

Mr. Pockets

and other
unsettling
and
unbelievable
stories



Christopher
Millin

Mr. Pockets

and other unsettling and unbelievable stories

Also By Christopher Millin

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Mr. Pockets

and other unsettling and unbelievable stories

by
Christopher Millin

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The Nutritional Value of Homework

Jimmy Fitz thought, the last ten minutes are always the longest. He also thought, why on Earth do they still keep these dumb clocks from the middle ages in our classroom? If I wasn't able to see the second hand ticking, time would move sooooo much faster. But that second hand had fingers on it, and they were all wrapped around Jimmy's eyes, keeping him focused on just how s l o w l y time was moving.

His last name was Fitz, but Jimmy was famous for stretching the truth, so his classmates started calling him Fibs early in the third grade. At first the name offended him, but he couldn't deny it was a misleading name. He *did* like to exaggerate the mundane events of day-to-day life. Eventually, he warmed up to the name. And after that, he insisted everyone call him Fibs.

Ms. Madeleine paced back and forth at the front of the classroom rambling on about integers and obtuse angles. It was a hard topic to grasp with mere seconds left in the school day. Fibs' attention was on that clock hand. And only on that clock hand. The only math he was thinking about was the number of ticks left before the end-of-the-day bell rang. And with only sixty of those ticks left, he was in countdown mode.

“Four...Three...Two...One,” he whispered into the sound of the ringing bell. “And I’m outta here!”

Fibs joined the throng of classmates making their way to the coatroom. Above the rumbling of eager feet, of jackets being put on, of backpacks being zipped up, he heard, “Oh Mr. Fitz, could you please stay put for a few minutes? We need to talk.”

Ms. Madeleine’s voice had a sprinkling of frustration mixed in with it. Not to mention she used Fibs’ real last name. It was never a good sign being eleven years old and having any type of authority figure address you as “Mr.”. For some reason, Fibs had heard the combination of “Mr.” and “Fitz” more often from these authority figures than he did his real name. And it usually had something to do with one of his fibs.

The kids in his class filed out of the door en route to their afternoon snacks and video games and piano lessons.

The minute hand on the clock was at ten after the hour when Fibs and Ms. Madeleine were the only ones left in the classroom. “Have a seat,” she said, motioning Fibs toward the wood chair in front of her desk.

“Is something wrong?” Fibs asked when he was seated.

Ms. Madeleine sat across the desk from him and placed her elbows on her desk. Then she lowered her chin onto her closed fist and said, “Well, yes there is Jimmy. Yes there is.”

She stared at him for almost thirty ticks of the clock’s second hand. In complete silence. It was unnerving, because Fibs didn’t have a clue about what could be wrong.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Madeleine,” he said when he couldn’t take it any longer. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“Maybe it’s more about what I want you to see,” she said. “Take a look at the wall behind me. Just under the periodic table. And look at the blackboard above the spelling test words. Above the word ‘Tribulation.’ And over there.” She pointed at the classroom’s fish tank filled with guppies and tetras. “Not to mention there. There. And there.”

Fibs smirked. "Looks like someone was shooting spitwads around the classroom, Ms. Madeleine."

"Someone indeed," Ms. Madeleine said.

"You don't think it was me, do you?" Fibs said.

"No, I don't think it was you..."

"Pheww, that's good," he said cutting her off.

"No, Jimmy, I know it was you."

Fibs pretended to be shocked. "I would never do such a thing," he said.

"I'll tell you what, Jimmy," Ms. Madeleine said. "If you stand up and empty out your pockets onto my desk and there isn't some sort of device in there that can shoot a spitwad... well then, I'll say sorry and we can forget this little meeting ever took place."

"Do you have a warrant?" Fibs said and chuckled.

"That's the type of response a guilty person would have."

"Ms. Madeleine, I have a lot of stuff in my pockets. There's a real good chance there's something in there that could shoot a goobered up piece of paper across the room. I think this is entrapment."

"Jimmy, you're one of the smartest kids in this class. Why do you insist on doing things that aren't smart? I saw you out of the corner of my eye shooting that last one. The one on the map of North America, just above Baltimore."

"You must be mistaken, Ms. Madeleine. You see, I crossed paths with a gorilla that escaped from the zoo this morning when I was on my way to school. I saw all the zoo workers running after the gorilla and they were yelling at me to stop him. So I stepped into his path and you know what? He ran right over me. And his stinky, hairy foot...it stepped on my neck and then on my chest. Look," he said and blew out a soft breath. "That's all the power I have in my blow. There's just no way I could shoot a spitwad that far."

"Mmm Hmm," Ms. Madeleine said. "Funny I didn't hear about that gorilla on the news. It would be a great story if it

was true. Because it's not true, this is what's going to happen, Jimmy. You're going to empty your pockets on my desk and we're going to see what's in there. And I don't need a warrant for that because I've got approval from the only people that matter in this case: your parents. You see, I emailed them at lunch and they responded right away. When that straw or pen case or whatever it is you used as a launching device is revealed, we'll move forward with cleaning up the mess you made in this classroom. Sound good? And then after every spitwad is removed, we'll talk about what I want you to do for homework tonight, so your punishment doesn't have to continue on for the next fifteen years."

"Homework!" Fibs said. "But nobody else got any homework."

"No. But nobody else plastered the classroom walls with saliva-soaked paper balls."

Fibs knew his story about the gorilla was a weak one, but he didn't have enough time to flesh it out. He really thought he had gotten away with his assault on the classroom and would be at home by now, in the clear. He also couldn't believe his parents would sell him out so easily. He slowly stood up and shoved his hands in his pockets. One by one, he removed each item and placed it on Ms. Madeleine's desk: an eraser shaped like a U.F.O., a penny with a hole in it, a marble-sized ball of bellybutton lint, a marble, fake dog poo, three raisins, an almond and lastly, a crumpled-up plastic straw.

The assignment due the next morning was going to be super easy compared to the cleaning. It took Fibs almost an hour to find each spitwad and extract it from the surface it had dried to. Wet paper was cement-like when it dried, so Fibs had to use a putty knife to scrape it off. Then he had to pick at the remnants with his finger nails. He wasn't allowed to

leave until every single spitwad was gone. His fingers still hurt when he quietly snuck into his home.

“What’s the assignment?”

It was his mother speaking from the kitchen. Her mother’s sense was stronger than usual. Most days he was able to slip right on by and get into his room without any interaction.

“Jimmy Fitz, you march yourself into this kitchen and you tell me exactly what you have to do for Ms. Madeleine.”

Fibs kicked off his sneakers and shuffled along the carpet. Maybe, he thought, if I build up a big enough electrical charge, I can zap a light switch and kill the power to the house. Then I can make my escape under the coat of darkness. It was a great plan, except for the fact the sun was still up. He touched the light switch next to the kitchen doorway anyway. A blue zap of electricity shot out from his finger and his right eye twitched. “Mom, you sold me out,” he said as he stepped into the kitchen. “I’m your only son. How could you do such a thing?”

She was sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of tea in her hand. “Jimmy,” she said, “you have to stop fibbing. It’s a bad habit that can lead to bad endings. Because you fib so much, one day you may be telling the truth and you won’t be believed. We need to nip this bad habit in the bud now so cleaning up after class doesn’t one day turn into tidying up a prison cell.”

“Mom! I’m not going to jail for fibbing. That’s just silly.”

“Hmmm,” she said and took a sip of her tea. “Now tell me what Ms. Madeleine assigned you. Because I want you to go straight to your room and complete it before you do anything else this evening.”

“Have you ever heard of a fable called *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*?”

His mom smiled and said, “Why yes I have. It’s one of Aesop’s fables. It’s the reason I just said that a bad habit like fibbing can lead to bad endings.”

“Aesop, that’s the name I couldn’t remember. Ms. Madeleine said I was to find the fable online and read it and write five hundred words comparing the boy in the fable to me.”

Fibs’ mom chuckled and said, “Well, it sounds like we’re all on the same page here. Better get to it, young man. And no video games while you’re on the Internet. I’ll know. You know I’ll know.”

“Yes, Mom.”

Fibs trudged his way up to his room and powered up his computer. He found the fable online quickly and smiled. It was one of the shortest stories he’d ever seen, barely longer than a paragraph itself. He’d get this homework done lickety split and be on to regular evening activities in no time. Nothing more than a glitch in the evening, he thought.

Ms. Madeleine’s instructions were very clear. “Tomorrow morning, when the bell rings for the start of the school day,” she had said, “a hand-written comparison between the boy in the fable and you, Jimmy Fitz, is to be on my desk.” Fibs was to compare similar traits and explain how the moral of the fable could relate to his own actions. “If this homework isn’t on my desk by the time the bell stops ringing,” she continued to say, “you will be given a month of after-school detention, which will include cleaning other kids’ spitwads off of classroom walls all throughout the school.”

Fibs was nothing like the boy in the fable. First of all, he wasn’t a shepherd. In fact, he’d never even seen a real sheep in his life. The only commonality between the two of them was that they were boys. As Fibs read the fable over and over again, he began to realize his regular evening activities may, in fact, be delayed until tomorrow. He started writing his comparison three times and all three times he crumpled the paper up and threw it across his room.

The last of the daylight slipped away and a giant full moon rose up above the trees in the small forest behind his backyard.

The boy in Aesop's fable was lonely and looking for a little excitement. He cried "Wolf!" a couple of times, fooling the people in his village. Fibs was never lonely. He was constantly excited. He tapped his fingers on his desk and looked out his window at the moon. Clouds floated by in front of it. "It really is kind of a spooky sight," he mumbled.

He read the fable again. If there was one comparison he could make, it was between the wise man of the village at the end of the fable and his mother. They basically said the same thing. Except the wise man used the word 'liar' and Fibs refused to call himself that. Fibbing was much more harmless than lying. It wasn't intended to hurt or deceive so it didn't make you that bad of a person. "Lying causes crying," he'd sing, "but fibbing is just a bit of fun!"

The clock in the bottom corner of his monitor read 9:13pm when he wrote the last word in his assignment.

The boy in the fable and Fibs liked to tell stories. The boy did it to quell his loneliness and have a little excitement. Fibs did it...to prepare himself for a career as a writer. It was a perfect answer. The boy's stories got his flock of sheep eaten. Fibs stories would get him lots of money and fame. If anything, the boy and Fibs were complete opposites. It was probably not what Ms. Madeleine wanted to hear, but it was a comparison and it did address the possible results of his actions. He dotted the period at the end of the last sentence and dropped his pen. "Done," he said.

Fibs opened his bedroom window a crack to let some fresh air into his room. As he walked away, a howl echoed through the backyard. It was clearly a wolf's howl, but there were no wolves anywhere in his town. There were lots of dogs that escaped backyards and open front doors. There were lots of teenagers that liked to be loud and howl at other teenagers. But there were definitely no wolves.

Having just read about wolves for hours and hours, he was sure his imagination was playing tricks on him. And just

after thinking that, a large shadow dove into a bush along the backyard's back fence.

"There's somebody in our backyard," Fibs said, then said much louder, "Mom! Dad! There's somebody in our backyard!" He ran into the hallway and banged on his parents' bedroom door. "There's somebody in the yard! Wake up!"

"Darn-it, son, go back to bed," his dad said groggily from behind the closed door.

Geesh! Why did his parents have to go to bed so early? He wondered if all of his classmates' parents went to bed as early as his. If that's what parents did, he never wanted to have kids of his own. All the good stuff happens late at night. Or so he believed. He banged on his parent's bedroom door again. "Really, you have to believe me. I saw someone in our backyard."

"Jimmy, please stop it with the stories and go to bed," his mother said.

Fibs banged on their bedroom door once more, but this time in frustration.

He ran down to the kitchen and snuck up to the back door. It had a window in it that looked out over the backyard. Something had set off the motion-activated light above the door, so he could now see all the way to the bushes along the back fence. The only time the motion-activated light went on was if there was a heavy wind and a plastic bag or newspaper or some leaves blew by it. But the night was still. Something else had crossed the light's path.

