that they are going across the street to the playground?

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### Literary Analysis

What **character** trait does Tasha show by deciding to go to the playground? Explain your response.

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### Reading Skill

Read the bracketed paragraph. What can you **infer** are Tasha's feelings as the girls begin to jump? Circle the sentence that supports your answer.

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"You ready for double-dutch practice?" she asked. "Yvonne and Keisha are going to meet us in the playground."

"Mama said we have to stay on the block," Junior answered before I could even open my mouth.

"No one's talking to you, Junior." I pulled Naomi up off the stoop. "I promised my mother we'd stay on the block, but the playground is just across the street. I can see the block from there."

"It's still not the block," Junior mumbled as we raced across the street.



The playground where they jumped rope was near the entrance to the park. Tasha really wanted to go. Ma had said not to leave the block, but after all, they weren't going very far. Tasha promised Junior that she would do him a favor if he didn't tell Ma.



Keisha and Yvonne turned and Naomi and I jumped together, practicing a new routine. We were so good that some of the boys in the stickball game watched us. A few elderly people stopped to look at us too. We had an audience, so I really showed off—spinning and doing a lot of fancy footwork.

Suddenly Junior jumped in the ropes with us and people laughed and clapped.

"Junior!" I screamed. "Get out of here!"

"Remember, your job is to watch me." He grinned. My foot slipped and all three of us got tangled in the ropes and fell.

"Your feet are too big!" Junior yelled.

Everybody roared. I was too embarrassed. I tried to grab him, but he got away from me.

### Vocabulary Development

**routine** (roo TEEN) *n.* a part of a work out or performance

“Get lost,” I hollered after him as he ran toward the swings.

I tried to forget how stupid I must’ve looked and went back to the ropes. I don’t know how long we’d been jumping when suddenly a little kid ran by us yelling, “There’s a wild dog loose up there!” He pointed to the steps that led deep inside the park.



For a long time, people had claimed that wild dogs lived in the park, but no one had ever seen one. So Tasha and Naomi kept jumping. Then they noticed that kids were leaving. They were scared of the dogs. Suddenly Tasha realized that Junior was missing. She shouted for him, but there was no answer. The girls dashed all over the neighborhood, looking for Junior and calling him. Now Tasha was getting really scared.

The girls went back to the playground. Then Tasha ran on to the entrance of the park. Naomi told her not to go in there because the wild dogs might get her.



I turned around. “If you’re scared, don’t come. Junior’s my only baby brother. Dear God,” I said out loud, “please let me find him. I will play any kind of game he wants. I’ll never yell at him again. I promise never to be mean to him again in my life!”



Naomi went with Tasha. Every time they heard a noise, they jumped. Tasha kept calling for Junior and getting more and more scared. Then the girls thought they saw a huge animal, like a bear or something, ahead on the path. The girls screamed, but it turned out to be just a dead tree trunk. However, next to it, Tasha saw one of Junior’s comic books. She started to cry. What if a wild dog had torn him apart?



## TAKE NOTES

### Reading Skill

What details in the bracketed passage can you use to **infer** that Tasha is not worried about the wild dogs?

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### Read Fluently

Prefixes come at the beginning of words. They can be used to change the meaning of the original word. Circle the word in the underlined sentence that has a prefix that means “not.” Write another word that you know that uses the same prefix.

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### Literary Analysis

How does Tasha feel when she finds Junior’s comic book?

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Underline the sentence that uses **indirect characterization** to show how she feels.

## TAKE NOTES

### Literary Analysis

What does Junior's reaction in the first bracketed passage show about his character?

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Is this **direct** or **indirect characterization**? Explain.

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### Reading Skill

Read the second bracketed paragraph. You can make an **inference** about Junior from his words and actions. What does Junior think the dog can do?

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Underline the details that support your answer.

### Reading Check

What does Junior remind Tasha that she promised to do? Circle the answer.

Suddenly, there was an unbelievable growl. My legs turned to air as I flew down the steps. Naomi was ahead of me. Her two braids stuck out like propellers. My feet didn't even touch the ground. We screamed all the way down the steps. I tripped on the last step and was sprawled out on the ground. Two women passing by bent over me. "Child, are you hurt?" one of them asked.

Then I heard a familiar laugh above me and looked up into Junior's dimpled face. He laughed so hard, he held his stomach with one hand. His checkers game was in the other. A little tan, mangy dog stood next to him, wagging its tail.

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Tasha was angry, but Junior just kept laughing, and the little dog growled at Tasha. Then Junior said something that really made her mad.

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"Me and Thunder hid in the bushes. We followed you." He continued laughing. Then he turned to the dog. "Thunder, didn't Tasha look funny holding that stick like she was going to beat up the tree trunk?"

I put my hands around Junior's neck. "This is the end of the tail," I said.

Junior grinned. "You promised. 'I'll play any game he wants. I'll never yell at him again. I promise never to be mean to him again in my life.' "

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Naomi started laughing too, because the dog was so little. Was this the animal that everyone was afraid of? Junior said that

### Vocabulary Development

**propellers** (pruh PEL erz) *n.* pieces of equipment that spin around to make a ship or an airplane move

**mangy** (MAYN jee) *adj.* having a skin condition that makes animals lose fur

## TAKE NOTES

Thunder was his trusted guard. He wasn't wild; he just needed a friend. Then Tasha checked her watch and saw that it was almost time for Ma to call them at the apartment. They raced home, and Thunder followed them. The phone rang, and it was Ma. Tasha told her that everything was just fine.



Well, the summer didn't turn out to be so terrible after all. My parents got Thunder cleaned up and let Junior keep him for a pet.



Tasha didn't leave the block again. She and Naomi practiced double-dutch jumping on the sidewalk in front of the apartment building. Tasha played with Junior too. He wasn't such a pest any more, thanks to Thunder.



. . . We won the double-dutch contest. And Junior never told my parents that I'd lost him. I found out that you never miss a tail until you almost lose it.

### Reading Check

Does Junior tell their mother about the incident in the park? Underline the text that supports your answer.

### Literary Analysis

How does Tasha's **character** change by the end of the story?

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## The Tail

1. **Analyze Cause and Effect:** What happens that makes Junior disappear?

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2. **Interpret:** Tasha calls Junior a “tail.” Later she says, “I found out that you never miss a tail until you almost lose it.” What does Tasha mean by this?

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3. **Reading Skill:** You use details in a story to **make inferences**, or guesses. Use this chart to list details that helped you make an inference about Tasha. One example is provided. Give one more example.

Details	Inference
Tasha tells Naomi, “If you’re scared, don’t come. Junior’s my only baby brother.”	Tasha is worried. She is determined to find Junior, with or without Naomi’s help.

4. **Literary Analysis: Direct characterization** is what a writer says about a character. List two examples of direct characterization from the story.

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