A fast, rhythmic banging sound filled the kitchen. It was coming from all around him. From inside of him. Fibs realized it was his heart beating louder and faster. He rarely got nervous or scared, but he was suddenly filled with fear. The motion-activated light turned off leaving Fibs in pitch-black darkness.

"There's nobody out there," Fibs said. "It's all in my head."

He turned to run and tripped himself on his own crisscrossed legs. The werewolf took another few steps back, then ran full speed at the door. It smashed through the window and sent a storm of broken glass through the kitchen. Fibs covered his head as the glass rained down on him. The werewolf slid across the floor and came to a stop right next to Fibs. He could now see that the werewolf was three, maybe four times his size. It smelled like milk left out on the counter for eight days. Or like a tipped-over outhouse with a hint of grass.

Fibs jumped up off the floor intending to run away as fast as he could, but the werewolf wrapped its hand around his leg. Its claws easily sliced through his pajama bottoms and dug into his flesh.

The pain was like the pain he had felt when he stepped on a rusty nail at summer camp last year. It was like fire he couldn't extinguish was being held against his skin. It brought tears to his eyes, but there wasn't a second he could give into it.

The motion-activated light switched off leaving Fibs and the werewolf in darkness. The only advantage he had over the hulking beast was his familiarity with his surroundings. He fought through the pain burning up his leg and reached out for a flower pot on the windowsill above the kitchen sink. He remembered his dad laughing and telling him, "What's growing in this pot is good at keeping away evil spirits. So always know where it is. Last thing you want to be dealing with is a ghost with a chip on its shoulder." The plant had several funny names depending on where it was found in the world. In some places it was called mugwort. While in other places it was called wormwood. In Fibs' hometown, it was called white sage.

The werewolf wasn't a spirit, but Fibs knew it was pure evil.

With the tip of his index finger he pulled the flower pot

close enough to get a hold of it with both hands. When he had a good hold on it, he dropped it on the werewolf's head with full force. The creature yelped and loosened its grip. Fibs slipped away, but not before the werewolf's claw sliced him across his foot.

Fibs ran through the house crying and yelling, "Hellllllp! Werewolf!"

He reached his parents door and banged on it frantically.

"Mom! Dad!" he yelled. "Wake up! There's a werewolf in the house!"

His dad sleepily said, "If that's your excuse for breaking something down there, you're going to have to try a little harder."

"Whatever you broke better be cleaned up by morning," his mother said.

"What's wrong with you two?" Fibs said and banged on their door.

"Go to bed!" his parents said in unison.

The stairs at the end of the hallway creaked. Guttural growls reverberated off the walls. The white sage must have done something, because the werewolf was holding the handrail and slowly walking up the stairs. Its slow pace didn't make it any less scary. Fibs ran to his bedroom and slammed the door shut. He pushed his dresser against the door and crawled underneath his desk.

The werewolf hit the door, pushing the the dresser forward a few inches. Its snout pushed through the crack between the door and the dresser. It growled and snarled. Specks of werewolf snot exploded from its snout and sprinkled down over the tips of Fibs' bloody toes. The werewolf snarled again and retreated. A few seconds later it hit the door with enough force to move the dresser even more out of the way. It shimmied through the opening and into Fibs' bedroom.

Fibs screamed.

“Keep it down in there!” Fibs’ dad shouted from down the hallway.

Snarling. Foaming at the mouth. Lit only by the full moon, the werewolf moved slowly, predator-like toward Fibs. He crawled as far back as he could under the desk, shuffling himself up against his wall. But it was a futile response. The werewolf’s massive arms could reach him no problem. He was utterly alone in the world at that moment.

How, he wondered, could his parents not believe him? How could they sleep through such a racket?

The werewolf arched its back and put its arms out in front of it. It was about to pounce and all Fibs could do was wait for the pain to kick in. He’d already felt the sharpness of its claws. He couldn’t imagine what its fangs might feel like piercing his skin.

Then he had a thought.

Maybe I am just like that boy in the fable. Maybe, I am a liar. And that’s what’s got me into this. “I’ll never tell a lie again,” he said out loud. “I’ll never tell a lie again.”

It was all he could think of doing in the situation. “I’ll never tell a lie again.”

The werewolf growled and leapt. Fibs closed his eyes. But he didn’t feel anything. He heard banging and shuffling sounds on the desk above him. But he still felt nothing. He opened one eye and saw the werewolf’s body from its waste down. Papers from the desktop floated down onto the floor. Pens and pencils rolled off the desk. The computer monitor crashed next to him.

He opened his other eye. The werewolf bent down and picked up some of the paper on the ground. It put the paper in its mouth. Its fangs sparkled from the moonlight as they shredded the paper into tiny pieces.

“Nooooooooo!!!!” Fibs cried. “My homework!”

When the werewolf finished making its mess and was full on Fibs’ homework, it howled at the moon and ran out of

Fibs' room. Fibs heard it run down the stairs and across the broken glass on the kitchen floor.

Then he heard nothing more.

“What on Earth!!!”

Fibs' eyes popped open when his mom's voice rang through the house. When it rang through his dreams about werewolves and terrible school assignments. He was under his desk. His head ached and his pants were sticky against his leg. The bottoms of his feet tingled painfully, like they were being pricked by dozens of safety pins. He looked around at the mess on the floor. At the dresser against the pushed open bedroom door.

“It was all real,” he said.

His mom appeared in his room. “Jimmy, what on Earth happened in here last night? The house is an absolute disaster. Why is the window in the back door shattered? And why are you under your desk? What is going on?”

Fibs crawled out from under his desk and gave his head a shake. “Mom, you wouldn't believe me if I told you?”

“Try me, young man.”

“It was a werewolf. It broke in last night and it attacked me. I was pleading with you and dad to come out and help me. But you never did.”

Fibs' mom shook her head. “Jimmy, are you ever going to be honest with me?”

“But mom, it's the truth! And worst of all...the werewolf ate my assignment for Ms. Madeleine. I'm going to be in so much trouble.”

“Well, that's the truth,” she said and walked away.

Fibs didn't have the energy to change his clothes or brush his hair or eat breakfast or face his mother again. He wrapped his feet in gauze, slipped on his sneakers and started his walk

to school. The limp caused by the deep scratches on his leg and the cuts on the bottom of his feet made the walk ten times longer than it usually was. He left home early enough, though, that he got to his classroom just as the morning bell was ringing. His classmates saw him and started whispering to each other about what could have possibly happened. They were anticipating a great story. It's what Fibs did best.

"I'm looking at my desk, Mr. Fitz," Ms. Madeleine said, "and I can't help but notice that the homework I assigned you isn't lying on top of it."

"I ummm," Fibs hesitantly said and looked out at his classmates. Their ears and eyes were on him. They were ready to pounce on his words and eat them up. "I ummm...I fought off a werewolf, but in the process, it ate my homework."

The class howled with laughter. They were all wolves, but a different type.

Ms. Madeleine said, "Now class, please do settle down." She looked across at Fibs and said, "Jimmy, I believe you."

"Really?" he said. "You do?"

"I do."

"Is it the scratches on my leg?" he said. "Or the shredded pant legs? Why do you believe me and no one else does?"

Ms. Madeleine leaned across her desk, getting as close as she could to Fibs' ear. She whispered, "I believe you, Mr. Fitz, because your homework was delicious."



Zinnia Moving Mountains

“Aren’t the trees beautiful?” Zinnia’s dad asked with an enthusiasm unwarranted after four hours of driving down roads flanked by nothing but trees.

“Dad, if I never see another tree again, I’ll be *okay*,” Zinnia replied.

“Awww, don’t say that. Without trees, we wouldn’t be able to breath. Or build things like houses and tables. Heck, we wouldn’t have tree forts if we didn’t have trees.”

“That’s just silly, Dad. Forts don’t have to be in trees.”

“But they’re so much cooler when they’re in trees.”

Zinnia threw her head back and groaned. “I just want to be there already.”

There. The place where “The Great Restart” was going to happen. Zinnia had never heard of Glendon before her dad said they were moving there.

“But it’s going to change our lives,” he had said.

“Why would we want to change something that’s already great?” Zinnia had asked.

Her dad had spent many nights prior to the moving news in his bedroom with his door shut. Zinnia had heard him talking on the phone. She had heard him crying. She had heard him pleading with whom she could only imagine was her estranged mother.

Glendon was one one-hundredth the size of the city she lived in. "Moving to Glendon is going to get us more involved with the community," her dad had excitedly explained. "We're going to know our neighbours names and the names of our neighbours' neighbours!"

Glendon was also going to get them outside more. Get them closer to nature. Somehow, that was supposed to make Zinnia even more excited for "The Great Restart."

Having lived in the city for the first ten years of her life, nature was already everywhere: pigeons on park benches, raccoons rummaging through dumpsters, rodents the size of cats darting from bush to bush. Zinnia loved the nature she experienced on her walks to and from school. She loved the wind in her face when she stood on the apartment balcony. She loved the smell of pizza and motor oil and lavender that was carried up the fourteen stories from the streets below. That was all the nature she needed.

Zinnia had run away that first night after getting the news. She had run to the sports field three blocks away and hid under the bleachers crying. Her dad had spent hours searching for her. It was only minutes before he was going to call the police and report her missing that he had found her. And when he did, he crawled under the bleachers and sat next to her, shoulder to shoulder. "Listen, Zee," he had said, his eyes glazed and teary. "The city's not for us anymore. Life is about being around people and places you can love and that will love you back. The only love left here is the love left between you and me."

"But isn't that enough?" Zee had asked, causing her Dad to get up and walk away.

Zinnia's dad turned the volume down on the moving van's radio. "Keep your eyes straight ahead," he said. "Don't blink or you'll miss it."

Zinnia placed her tablet on her knees and looked out the front windshield. "What am I going to miss?"

"After today you'll see this sight thousands of times. But you'll only see it for a first time once. First times are one of the many gifts we're given when we are born. Firsts shape us and inspire us and drive us."

"Do you think they could drive us a little faster? I have to pee."

"Shhh, Zinnia. Just watch."

The van passed by a sign that said to reduce its speed, and it approached a tight turn in the road. As the van rounded the turn, the poorly fastened contents in the back shifted and slid, banging into the van's aluminum sides.

"Ooops," her dad said and slowed down the van even more. "Okay, here we go."

As the road straightened out, the wall of trees that had been running alongside them retreated to the background, opening up a new, spectacular view. Now all Zinnia could see were mountains. Massive mountains with snow-covered tops that towered above the few clouds hanging lazily in the sky. The mountains were in front of her. The mountains were beside her and in the side mirror rising up behind her. She craned her neck trying to look at them all.

"I've never seen so many mountains," she said. "And so close!"

"Pretty impressive, eh? We just spent the last hour in the mountain behind us. Now we're in a little valley in the middle of all of them. I like to think of it as the bellybutton of this mountain range. Glendon is only ten minutes away. You'll get to see these giants every single day."

“Wow,” Zinnia said. “It’s impressive, Dad. I’ll give you that. I just hope this bellybutton we’re moving to doesn’t turn out to be more of a butthole.”

“Zinnia!”

Zinnia had never lived in a house before. The prospect of yelling back at her dad that she was “*upstairs*” in her room was the only draw to “The Great Restart.” The fact that she could be in one part of a house and not hear a single sound from someone who was in another part of the house was intriguing. Living in an apartment, every breath, every whisper, every pass of gas could be heard. Privacy was for the privileged, she’d tell herself. But here she was, pulling up to a house with not two floors, but two floors and a basement. A house that was hers. It was a one-hundred and twelve year old home built in the days of gold rushes and horse carriages. “Trust me, though,” her dad had said when he showed her a picture of it. “It’s not haunted.”

Her dad put the van in park and turned off the engine. He took in a deep breath then looked down at Zinnia. “Excited?”

Zinnia shrugged her shoulders. She didn’t want to show too much interest, because part of the drive to Glendon was spent concocting her journey back to the city. The plan included waiting till her dad was asleep, then sneaking out of the house and walking down to the freeway and hitchhiking home. She knew hitchhiking was illegal and that her dad would probably disown her if he found out. But she was willing to be labeled a criminal if it meant she could go back home.

“This is our home now,” her dad said. He ducked his head and looked out Zinnia’s passenger-side window. He pointed at a big white oak tree in the front yard and said, “I think

that's my favourite part of the house. I've always wanted a big tree in my front yard. Think you can climb it?"

"Your job is to keep me safe, Dad. There is so much potential for injury climbing trees. Geez."

"Well then, you can watch me climb the tree. Geez!" he said and sat back in his driver's seat. "Listen, Zee, the landlord said the key is under the rock by the front door. I'll start untying the stuff in the back of the van. You go on in and have a wander around. Just prop the front door open after you open up."

Zinnia stepped down from the van and approached the front door to her new house. House. It did have kind of a nice ring to it, she thought. She kicked the rock off the key and chuckled. "A lot of trust in this funny little place," she mumbled. Then she turned and said to her dad, who was swinging open the back door to the moving van, "You could never leave a key so poorly hidden in the city. Bad guys would definitely find it and steal everything."

"Well you're in luck," her dad replied. "Glendon is bad guy free."

"Funny, Dad," she said so low there was no way he'd hear her. "Bad people are everywhere. You, of all people should know that."

Zinnia unlocked the door and pushed it. As it swung back, it creaked like it hadn't been opened in a hundred years, and the ancient creak echoed through the empty house. "Very spooky," Zinnia said. "Dad's such a liar. This place is totally haunted."

She stepped into the front hallway and was quickly swept up by the size of the house. From where she stood she could only see the living room and the kitchen. It was such a foreign thing to not see every room in the place when standing at the front door. Foreign, like Sauerkraut or Finland or a father with the ability to sing in tune.

But only one room truly mattered in this new house: her room. And she knew exactly where it was from the dozens

of pictures her dad had shown her of the place. “Don’t get too excited, Zee,” she said to herself. “You won’t be here long.”

She grabbed the railing on the stairwell that edged up to the right side of the house and she ran up the stairs two at a time. With each step she took, the house seemed to scream out in pain. The creaking under her feet didn’t slow her down, though.

The room was twice the size of the one her and her dad shared in the city. The walls were a robin’s-egg blue, which was so much more appealing than the yucky rotten-corn brownish-yellow of the walls she grew up with. Along the far wall, which ran parallel to the road the van was parked on, was a window the size of her bed. She’d never seen a window so large in a “normal” person’s house. So much warm, golden sunlight poured in from the window. Like sticky honey, it clung to her. She lazily floated through it towards the window. And there, outside the window, within reaching distance, big as a Tyrannosaurus Rex, was the tree her dad wanted her to climb. One of its branches reached out almost to the window. Its end was twisted and gnarled into a shape that kind of looked like a thumbs up.

Zinnia’s dad spotted her in the bedroom window, through the crisscross of tree branches, and waved. Zinnia waved back and for the first time since they had left the city, she smiled.

They hadn’t had time to set up her bed the first night in the house, so Zinnia slept on her new mattress in a sleeping bag in the middle of her bedroom floor. She had decided before falling asleep to give it one night before hitchhiking home. It was the least she could do for her dad.

For the first time in her life she wasn’t woken up by horns honking or garbagemen yelling or her dad snoring. No, for

the first time in her life, it was a ray of sunlight warming her nose that woke her. The sunshine felt so much more intense than the day before. Zinnia's first thought when she woke was to wish the big tree a good morning. She slithered out of her nighttime cocoon and crawled toward her window. She put her palms down on the hardwood and pushed herself up onto her knees ready to do a childish peek-a-boo, but she didn't care. No one was there to tell her to grow up. And she knew the tree wouldn't mind. She jumped up onto her feet and before she could even make a peep, she froze like a Zinnia-shaped ice-cube.

The tree was gone.

"What the heck?" she said.

She stretched out her neck and put her forehead against the warm window. Her eyes darted back and forth, up and down. Where the tree once stood was a deep hole and a line of loose dirt and frayed roots that crossed over the front yard and onto the road.

"What the actual heck?"

She followed the line of dirt and wood across the road to the front yard of a house on the other side of the street. In it was a tree that looked similar to the one that was outside her bedroom window only a day earlier. But it couldn't be.

"Could it?" Zinnia whispered.

She ran her eyes up the tree's trunk and gasped when she saw the gnarled branch that looked like it was giving a thumbs up.

"Daddddddd!!!!!" she screamed.

He burst through her door with a frantic look on his face, his hair all pushed over to one side like his bedroom pillow was still under it. "What's wrong?"

"The tree," Zinnia said. "It's...It's...!"

"What on Earth are you going on about, Zee?"

"Look," she said and pointed out the window at the space where the tree should have been.

Her dad rubbed his eyes and walked to the window. He looked out, then rubbed his eyes again. "What's going on? Why would someone steal our tree?"

"But it hasn't been stolen. It's across the street, Dad!" Zinnia said. "Look at the line of dirt and stuff leading up to it. I think it walked."

After breakfast, Zinnia and her dad walked over to the neighbour's house where the tree now stood. An elderly man wearing a plaid jacket and a plaid toque was staring up at the tree. The appearance of Zinnia and her dad startled him and he jumped when they both said, "Hi."

"Oh goodness, me," he said. "My heart just about stopped for the second time today."

"We're sorry to scare you," Zinnia's dad said. "We just moved in across the street and I don't want to sound weird saying this, but I think that tree was in our yard yesterday."

"Hmmm," the man said. "I thought it looked familiar. Well, why is it over here in my yard now?"

"Ummm," Zinnia's dad said. "That's kind of what we were coming to ask you."

The elderly man introduced himself as Mr. Potter. Mr. Potter liked to joke that his wife's name was Beatrix, though it was actually just Bea, and that they both absolutely adored rabbits. Especially in stew. Zinnia didn't understand what he was talking about, but her dad chuckled when he said this.

"Mr. Potter," Zinnia said, wanting to return the conversation back to the tree. "I think it walked over here."

Mr. Potter's eyes widened. "The *tree*?" he asked. "Why would you think that, little lady? You and I both know trees can't walk."

"Something might have spooked it."

Mr. Potter scratched the inside of his ear, drawing attention

to all the scraggly gray hair growing out of it. Zinnia must have been staring too long, because her dad nudged her.

“My yard isn’t near as nice as yours,” Mr. Potter said. “Hopefully, the tree walks back when it realizes this. And if it doesn’t...well, I guess that’s when we have to start worrying.”

“What does that mean?” Zinnia’s dad said.

“I’m sure the tree is just confused,” Mr. Potter said. “Happens sometimes around here.” Without a “Good bye” or even a nod, Mr. Potter then turned and walked away.

Zinnia’s eyes popped open after a very restless sleep and her first thought was, that tree better be there. She rolled out of bed and crawled toward the window. Hopefully, day two in Glendon wouldn’t be nearly as weird as day one. She put her hands on the windowsill and slowly lifted herself up.

The tree wasn’t there. She looked across to Mr. Potter’s yard and the tree wasn’t there either. In fact, up and down her street, there wasn’t a single tree to be seen. Where all the trees had been, only holes remained. Lines of dirt and roots crisscrossed the road and the yards of all the houses she could see from her bedroom window.

“Daaaaaaaaddddd!!!! she yelled.

A minute later her dad stumbled through the doorway to her bedroom.

“Zinnia, it’s seven in the morning. What on Earth are you yelling for?”

“Look! Look!” she said. “All the trees are gone this morning!”

Zinnia’s dad stepped up to the window and put his palms against the glass. “What is happening?”

Zinnia squeezed up against him and spotted Mr. Potter walking into the middle of the road. Mr. Potter was pulling on his earlobe and looking up at the sky.

“Do you think he knows what’s going on?” Zinnia asked.

“Only one way to find out.”

Zinnia’s dad marched out of her room and down the stairs. She heard the front door creak open and a gust of wind blow through the house. Zinnia ran after her dad.

He had left the door open and had not even changed out of his pajamas when he ran into the street. This would have been so embarrassing in any other situation. She reached Mr. Potter and her dad just as her dad was asking, “What do you know about this?”

“I know it’s too cold to be wearing only pajamas,” Mr. Potter said.

“I mean the trees,” Zinnia’s dad said. “What do you know about the trees disappearing?”

“Mmmm, yes, of course. The trees. Look,” he said and pointed to the mountains that were visible from the road. Where yesterday trees merely sprinkled the tops of the mountains, allowing the snow that ran a third of the way down them to be visible, now a thick layer of trees could be seen. “They’re all up there.”

“The trees from this road are up there now?” Zinnia asked.

“Not just this road,” Mr. Potter said. “From every road in this city. The mountains...they’re restless and the trees don’t want to be collateral damage.”

“What’s collateral damage?” Zinnia asked.

Her dad looked down at her. “It’s when people who weren’t intended to get hurt by another person’s actions, actually do get hurt...or worse. Wait, this is crazy. What do you mean the mountains are restless?”

“I don’t really know what to tell you,” Mr. Potter said. “Once, or it looks like twice in a lifetime, they get tired of being stuck in one place, of seeing the same things day in and day out, forever and ever. Sometimes they get tired of not being seen. Sometimes they just need to roam free. I’m sure you can relate.”

“No. No I cannot,” Zinnia’s dad said. “I am not a mountain.”

“Mmmm,” Mr. Potter said. “I’ve noticed that this all began when you moved in. We don’t get a lot of new people in Glendon. Maybe the mountains sensed your arrival. Or...”

“Well that’s the silliest thing I’ve ever heard,” Zinnia’s dad said cutting off Mr. Potter’s thought.

“Maybe,” Mr. Potter said. “But it’s happened before, decades ago when another young family moved into Glendon. Mine. My only hope is the mountains choose to go outward, like they did then, instead of inward.”

“What do we do now, Mr. Potter?” Zinnia asked.

“Well, I think we wait to see which way the mountains choose to go. And then we either sigh in relief. Or we run for our lives.”

On her third morning in Glendon, Zinnia wasn’t going to give the sun a chance to wake her, because she never fell asleep. Her dad and her had set up two chairs in front of her bedroom window, intent on staying up through the night watching the mountains. It was a lot of fun at first. They ordered in pizza and drank soda pop and played loud music. But the darker it got outside, the harder it got to see the mountains. Eventually, the mountains disappeared completely. Her dad gave up soon after that and laid down on her bed and fell asleep. Zinnia tried to focus on staying awake through his snoring and sleep talking. He was obviously dreaming about the mountains, because he kept saying, “I’m nothing like you. I’m nothing like you.” She was going to beat the sun at its own game and be up and ready when its little fingers crept over the mountains and began lighting up the world. She was going to know the second the sun knew, which way the mountains chose to go. That is, if Mr. Potter wasn’t fibbing about the whole thing.

Zinnia gulped down another big sip of cola and gave her head a shake. Her clock said it was 4:34 in the morning. The sun would be rising very soon. She tossed a pillow at her dad, waking him. “Zinnia, did you sleep?” he said sleepily.

“Not a wink,” she replied. “I wasn’t going to take a chance losing any time if we have to run.”

“You know none of this makes any sense, right? Mountains don’t roam. Trees don’t walk.”

“Not in the city, where we used to live,” Zinnia said. “But maybe they do here.”

Zinnia’s dad rubbed his eyes and joined his daughter at the window. He wrapped his arm around her shoulder and said, “Well then, let’s see what surprises this day will bring.”

Zinnia’s heart raced as the first light of day appeared. Far earlier than it had the morning before. Usually, the sun had to climb the other side of the mountain before making itself known, but Zinnia and her dad saw pretty quickly that the mountains were nowhere to be seen.

“I simply cannot believe it,” Zinnia’s dad whispered.

“It’s pretty hard to deny now,” Zinnia replied.

The light of day appeared quickly. With no mountains, Zinnia and her dad could see the next city over. They could see all the way to the next mountain range that was obviously, still quite content with where it stood. Four lines of crushed rock, dirt and tree limbs were left in the mountains’ wake. Three of the lines went east and one line went west. Luckily, the mountains behind Glendon chose to go the opposite way or they would have rolled right over the town. But there were many more towns in both directions. Zinnia thought, what would happen when the mountains reached those towns?

The awe of the moment was upstaged by Mr. Potter’s car quickly backing out of his driveway. The car pulled into the middle of the road and sat idle. “I wonder what he’s doing?” Zinnia’s dad said.

“Only one way to find out,” Zinnia said and bolted from her room.

Her dad’s voice echoed through the house, “Zinnia, stop!” But her feet were in full control now, telling her to go go go. She had to catch Mr. Potter before he started driving away. She didn’t know why she had to catch him, she just knew she had to. She left the front door wide open, which would normally get her a stern talking to from her dad, but the pull of her feeling was too strong. It was almost like the retreating mountains had lassoed her and were dragging her behind them.

Zinnia sprinted over to Mr. Potter’s car and banged on his driver side window, startling him. He rolled the window down an inch and said, “Goodness gracious, little lady. That’s the second time you’ve scared me to within a dog’s hair of death.”

“Are you going to get the mountains back?”

“Hmmm. I’m just a tiny ant compared to the mountains. How do you think I’d be able to do such a thing?”

Sleepy-eyed neighbours en route to their jobs and morning workouts and meetings at coffee shops began appearing on their front porches and in their driveways. They distracted Zinnia from Mr. Potter’s question. Many of them noticed the young girl in her pajamas standing in the middle of the street before they noticed the missing mountains. But once they noticed the mountains were gone, their confusion about the activity in front of them turned to horror. A few of the neighbours even screamed out loud.

“Zinnia!” her dad shouted over the neighbours’ screams. He ran up to the car and wrapped her jacket around her shoulders and dropped a pair of shoes at her feet. “You can’t do anything about anything if you’ve frozen yourself to death.”

“Geez, Dad, could you be any more dramatic?” She said and slipped on her shoes. After she zipped up her jacket, she returned her attention to Mr. Potter. “You said this happened

to you before. You obviously had something to do with bringing them back.”

“Yes, well...I don’t think I had anything to do with it.”

“Then how did they get back then?”

Mr. Potter repositioned his toque and said, “That’s where you come in. I’ve been sitting here waiting...waiting for you, Zinnia, because I think the mountains need to hear it from you.”

“Hear what from me?”

“That they’re still seen. That they’re loved. That they’re just where they need to be.”

“But why from me?”

“Because you wouldn’t be lying to them. It’s how my son convinced them to come back when we first moved here. He and his family moved away only a few weeks before you arrived. I think they’re looking for him and his girls. You know, we lose our focus when we grow up, Zinnia. We start taking for granted the things we think will always be there and then...and then we start to forget about those things. Being forgotten. Being unloved. It’s a terrible thing. And it happens so often in life. Sometimes rash actions are our only way to be seen again. It doesn’t take much, though. The mountains were content being seen and loved by my son and my grandchildren. Sure, we all could’ve made more of an effort to recognize their beauty. But we didn’t. And if any of us tried to retrieve them now, they’d just ignore us. So you need to get them back.”

“But how? I’m an even smaller ant than you are.”

“Get in the car. We have to go now before the mountains run right over Beaverton. It’s the next city over. Then we’ll have to circle back and get the mountain heading west. The next town is much farther away. That gives us the extra time.”

Zinnia ran around the car and jumped into the passenger seat and buckled up. Her dad slid into the backseat and said, “I know this all has to be a dream, because it’s the kookiest thing I’ve ever seen! So I’m coming along for the ride to see how it plays out.”

Mr. Potter slammed his foot down on the gas pedal and made his car tires squeal. The burning rubber filled the treeless street with smoke, temporarily erasing the frightening image of the missing mountains from the neighbour's eyes. The car lurched forward. "Mountains don't move very fast," Mr. Potter said, "So we shouldn't have too far to go." He reached behind his driver seat and retrieved a bullhorn that was lying on the floor. He handed it to Zinnia and said, "They'll hear you better with this."

"I still really don't know why they'd listen to me. I'm so insignificant," Zinnia said.

"Don't say that, Zee," her dad said from behind her, before leaning forward so she could see him. "Your voice really can move mountains."

"But it didn't stop you from moving us out of the city."

He smiled, but tears were pooling in the corner of his eyes. "But I'm not a mountain, Zinnia. I am...an anchor. The city, your mother, the lack of work, the lack of warmth from the people all around us...it was starting to distract me from seeing the only thing in the world that is important to me. You. I moved to Glendon so I could see you again and love you again the way I used to. And I think we moved here so you could do the same. With me. With the mountains. You are more than enough, Zinnia. In fact, you are everything! And here in Glendon, you will have the opportunity be a young girl who is bigger and stronger than any mountain. And that's all I could ever want for you. Sometimes, Zee, we have no control over where we end up, especially when we're young. We just have to love where we are."

She smiled sincerely. "I do, Dad. I think I really do."

Far up ahead of them the roaming mountains appeared. Zinnia flipped the power switch on the bullhorn and rolled down her window. "Dad. Mr. Potter," she said. "Let's go put those mountains back where they belong."



Mr. Pockets

A few squashed boxes of raisins and a baggy of candy corn remained in the orange plastic bowl. “Isn’t it a little late to still be trick-or-treating?” The lady holding the bowl asked as she looked at the empty sidewalk behind the kids.

Only then was it apparent how quickly the night had passed.

Where only minutes earlier masses of children roamed, children dressed up as mermaids and cyclops and ghosts and math teachers, swinging their candy-filled pillow sacks and kicking up dead leaves behind them, now all that remained were stomped-on Jack-O-Lanterns with their candles burned out, deflated balloon monsters and torn-apart paper skeletons. All that moved were the shadows conjured up by flickering streetlamps and swaying trees hypnotized by a late-October wind.

A wispy snake of toilet paper blew down the road. The kids watched it disappear behind a bush shaped like a torpedo. They looked back up at the lady, and the kid dressed up as an old-timey gangster said, “What time is it?”

She looked at her watch and said, “9:52pm. It’s getting to that time when the real ghouls and ghosts start coming out. You don’t want to be stuck outside when that happens.”

“9:52!” the old-timey gangster exclaimed.

“Oh, now it’s 9:53,” the lady cut in.

“I was supposed to be home almost an hour ago. My mom is going to kill me.”

The lady in the doorway laughed and said, “Well, it is Halloween night. Dead things are kind of the theme, aren’t they?” She dropped the remainder of her crappy candy into the three bags held out in front of her. “You kids should probably get home now.”

She slipped back into her house, shut her door and turned off the porch light, leaving the kids in partial darkness. “I really have to get home now,” the old-timey gangster said. “My mom’s last words to me were, ‘Nine o’clock, mister, and not one second later. Not one second! That one second will define what freedoms you get over the next year!’ I like being out without supervision. I like making my own decisions. I can’t lose that.”

The girl dressed up like a zombie train conductor said, “Do you want me and Billy to walk with you? It’s the opposite direction from our house, but we will. Just to be safe.”

“Yeah, we will, Gar,” said Billy, who was dressed like a vampire with a stake through his heart. “Our parents don’t care what time we get home.”

“Nah, I’m going to have to sprint this one,” said the old-timey gangster. “I’ll see you at school tomorrow.”

With that, the old-timey gangster, whose name was Garrett Kline when he wasn’t wearing a fedora, a long overcoat and a mascara moustache, ran down the steps and into the night. The orange tip of his plastic Tommy gun, which was fastened to the belt underneath his overcoat, dragged and bounced along the ground behind him. As he ran down alleys and along sidewalks, he wished he had parents as cool as Billy and Beth’s parents. They didn’t seem to care at all about when and where Billy and Beth were. Or maybe, they just trusted Billy and Beth. Garrett was twelve years old. One

year away from being a *TEENAGER*. He got good grades in school. He always did his chores on time and ate the gross food his mom made for dinner. Why couldn't he be trusted to come home when he was ready? Why did his parents have to keep such a short leash on him? Last time he checked, he wasn't a dog.

Garrett turned a corner and slammed into a wall.

But it wasn't a wall made of bricks or cement, because it had a squishy-ness to it. Just like the gymnasium mats fastened to the gym walls during games of dodgeball. Garrett stumbled back a few steps and regained his balance. As he did this, the bulb in the streetlamp above him began to flicker. He looked up and it popped out. He was now in partial darkness again. Only the glowing moon high up in the sky was helping him see. A shadow stood still in the middle of the sidewalk. It was the shadow he had run into. It was shaped like a man two or three times larger than men were supposed to be. But it couldn't be a man, because it remained perfectly still, except for the bottom of its long coat, which fluttered in the wind.

"I like the pockets on your coat," the shadow said in a deep, distant voice that sounded like it was coming from underneath the ground.

"Sir, I'm sorry to have run into you like that," Garrett said.

"Mmmm, but you're running late and you must get home, mustn't you?" said the shadow.

"Well, yes, but...how did you know that?"

The streetlamp buzzed and started glowing again and now Garrett could see what was standing in front of him. It *was* a man, but a giant of a man, or a man on the shoulders of another man, and he was wearing a long beige overcoat, the bottom of which was only inches from the ground. The overcoat had way more pockets on it than a normal overcoat should. And each pocket was made from a different material, almost like it was taken off of another jacket and sewn onto

this one. The man's face was darkened by the brim of an oversized black ivy cap he was wearing. The only feature Garrett could make out on the man's face, only because it was outside of the shadow cast by the hat's brim, was the tip of a nose far too long to be on a human.

The giant man moved for the first time, dropping his right gloved hand into one of the overcoat's pockets. It was a yellow pocket that looked like it had once been sewn onto a raincoat. When he pulled his hand out of the pocket there was a severed ear clasped between his thumb and index finger. "I have ears everywhere," he said flapping the ear in front of Garrett's face.

Garrett stumbled back, a high-pitched scream of terror cocked and ready in his lungs. But the scream turned into an uncomfortable laugh when it finally fired out of his mouth. Garrett remembered it was Halloween night and older people liked to scare younger ones. Especially the younger ones who were out later than they probably should be.

"Haha," he said. "You're trying to scare me, aren't you?"

The giant man placed the ear back in the pocket and returned to standing perfectly still. "I want you to pick a pocket," he said.

"Sir, I really must get home."

"I know. I know," the giant man said. "Or your mom is going to *kill* you."

"How do you know I said that?" Garrett asked. "Were you hiding somewhere in that lady's yard?"

"Mmmm, I do love when the French say it... 'Mes parents vont me tuer.' Sounds like poetry."

The giant man slowly leaned overtop of Garrett, covering him in shadow. "Pick a pocket, boy!" he bellowed. His voice still sounded like it was coming from underneath the ground, but now Garrett could feel it rumbling under his feet.

"What's in the pockets?" Garrett said, shaking from the returning fear. "More fake body parts? Fingers? Eyeballs? If

you're trying to scare me, it's not going to work."

"Your future is in the pockets, boy, and if you don't pick a pocket right now, you'll have no future."

The giant man stood up straight and still again. Garrett was terrified, but he wasn't going to let on how terrified he was. It could still be a couple of teens trying to scare him. And if they knew he was terrified, they'd win, wouldn't they? "Fine, I'll pick that one," he said and pointed to a pocket on the overcoat that was made of cloth and had a green and red argyle pattern on it.

The giant man's gloved fist unfurled. He put his hand in the argyle pocket and rustled it around in it for a few seconds. When he removed his hand, it was in a fist again. He held his fisted hand up and motioned for Garrett to cup his hands beneath it.

Garrett put his hands out and narrowed his eyes. What was in the giant man's closed fist? Was it a spider? Or maggots? Or even worse, a snotty handkerchief? He prepared himself for the culmination of the teenagers' scare, when the lamp light above him popped out again.

Something prickly landed in his hands.

The buzz of the lamp light powering back up morphed into the familiar buzz of an alarm clock. Garrett blinked his eyes and saw the unilluminated glow-in-the-dark stars on his bedroom ceiling. "It was all a dream," he whispered.

Garret was tucked tight into his bed. He turned his head and saw his old-timey gangster coat flung over his desk chair. His fedora was upside down under the desk and the plastic Tommy gun was standing up against the wall next to his closet.

"Ahhhh, Garrett! Turn off that darn alarm!" his mother yelled from somewhere in the house.

Garrett worked his hand out from under his covers and saw that it was balled up in a fist.

He brought his fist down on the SNOOZE button, silencing the screeching alarm. As his hand connected with

the clock, a bolt of pain shot through his arm. Whatever was in his hand pricked him. "Ouch," he said and opened his fist. It was a pinecone about the size of a ping pong ball. He sat up in bed and stared at the odd object in his hand.

The overcoat slid off the desk chair and startled him. My mind is playing tricks on me, he thought. His heart began to beat loud and fast. So loud and fast, in fact, he thought maybe it was trying to force its way out of his body so it didn't have to deal with what his imagination was conjuring up.

He laughed uncomfortably and jumped out of bed just as his bedroom door swung open and his mother poked her head in his room. "I have to head out now," she said. "I want you home right after school, Garrett. Okay? No hanging out. No playing. Nothing. We didn't get a chance to discuss you coming home late last night. How you had us worried to death. We're going to sit down as a family tonight and talk about how as you get older you have to be accountable for your actions. How what you choose to do and not do affects a lot more people than you think."

"Okay, Mom," Garrett said meekly.

"Good. There's some breakfast for you on the kitchen table," she said and disappeared without shutting his bedroom door.

Garrett dropped the pinecone onto his desk and got ready for his school day.

School days after Halloween night were the hardest days of the year. Garrett knew he wasn't alone in this belief. Kids all over the world would be over-sugared and under-stimulated as the skeletons and spiders and normalization of candy eating were boxed up and stored away in grimy basements and dusty attics for another year. To Garrett, the buildup and excitement leading up to Halloween, and to the night itself, was like a balloon being blown up. Bigger and bigger, reaching its maximum size when he was in the moment saying, "Trick or Treat!" The day after Halloween was after

that balloon had popped and the shrapnel from the balloon was lying on the ground, and the sound of the pop was still ringing in his ears. Yes, it was back to reading, writing and arithmetic, but without any anticipation whatsoever tingling in his stomach. And Garrett was dreading it.

He stepped over dozens of smashed pumpkins and whips of fake spider webs and candy wrappers on his walk to school. On one street he stepped on a fake skeleton arm, the kind you push into your garden to make it look like its clawing its way out of the ground. Its plastic crunched under his foot and made him jump. On another street, a windbreaker fell out of a tree and landed on his head. He pulled the jacket off his face and threw it to the ground. Something about the jacket caught his eye.

It was...missing a pocket.

He ran the rest of the way to school and spotted Beth and Billy in their morning meet-up spot, underneath the playground monkey bars.

"Did you get in trouble for being late last night?" asked Billy.

"Your mom didn't kill you," Beth said. "So it must not be that bad."

"I'm in so much trouble," Garrett said. "My parents are giving me one of their lectures about responsibility and getting older and all that junk when I get home from school."

"Ohhh, sounds terrible," Beth said.

"Well, I'm glad you got home in one piece," Billy said. "I heard my mom and dad talking this morning about some kid that didn't come home last night. A local kid. I didn't recognize the name, Davey something...but they said he just vanished off the face of the earth. They were talking about joining some search group after work today to help look for the kid."

"That's really spooky," Garrett said. "Because, you know, I had this weird thing happen to me last night. At least, I think I did."

“What do you mean by, ‘you think you did?’” Beth said.

“On my sprint home last night, I ran right into a...well, I ran into a giant wearing an overcoat,” Garrett said.

“A giant?” Beth said.

“I couldn’t really tell what it was. It could have been one big man or a teenager on another teenager’s shoulders. I thought they might be trying to scare me because it was late and I was alone. The weirdest part of it all was the overcoat the giant was wearing. It was covered in pockets. But not pockets that belonged on the coat. Like pockets from other coats.”

“That is weird,” Billy said.

“Yeah, and he made me pick a pocket.”

“Really? What was in the pocket?” Beth asked, her eyes wide.

“A pinecone.”

“Well, that’s not very scary,” she said.

“No, but after he dropped it in my hand, I don’t remember getting home or going to bed. I just woke up and it was this morning.”

The school buzzer blared and kids around the schoolyard began running for their classrooms. The buzzer droned on much longer than usual. Garrett thought about all the buzzing he had heard in the last 12 hours: a buzzing streetlamp bulb, a buzzing alarm clock and a buzzing school bell. But these things happen everyday, he thought. There’s nothing suspect about them. I’m just noticing them more because of all the weird stuff going on.

When the buzzer stopped ringing, Garrett said, “Guess we should get to class.” But he said it to the air, because Beth and Billy were no longer there with him under the monkey bars. He was all alone on the playground.

The swing behind him began swinging. He turned and saw a boy about his age on the swing. A boy that wasn’t there only a second or two earlier. The boy was kicking his legs up and down, gaining more and more momentum, raising the

swing higher and higher. He was wearing only a dirty white t-shirt, tucked into an even dirtier pair of jeans. No shoes or socks. No jacket.

Autumn was in full swing and the chill in the air was visible. Garrett's breath left his body as a cloudy vapour. But as much as the boy on the swing huffed and puffed as he attempted to get the swing higher, Garrett could see no breath coming out of his mouth.

"Hey kid, it's too cold to have no jacket on," Garrett said. "Like my dad says, 'you'll catch your death out here.'"

The boy chuckled and stopped kicking his legs. "You see that?" the kid said. "I almost did a full circle. I've done it before, you know?"

"Are you new to Daleview?" Garrett asked. "I've never seen you here before."

The boy kept his hands wrapped around the chains connected to the swing seat. He leaned his torso forward, swinging the bottom half of his body back a little. "Kids lose track of the time in every country in the world. Did you know that?" the boy said. "Or did you know that kids all over the world break important things or get failing grades or get caught stealing? I do it. You do it. We all do it. And kids like us always say the same thing when we do it. It might be in a different language, but it's always the same thing. We say that our parents are going to kill us. We all know our parents would never actually kill us. Our parents love us. Sure, they don't like us sometimes, but no matter what we do, they always love us. I think it's kind of a rule of becoming a parent."

"What are you talking about?"

"Most times, we just mumble it under our breath or say it to the dog. 'My parents are going to kill me.' And that's okay. It really is. The walls keep it in. But on that rare occasion when we say it outdoors to other people or around other people... well that's when he hears it. That's when he comes."

Garrett shivered.

“Mr. Pockets, you’ve seen him, haven’t you?” the boy said.

“Who are you?” Garrett asked, shivering uncontrollably now.

The boy jumped off the swing and ran up to Garrett. “You didn’t pick a pocket, did you?”

“Why? How do you know all of this?”

“I picked a pocket,” the boy said. “I wish I hadn’t. I wish I had just run away. There was a rock in the pocket I picked. A little rock, no different than any of the ones in this playground. It was the size of a marble or a Gobstopper. No, it was more like the size of an almond. The last thing I remember is riding my bike to Evan’s house. We were about to go trick-or-treating. I was riding alongside the road when a car passed by me. I heard a flinging sound and then a whooshing sound. The car had kicked up a rock with its tires and the rock flew through the air like a bullet.”

Garrett noticed the boy’s hair was greasy and matted. He noticed a line of dried blood along the side of the boy’s face. The boy ran his hand through his hair, moving it off the side of his head. A hole the girth of an almond was where his temple should have been.

“Have you seen my jacket?” the boy asked. “It’s a green jacket.”

Garrett felt a hand on his shoulder. It spun him around. “Mr. Kline, the bell rang almost fifteen minutes ago.” It was the principal of Daleview Elementary School, Mr. Cargill. And he had a very stern look on his face when he asked, “What are you still doing out here?”

“I think this is the missing kid. Davey something,” Garrett said.

Mr. Cargill looked confused. “What kid?”

Garrett turned around. The kid was gone. The playground was empty.

“He was right here,” Garrett said. “I was talking to him when you arrived.”

“Are you okay, Garrett?” Mr. Cargill asked, his expression turning from confusion to concern.

Garrett looked at the ground for footprints. He looked for any sign that the kid had actually been there. But there was nothing. “I don’t know.”

“Well, get to class. And if you think something might be wrong, go see the school nurse.”

Garrett looked up at Mr. Cargill and said, “I don’t think the school nurse is going to be able to help me in this case.”

All eyes were on Garrett when he walked into his classroom. A couple of students in the back of the classroom were leaning in close to each other whispering. Other students looked like they were trying to hold in laughter. He sat down at his desk and tried to act like nothing was out of the ordinary. Like he’d just arrived late. Beth, who sat behind him, leaned forward and whispered, “Where’d you go?”

“Where did *you* go?” Garrett said while turning around.

“Garrett, please be quiet,” his teacher, Mrs. Ogilvie said. “You’ve been disruptive enough as it is.”

“Sorry, Mrs. Ogilvie, I just...” he felt all of his classmates’ eyes on him again.

“I don’t want to hear another peep out of you.”

“Yes, Mrs. Ogilvie,” Garrett replied and laid his head down on his desk.

Mrs. Ogilvie started talking about world-changing inventions, like the light bulb and the steam engine, which would have been super interesting any other day. But it was all just noise as Garrett’s brain played through the last twelve hours. He wondered if maybe he was going crazy or if some of his Halloween candy had been tainted with chemicals that made him think he was going crazy.

The day dragged on.

Not a single word his teacher taught stuck.

He kept his head on his desk, ignoring the learning he usually loved so much...ignoring the many pleas from Mrs.

Ogilvie to go see the nurse and the requests from Beth and Billy to join them at lunch. It was only a flash of movement outside his classroom window that made him sit up. He jumped out of his desk and ran to the window, causing his classmates to chatter and chuckle.

A tall tree was across the street. Garrett swore he had seen someone peek out from behind it, then duck back. He swore it. "Watch! Watch!" he shouted.

He turned around, hoping to coax his classmates to join him at the window. But they were all gone. The classroom was empty of all life. All that remained was desks and open books and pencils rolling back and forth.

He slowly turned back to the window and kept his eyes on the tree. The brim of a hat appeared from behind it. Then a dark face and the shoulder of a very recognizable overcoat appeared. The shoulder of the coat had a green pocket on it. Garrett screamed. He screamed at the top of his lungs. He screamed so loud he hurt his own ears.

Beth grabbed his hand and squeezed. "Garrett, stop. Stop! It's okay. I'm here. Billy's here."

"Garrett, that is quite enough," Mrs Ogilvie said while tapping the chalk in her hand against the blackboard. "Go to the nurse's office now."

"I think...I think I might have been poisoned," he said, eliciting more chuckles from his classmates. "It's probably best I see her."

As he finished his proclamation, the end-of-day buzzer rang. The kids got up out of their desks and instantly forgot about Garrett and his strange behaviour. Beth, who was still holding his hand said, "I can come to the nurse's office with you, if you'd like."

"I think I want to just go home to bed," he said.

"Do you want me and Billy to walk home with you?" Beth said. "You don't seem yourself, Garrett. We're really worried."

Garrett pulled his hand away from hers. "I don't think that's such a good idea. I don't want to put you guys in any danger."

"That's a silly thing to say," Beth said.

"Make me a promise," Garrett said. "If ever you're in trouble or you've done something stupid and you know trouble is around the corner...promise me you'll never say the words, 'My parents are going to kill me.'"

"Is this about that thing you thought you saw last night?" Billy said. "That thing you were talking about this morning?"

"Just promise me."

"Okay, Garrett. I promise I won't say those words," said Beth.

"I promise, too," said Billy.

Garrett smiled and said, "Thank you."

He walked out of the classroom without looking back at his friends. He couldn't bear to see the very real concern on their faces anymore.

"Please call us when you get home," Billy shouted from inside the classroom.

Garrett walked home slug slow. With each new step he took, he scanned every visible inch of the world around him.

Maybe I can cheat death and Mr. Pockets will forget about me, he thought. The pinecone is the key, he thought. But how could a squishy pinecone kill me? It just seems so implausible.

Garrett took another slow, deliberate step and brought his foot down on something. He lifted it back up and saw a semi-flattened pinecone. He looked up at the branches crisscrossing above him.

"They're all pine trees," he said to himself.

There were hundreds of them along the roads and sidewalks in Daleview. Giant soldiers standing at attention watching the world shuffle by below them. And their branches were full

of pinecones. Garrett knew one pinecone couldn't kill him, but thousands could if they all fell on him at the same time and buried him. He ran out into the middle of the road and laughed. "I just need to stay away from the trees," he yelled while jumping up and down. "Ha! I just need to stay away from the trees!"

A bolt of lightning shot down from the sky and hit the base of the tree he had been standing under. A poof of smoke wired its way up into the air and the loud CRACK! of wood breaking echoed down the street. It all happened so quickly, Garrett had less than a second to react as the tree tipped forward, then fell toward the spot where he was standing.

In that second, Garrett chose to dive to his left. The tree missed him by inches, hitting the ground and bouncing twice. The impact caused hundreds of pinecones to pop off the tree like popcorn kernels popping in a heated pot. They fell down on him, pricking his exposed skin, but not killing him. He jumped up and laughed again. "You didn't kill me!" he shouted pointing at the tree. "Ha!"

"Hey, what are you doing up in that tree?"

Dizziness momentarily clouded Garrett's brain. It clouded his vision.

He looked down at the face of a young girl looking up at him. She had reddish-blond hair and clover-green eyes. He was sitting on the fat branch of a very tall pine tree about fifteen feet off the ground. His legs were swinging back and forth. The view from his perch wasn't familiar. "How did I..."

"You could really hurt yourself if you fell from that height," the girl said.

Garrett put his open palm to his forehead and surveyed the surrounding area, looking for anything recognizable.

"Do you want a hand getting down?" she said.

Over a small grassy hill, almost as far away as he could see, he spotted the pointed roof of his school. He was nowhere near where the tree had fallen, but he was still in his town.

“Well, that’s a relief,” he said.

—

Garrett’s mother and father were getting frustrated with their son’s tardiness. “I told him to be right home after school,” his mother said. She got up from the kitchen table and looked down at her husband. “I swear, I could just kill that kid some days.”

They both had a laugh and she went up to his bedroom to search for any clues as to where her son might be. The room was still a disaster, but did she really expect it to be any different from the way it had looked when she left the house that morning?

She spotted Garrett’s Halloween costume lying on the floor. “You silly kid,” she said under her breath. “That was your grandfather’s jacket.”

She picked up the overcoat and folded it over her arm. But something wasn’t right about it. “What...what’s this?”

She clasped the shoulders of the overcoat and held it out in front of her. The whole overcoat was in perfect shape, except for the pocket on its right side.

The pocket was gone.



His Foot Made the Earth Quake

Family vacations are the worst!

For some reason Angus Lydekker's parents insist on taking him and his sister, Martha, on family vacations twice a year. Once in July and once in December. Those are the months that work best with work and school schedules, or so they say. They're also the months Angus wishes he was anywhere but in a car in some strange place with his family. Being a kid yourself, you can probably understand why. Those are prime play-slash-relax-slash-get-into-trouble-with-your-friends months.

It's July and this trip's strange place is a national park in Utah called Zion. Zion National Park is famous for its steep red cliffs, which are located at a place inside the park called Zion Canyon. Angus is in the backseat of the old stationwagon his dad nicknamed 'Percival', or 'Percy' for short. He's fending off Martha's pinching fingers and and glee attacks. Martha is a master provoker and a master gleeker. "Stop it," Angus says. "You're getting spit all over my tablet. You're such a gross little maggot."

"In a place in Italy, there's a cheese that has live maggots in it," Martha says. She knows a lot about a lot...but cheese with maggots purposely left in it? "Horsehockey!" Angus says.

“Your sister’s right,” his dad says as he looks at Angus in the rearview mirror. It’s called *casu marzu*, which literally translates to ‘rotten cheese.’ And I’ve had it. It’s delicious.”

“Ewww!” Angus and Martha say at the same time.

“Don’t worry,” Angus’s dad says. “I don’t think they make *casu marzu* in Utah.”

Angus’s dad drives Percy into the park’s parking lot. There are dozens of cars and trucks and stationwagons in the lot, filled with other families psyching themselves up to have a good time.

“All right, kiddos,” Angus’s mother says and turns to look at them over her seat’s headrest. “We’ve got a full day ahead of us, so make sure your shoes are tied up tight and your eyes are ready for beautiful sights.”

“Ahhh, you’re such a wonderful poet,” his dad says and chuckles.

Angus can’t take any more of it. He undoes his seatbelt and ejects himself from Percy like a circus performer being fired out of a comically-large canon.

Having come straight from the strange place they had woken up in—a hotel in Las Vegas shaped like a pyramid—the three-hour car ride to Zion without a stop for a snack, a pee or even a stretch was too much. His legs ache and his arms are asleep. Pins and needles? More like daggers and machetes! He swings his arms around and jumps up and down, shaking free a few of those sharp weapons and bringing a bit of life back to his body.

What makes this trip extra worse than it already is, is that today, of all days, is his best friend Stevie’s “Big Bombastic Birthday Bash!” Angus pleaded with his parents to change the date of their trip to Nevada and Utah, but according to them, “Adults don’t have the luxury to change things all willy nilly.” Something about work scheduling and set vacation times and blah blah blah. Angus didn’t care. It just meant he was missing the biggest party of his life right now, which

makes being at Zion National Park even worse than if it were any other day.

“Family vacations are the worst,” he mumbles as his sister and parents appear at his side.

“Oh, Angus,” his mother says. “You’ll appreciate all of this when you’re older. You really will. There will always be more parties. More time to play with your friends. As you and Martha get older, the time we share as a family will dwindle. It *will*, believe you me. So let’s turn that frown upside down and let’s have us a grand adventure in one of the most beautiful places in the whole wide world.”

Angus kicks some rocks. “Okay, mom, whatever.”

As the rocks tumble and skid across the ground, the earth below the Lydekker’s feet starts to shake. Not for long. Maybe a second or two. And not a lot. Just enough to make the family reposition themselves so they don’t lose their balance.

“Oooh, now that’s some good energy,” Angus’s mom says and chuckles.

The Lydekker Family spends the next few hours looking at trees and at rocks and at cliffs. Angus’s mom routinely stops them in random spots and reads from a book she had purchased about the park. Over there, she says, “that’s the Narrows. It is the narrowest gorge at Zion National Park. In some areas, the bottom of the canyon is just six meters wide and the river running through it touches both sides of the canyon walls.” And a few minutes over there, she says, “Did you know that endangered California condors and peregrine falcons are among the 288 bird species seen in Zion? Well, isn’t that interesting?”

It’s enough to make Angus want to pluck his ears off his head.

Now don’t you worry! Angus is well aware that he’s not a Potatohead toy, so he knows that any sort of ear plucking would cause great pain and suffering. Plus, having no ears would make it extremely difficult to wear any sort of cool

sunglasses in the future. Unless the sunglasses had a nose clip. But then that wouldn't be cool at all, would it? No, Angus would never actually do such a terrible thing to himself. But listening to his mother list off facts about a place he doesn't care about one bit, while his sister sings *Ring Around The Rosy* over and over again and his dad tips his hat to every person that passes by and says, "Howdy", all while underneath a blazing hot sunshine... Well, that's enough to make him at least think it might be a better alternative to pluck his ears off his head.

But he keeps his ears on and this is what he hears next:

"Ooh ooh ooh. Stop right here," his mom says and points out at Zion's Virgin River, which snakes through the canyons. It's a ways from them, but his mom happens to be reading a part in her guide that talks about it, so she figures she should, too. "Did you know that the Virgin River has four native fish species? Well it does! The Virgin River Spinedace, the Speckled Dace, the Flannelmouth Sucker and the Desert Sucker. Isn't that interesting?"

Martha and Angus respond with a, "Sure is, Mom." While they're saying the word "Mom," a nice looking lady wearing a sundress with pictures of potted plants and bumblebees on it runs by them. "I'm free!" she shouts. "Free! Free! Free!"

Angus notices that she's only wearing one shoe.

The day wears on and the heat ramps up. Angus's pace slows. The heat is like a two-hundred and fifty pound boxer throwing punches at him. Knocking him back further and further from his family. "Keep up, slow poke," his dad says between "Howdy's." Angus tries, but the space between him and them only expands with each labored step. A giant darkling beetle appears on the dirt next to his feet, and then it passes by him. "Out of my way, bud," he imagines it saying. This makes Angus laugh. When he looks up again his family has disappeared over a hill. Or into an inter-dimensional wormhole. Lucky ducks, if that's the case.

A few dozen meters off the hiking path, just to his right, stands a stoic trio of Ponderosa Pine trees. Angus doesn't know they're Ponderosas. To him, a tree is a tree is a tree. He notices them not for what they are, but because they are casting shade. And right now shade equals relief from all of those hot blows. He knows he should catch up to his family. But they know he tends to drag his feet wherever they are and that they should never get too far ahead. They're just over that hill looking at a desert bighorn sheep or a rock squirrel or something like that. No worries!

So Angus trudges over to the Ponderosas and sits up against the exposed trunk of the largest of the three trees. It may be the same temperature under the tree, but because there's none of that icky solar radiation, it feels like it's fifteen degrees cooler. And right now, nothing in the world feels better.

He's been down this road before. You know, the road where you can only defy your parents for so long before they get you back in line? Usually with a loud clap or a command using your full name. "Angus Beauregard Mycroft Lydekker, get your butt over here! Right now!" Angus will give it one more minute in the shade and then he'll have the energy to sprint forward and continue on with this so-called adventure he's been thrust upon. One more minute...

"Pssst!"

That wasn't me, your narrator. It was someone on the other side of the Ponderosa Pine trees. Someone just around the trunk from Angus. He jumps up startled. "Who...who's there?" he asks as he backs out of the shade, away from any hands that may try to grab him.

"I need your help, kid."

From where the voice is coming, it sounds to Angus like it's the tree asking him for help. Maybe, he thinks, the heat is affecting my brain. Maybe, I'm hallucinating.

"You still there, kid?"

“You’re not the tree talking, are you?”

“What?”

“I’m not just hearing things, am I? Like I did with that silly beetle.”

“No. My name is Gary and I’m behind the tree.”

“Gary,” Angus says, “My mom and dad are pretty serious about me talking to strangers. Basically, I’m not allowed to.”

“And that’s a good thing,” says Gary. “My parents were the same way.”

“Good,” Angus says. “So now that that’s settled, I’m going to mosey on my way.”

“Listen, kid, any other time, I’d say you’re doing the right thing, but I implore you to just swing your head around the tree and see what’s going on here.”

“Implore? Is that the opposite of explore?”

“What? No. It’s just another word for beg. I beg you to look around the tree.”

Angus feels conflicted, as he should. There’s no telling what’s behind the tree. If his parents were to walk up right now and see him interacting with a stranger, he’d be grounded for months. But kids, like cats, are curious creatures, aren’t they? And this is a flaw that can be very dangerous at times. Angus knows this better than anyone. Once, he opened up a battery, because he was curious about what was inside of it. A dab of sulfuric acid fell onto the back of his hand and burned a hole down to the muscle. It left a permanent indent and scar. It also hurt for weeks. Don’t ever open up batteries. It’s just not worth it.

“It’s just a look,” Angus says to himself. “I can stay far enough back that I’d be out of harm’s way.”

With that tough decision now made, Angus slowly walks along the outside of the circle of shade. And slowly, the world behind the trees becomes visible. There are cliffs in the distance and small rocky mountains in front of the cliffs and speckled over top of the small rocky mountains...more

trees and all types of squiggly bushes. And then Angus sees a hand and an outstretched arm and the side of a body. He sees a man. A normal-looking man, like his dad, but if his dad wore glasses and had a puffy moustache. What's weird about this man is that he's standing on one foot. What's even weirder about this man is that the foot that's up in the air has a shoe on it that's ginormous. It's like ten times bigger than the shoe on the other foot. And this giant shoe has a sole that looks like it's made from the same metal Angus's dad's golf clubs are made of.

"What's the deal with the big shoe?" asks Angus. "You some sort of clown?"

The man hops around on his one foot until he can see Angus. "I can't let it touch the ground," he says.

"Why not?"

"I make earthquakes," the man says.

"I beg your pardon?"

"If my foot touches the ground, the earth quakes."

"But...but aren't earthquakes caused by a sudden slip on a fault," Angus says. He doesn't like a lot in school, but when the teacher starts talking about volcanoes and tsunamis and earthquakes, he's all ears. "Yeah, I learned that the tectonic plates are always slowly moving, but they sometimes get stuck at their edges due to friction. When the stress on the edge overcomes the friction, there is an earthquake that releases energy in waves that travel through the Earth's crust and cause the shaking that we feel. They're not caused by your silly foot coming down on the ground."

"Sure, that's what they teach you in school and that definitely causes earthquakes. But I do, too. Don't know why. I just do."

"Hmmm," Angus says. "Sounds like a bunch of horse-hockey to me. Prove it!"

"I'm not going to cause an earthquake just to prove to you that's what I do. Seriously, do you think I'd be standing here

in the direct sunshine on one leg wearing this giant shoe if I didn't?"

"Good point," says Angus. "Do you get paid to do that? How long have you been doing it? Do you ever get time off? Does your leg get tired?"

"Whoa, kid, slow down. I don't have any of those answers. I really haven't been doing this long. The thing is, I really really have to go to the bathroom and the lady who I'm covering for never came back. I just need you to put on the shoe and stand on one leg for a few minutes. You'd be doing me a huge favour."

"Mmmm, I don't know," Angus says. "I don't have the greatest balance and if you really are telling the truth, I might not be the right person for this."

"Oh no, hey, anyone can do this," Gary says. "It's easy peasy. And you know, I get paid real well to do this. 'I'll tell you what...I'll give you a hundred dollars if you help me out. It's only fair that I compensate you for your time. A hundred dollars for ten minutes of work. Seems fair, right?"

Angus thinks about all the cool things he can do with a hundred dollars. He can buy that radio-controlled Zeppelin he's been wanting forever. Or that cool video-game system Stevie said he was getting for his birthday. Ohhh, even better than that, Angus can have his own "Big Bombastic Bash" with paintball and lawn bowling and slushy machines.

Standing on one leg for ten minutes won't be too hard.

It's settled.

"I'll do it," Angus says.

Gary claps his hands excitedly. "That a boy," he says. "You're a life saver. Now what I need you to do is slide this shoe off my foot. Then take off your shoe and get on one leg and slide my shoe onto your foot. Once it's on, no matter what happens, you can't let the shoe touch the ground or anything connected to the ground. Got it?"

"Ten minutes, right Gary?" Angus says.

“Of course, kid. I’ll probably be less time than that. There are bushes all over. Just got to sneak behind one of them.”

Angus can taste those slushy drinks already. He’ll mix all the flavours together. Classic swamp water. He walks over to Gary and unties the shoe on Gary’s raised leg. He slides the shoe off and is surprised by how light it is. He taps on the metal sole and his tapping makes a clinking sound. All that metal should make the shoe so much heavier, but it’s no heavier than his own shoe.

“Good good,” Gary says and drops his socked foot onto the ground. “Oh my goodness, that feels heavenly. Heav-En-Ly!”

Unease is rising in Angus, like soda fizz when soda is poured into a glass too fast. But he’s holding the shoe now. He can’t just put it down or toss it at Gary. If, in fact, it does cause earthquakes, a lot of people could get hurt.

“Okay,” Gary says. “Slide the shoe onto your foot. I know it seems way too big, but once your foot goes into it, it’ll form to your foot. Believe me.”

Angus is on one leg now. He bends back the one that’s in the air and slides the shoe on. The second his foot is completely inside the shoe, something like modelling clay or Play-Doh encases it.

“Feel it?” Gary asks.

“Yeah, it feels like my foot is in quicksand.” Though Angus has never been in quicksand, he imagines the feeling to be similar.

“Alright, kid,” Gary says. “See you in a jiffy.”

Gary turns and runs away from Angus as fast as he can, with only the one shoe on his foot.

“Why does that look so familiar?” Angus mumbles as he tries to maintain his balance on one foot.

He remembers all the gym classes where he was always the first one to tumble when they did balance exercises. If only Mr. Popoff, his gym teacher, could see him now. But when

you are on one leg, seconds feel like minutes and minutes feel like hours. Thirty seconds in and Angus's leg is starting to cramp.

"This can't be real," he whispers. "Someone's playing a trick on me. Probably Martha. Good one sis. Good one." Where she got Gary and the shoe that fills with goo is a mystery. His parents had to be involved, too. Probably some elaborate plan to reinforce in him a lesson or moral. Always be present. Don't talk to strangers. Never take for granted how lucky you are. Something like that.

But he's still cautious. He slowly lowers the giant shoe to within an inch of the ground and holds it there. I'll tap the ground with the tip of the toe first, he thinks. Just to see what happens.

He lowers the tip of the shoe. Lower. Lower. Lower. Until it touches the ground, as light as a falling snowflake might. The earth shakes underneath him. Rocks tumble down the mountains. Pine needles shower down from the Ponderosas. He stumbles forward, but quickly turns his stumble into a hop and regains his balance on the one foot.

"It is real!"

Gary can't return fast enough. Angus figures Gary's been gone two or three minutes now. He hops over to one of the Ponderosas and leans against it. "Why didn't I think of this earlier?" he says.

Somewhere in the distance, above the sound of the river flowing and the screeching of the falcons, he's sure he can hear someone yelling.

Yes, that's exactly what Angus hears.

"I'm free," they're yelling. "Free! Free! Free!"



The Cabin

The camp counselors and most of the campers were nestled tightly in their sleeping bags, sound asleep inside the circle of tents set up a safe distance from the fire pit. The whispers of the four campers still awake mingled with the snores of their fellow campers, the scraping of tree branches in the soft wind, the hissing inside the fire pit and the vermin scurrying in the darkness just beyond the campsite.

The last of the firewood was crumbly-red charcoal, but it still gave off enough heat to keep the campers warm enough to continue telling their ghost stories. It was the perfect time for ghost stories; the one night during their week at Camp Pinewood where they travelled by canoe from their home cabin and campground to a rustic forest setting half a mile down Lake Whatcom. In this setting, they cooked over an open fire. They learned to construct a tent and identify different types of flora and fauna from the flora and fauna around the grounds at Camp Pinewood. Mostly, though, they were alone in the woods, far from any reminders of civilization.

Except for the decrepit cabin.

In daylight, the campers could just see it through the trees from their campsite. It looked like it had been abandoned

for a hundred years, all caved in on one side and covered in moss. The only rule the campers had been given by their counselors upon arrival was, “Do not go anywhere near the cabin. Every-where else is fair game.”

Heather cackled and said, “And then the witch turned them into newts and put them in Mason jars. Their fate...to become ingredients in future potions.”

“That wasn’t scary,” Dominique said. “Not at all. I kind of think witches are cool, too. They get a bad reputation from all that boil and bubble stuff.”

“Hey, Dom. I haven’t heard anything scary come out of *your* mouth tonight,” said Agatha.

“Yeah,” said Clarice. “Why don’t you tell us a scary story then.”

Dominique poked at the coals with a stick, sending a cloud of twinkling embers into the air. The girls watched the embers rise and blink out.

Still looking skyward at the billions of visible stars, Dominique said, “One last story then. But don’t blame me if you don’t sleep tonight because of it.”

The girls lowered their heads and looked over at Dominique. The fire was almost out, making her look like a shadow missing the body that should have been making it.

The chill of night could now be felt. Heather, Clarice and Agatha shuffled closer together, shoulder to shoulder, sharing what body warmth they had left. Across from them, Dominique tossed the stick she was holding onto the fire pit and said in a whisper almost inaudible, “There’s a reason they bring us to this spot and it has everything to do with that icky cabin in the woods. But be warned, if I tell you why, one of you might not be returning to the camp with us. Do you really want me to go on?”

“Now we’re talking,” said Clarice.

“Yes, go on,” said Agatha.

Only Heather felt uneasy about hearing such a terrifying

tale so late into the night. "Maybe, I'll go to bed. I think I'm good."

"Awww, don't be a chicken," Clarice said.

"Okay. Okay," Heather said giving in easily. "Go on then."

"A million years ago, like in the 1950s," Dominique said, "that cabin was built by a man named Orville Smith. He was getting so very tired of modern society. Of the hustle and bustle. The pushing and shoving. The take take taking. So he bought that little patch of land far far away from the city and he built that cabin and then he moved his wife, Ella May and their daughter Delores into it. The plan was to live off the food the land and the lake provided. They'd teach Delores the ways of life from the comfort of their own kitchen. It would be a simple, rewarding life built on family, foraging and a deep respect for the natural world. And you know, everything was hunky dory for about ten years. But in the early 1960s, that all changed. Camp Pinewood was constructed a half mile down the lake. The owners of the camp made several excursions up and down the lake looking for places to extend their campers' experiences. One day, they found this patch of land we're sitting on. They didn't notice the cabin at first, because the trees were fuller during the time of year they were here. The trees hid the cabin."

"This isn't scary, Dominique. Get to the good stuff," Clarice said. "I'm getting bored here."

"If I don't set up the story, the scary stuff won't make any sense," Dominique said.

"Geez, Clarice, let her finish," Agatha said.

"Thank you, Aggie," Dominique said. "As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, the trees hid the cabin the first time the camp owners came here. The owners just thought they had discovered untouched, rustic nature, and that it would be perfect for overnight trips. A few months later the first group of campers arrived. It was a group of

girls our age and their camp councilors. By this time, the cabin could be seen from the campsite just like it is now. The councilors weren't sure what to do. They could see candles burning through the window, so they knew it was occupied. They decided, as a group, to walk over to the cabin and introduce themselves. The councilors would assure the occupants of the cabin that the campsite would be far enough away as not to be noticed and that they'd clean the site so well in the morning the occupants would never even know they had been there in the first place. It was the middle ages, people weren't as afraid of strange places in the middle of nowhere as they are these days. So that's what they did. Twelve girls and three councilors trekked over to the cabin. The commotion brought Orville, Ella May and Delores outside before the girls got to the front door. It was the first time in years Delores had seen children her age. She thought she was dreaming. She really loved her little life in the woods, but she did miss playing with others. After a lengthy conversation, Orville returned his family to the cabin and the girls and their councilors returned to their campsite. They could tell Orville was uneasy about them being there, but it wasn't his land they were on, so there was nothing he could do about it. As the girls learned about the nature around them, as they learned how to build a fire and cook food wrapped in tinfoil over the fire, they continued to spot Delores peeking out from behind trees. Every time they spotted her, she had moved closer to them. The campers felt sorry for the little forest girl, so a couple of them invited her to go out in a canoe with them. Delores knew her father would never let her go out onto the water. She knew he would be furious if he found out. But she so wanted to spend time with others her age, she felt the risk was worth it. So Delores and two of the campers climbed aboard a canoe and rowed out into the middle of the lake. They were all having a great time, giggling about dirty boys and dumb

councilors and annoying siblings when suddenly a big wind blew across the water and tipped the canoe. All three girls went into the lake. Unfortunately, only the campers knew how to swim and poor Delores sunk down down down to the bottom of the lake. The campers tried to save her, but it was too late. Delores had drowned. The girls swam back to the shore with what little energy they had left. Because they were supposed to be on a planned exploration of the surrounding forest, no one knew they had gone onto the lake. Afraid of the consequences of going onto the lake unsupervised, of taking the girl they were supposed to leave alone with them and of the reaction of the scary father, the girls decided to act like nothing ever happened. They'd blame the big gust of wind that blew through for the missing canoe. As darkness fell, Orville Smith appeared at the campsite with a lantern in his hand. He was panicked, screaming that his little girl was missing. The girls could see candles in the window of the cabin and the silhouette of Ella May looking out. Orville, the campers and the councilors all searched through the night with no luck. The two girls who had been in the canoe with her never said a word. And the candles in the cabin never went out. The next day, after the campers had left and Orville and Ella May were left alone with their worry and their grief, a canoe washed up on shore. Orville found Delores's hair tie wrapped around the back seat. What they don't tell you when they bring you on this trip down the lake is that they're bringing you here to appease the restless spirits haunting Lake Whatcom. Two restless spirits to be exact: Orville and Ella May Smith. The Smith's knew their daughter died because of the summer camp down the lake. They just couldn't prove it. When they died a few years later from broken hearts, they began to haunt Lake Whatcom and Camp Pinewood. It got so bad that people started to fear sending their children to the camp. Until...until the camp made a deal with the spirits. The camp would give

up a camper to make up for the loss of a daughter. Yes, the camp would say the camper drowned or fell off a horse or whatever, and they'd go through the bad press of having a camper die under their watch, but the haunting would stop. There was no time given as to when it would happen or who it would be. The only hint the Smith's were going to take a soul would be the flicker of a candle burning in the window of the cabin...the cabin through those woods."

Dominique pointed into the dark woods at the cabin. The girls, now lit only by the moon and the stars, looked in the direction Dominique was pointing. Suddenly, a flickering light appeared in the cabin's window.

The girls screamed at the top of their lungs.

Their fellow campers and all the councilors stumbled out of their tents. Flashlight beams crisscrossed the campsite. The beams briefly lit up the trees in the forest, then the other tents, then the horrified looks on Heather, Agatha and Clarice's face.

"What's happening? What's going on?" Agatha's councilor shouted.

"One of us is going to die tonight!" Heather yelled. "We have to get out of here!"

"Heather, you're scaring the rest of the girls," the councilor said and wrapped her arm around Heather's shoulders.

"She's right," said Agatha, who was now crying. "There's a light coming from the cabin. The Smiths have come to collect one of our souls."

Everyone looked towards the cabin. Other than the flashlight beams bouncing over its busted-up exterior, there was no light shining from within it.

The three councilors gave each other strange looks. Then Agatha's councilor said, "It's all just an urban legend, girls. Campers have been telling that story for years. Obviously, one of you has been told that story before."

They all looked at Dominique.

“Okay okay okay,” she said. “My brother, who went to Camp Pinewood three years ago...he told me the story.”

“But the light in the cabin,” said Clarice. “We saw it. We did.”

A big smile crossed Dominique’s face. “It’s just a little Bluetooth light,” she said. “I turned it on with my phone. Told you I’d scare you, didn’t I?”

“You scared all of us,” Agatha’s councilor said. “Now everyone go to bed.”

The next morning the campers and their councilors ate dry cereal in small groups around the campsite. They were still buzzing from the commotion in the middle of the night. After breakfast, they packed up their tents and cleaned up their campsite. No one would have ever known they had been there. They trudged all of their belongings down to the canoes that were tied together on the beach.

“Wait a second,” Dominique said and dropped her backpack down on the sand. “The canoe Agatha, Clarice and I came here in...it’s gone.”

“Well that’s strange,” said one of the councilors. “I tied them up myself. And look, they’re all still tied up. But you’re right. One is missing.”

“Okay girls,” said another councilor, while clapping her hands quickly. “Let’s get our stuff in the canoes and let’s get out of here. There’s enough room in the remaining canoes for the the three girls. It’ll just be a tight squeeze. Let’s go! Let’s go! Let’s go!”

The campers and councilors worked together to load the canoes and push them into the lake. As the girls rowed away, Dominique took one last look back. She saw the beach with three deep lines in the sand that had been made by the canoes. Beyond the beach, she saw where the campsite had been. And just beyond the campsite, she saw a little bit of the cabin, way back in the woods.

In the window of the cabin, a light flickered.

Dominique patted her pocket and felt the Bluetooth light that she had retrieved when she woke up. “What the heck?” she whispered. She squinted her eyes. It was daytime, so it had to be a ray of sunlight, reflecting off of something. “Yeah, that’s what it is,” she told herself under her breath. “A ray of sunlight reflecting off a piece of metal or something.”

The branches on the trees along the shoreline began to quiver. A shiver crept down Dominique’s spine.

“Come on, ladies, let’s row a little faster,” a councilor shouted. “We don’t want to get caught in this wind that’s picking up.”



Dandelion

“Core power is at seven percent, Amaya. Failure of all systems will occur in twenty nine minutes and thirteen seconds. Recording and transmitting audio will drain power eleven percent faster. Would you still like to commence with recording?”

Yes, Inix. Please start recording now.

“Very well. Recording will initiate with your next word.”

September 9, 2078. It's my twelfth birthday today. I ummm...I didn't see myself celebrating it like this. But I've been given the universe today, and really, who gets that kind of gift for their birthday?

Space is a big place. It kind of makes me feel like a fleck of dust in the corner of the deepest darkest basement in the tallest building on Earth. It makes me feel so small.

It's scary feeling this small.

Mom was a big fan of twentieth century science and astronomy. She said it was a great time of discovery and hypothesis and ingenuity. Without the science done during

this time, we wouldn't be where we are today. One of her favourite astronomers was a man named Carl Sagan. She loved to spout off quotes from him and his books. One of her favourite quotes was from a book he wrote called *Contact*. Mom made me read it when I was nine. There were a lot of adult parts in it I didn't understand or that made me retch. But I liked it. In *Contact*, Mr. Sagan writes, "For small creatures such as we, the vastness is bearable only through love."

Mom and I would stand in our backyard at night and look up at the stars and she'd have her arm wrapped around my shoulder, squeezing me tight. Her love would make me feel as big as the universe. Like the stars we were looking at were the size of white chocolate chips and I could eat them up with ease. I don't know where she is right now, but I can feel her arm around me. I can feel her twinkling in the cosmos, watching me. Guiding me towards her.

No more tears, Amaya. You've already spent enough time crying. Tell the story.

The story, yes.

My mother was...my mother is a scientist, too. But her science has nothing to do with space. She's a plant scientist. These types of scientists are called botanists. She's a pretty famous botanist, too. Botanists study the many various aspects of plants. I never found her work very exciting, so I didn't ever really learn much about it. With the pollution and climate issues affecting earth, with thousands of plant species becoming extinct over the last fifty years, Mom would tell me that her science was becoming more and more important. She told me that by learning how plants react to the catastrophic changes in the world, she's able to propose ways to strengthen them and help them survive. And by doing this, it may lead to breakthroughs in human survival as well.

She once discovered a type of weed that grows only in the remnants of bombed-out structures. This weed realigns its atoms to adapt to whatever conditions it happens to be

growing in. She wrote a five-hundred page report about her research and all the experiments she did and a lot of people praised that report. She even won a bunch of science awards for it.

“Sorry Amaya, systems failure will occur in twenty-three minutes. Would you like to continue recording?”

Yes, Inix. Please inform me when a minute is left. Exactly one minute.

“Very well, Amaya. Recording will continue with your next word.”

A few weeks ago I walked past Mom’s office and saw choppy video playing on her holomonitor. It looked like it was being filmed somewhere other than Earth. I quietly snuck into the office and stood very still next to the vintage globe Dad had given her for her birthday the year before he died. I have such great memories of us all spinning that globe and stopping it mid spin with our index fingers and learning everything we could about the city or the area our finger landed on. Mom and Dad made me love geography so much. We had created this great bucket list of places I had hoped to visit before I...before I died. I wanted to see Iceland and the Shetland Islands and the Galapagos. I wanted to see Eureka, California and Christmas Island and Popcorn, Indiana because of their cool names. But you know, one place that never appeared on that bucket list was space. I could see that every night from anywhere I happened to be.

That was good enough for me.

Anyways, I held my breath so no one could hear me eavesdropping. A man with a deep voice was speaking through the soundsphere, overtop of a lot of clicking and buzzing. He was saying that the footage they were looking at was received

a few hours earlier. The footage looked like it was being taken on the moon. There was dark, starry sky, much darker than it looks on Earth, and a rocky surface that someone appeared to be walking along. It was all grayish whites and blacks... and way up in the distance there was this stroke of yellow that seemed so out of place. So alien. The man talking to my mom said a satellite had picked up an image of the object on a routine pass over of the moon. Astronauts from the space station were sent to investigate. As the astronaut got closer to the object, I started to recognize what it was.

And I couldn't believe it.

We were taught early in life that the moon's atmosphere did not allow for life. There was no water on the moon and the temperatures are unbearable. It's why we focused our efforts on Mars when it came to a plan B for planet Earth. It's why a third of Mars is now terraformed, ready for construction. But there on the holomonitor in front of me, sent from the lifeless moon way up above me, was a vibrant, healthy dandelion. A dandelion is often classified as a weed...something to be poisoned and destroyed. But up there, around all that nothingness, it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

The astronaut approached it and leaned down. I could see his puffy gloved finger reaching out. When it touched the dandelion's flower head, the dandelion swayed back and forth. This should have been an indicator of what was to come. There were many voices in the astronaut's communication system. Some were saying to pull it out of the ground. Others were saying not to touch it. The consensus was confusion.

The astronaut's hand hovered overtop of the dandelion for several seconds while decisions were being made. And then the image on the holomonitor went black. It just cut out. The man talking to my mom said, "We slowed down the last second of the footage by twelve-thousand percent. You can see that just before the image cuts out, the dandelion disappears."

It was the strangest sight at that slow speed. The dandelion was there underneath the astronaut's hand. And then it wasn't there. And then the screen goes black.

The man talking to my mom said the astronaut and the two other crew members of the ship sent to the moon to investigate the dandelion had disappeared as well. Another satellite was flown over the area within minutes of the crew disappearing and once again the dandelion was spotted.

"What's this have to do with me?" Mom asked.

I'll try to mimic the man's deep voice, because I'll never forget what he said. He said, "Mrs. Antoinette Milloni, we need you to accompany us on a search and rescue mission to the moon. While we're looking for our lost crew, we need you to study the plant and tell us how it's growing there."

I gasped.

Mom turned around with a horrified look in her eyes. She put her index finger to her mouth and silently shushed me.

"This seems very unconventional, Colonel," she said.

"It doesn't seem that way, it is that way," he said. "But if that plant can grow on the surface of the moon, its biology could help humanity in thousands of ways. And you, Mrs. Milloni, are the foremost authority on plant biology. Your country...your world needs your expertise now."

After that, Mom made me get out of the office. She quietly shut the door when I left. I stood at the closed door listening as she talked to the colonel for almost an hour, but I couldn't hear much that made sense to me. However, I did hear my name come up several times.

As you know, in the mid 2040s, space travel became accessible to civilians. If you had the money, you could board a ship that would break the Mesosphere and take you into the Thermosphere. You could look back down on the beautiful blue marble called Earth that you lived on. You could be close enough to the moon to see rocks on its craters. You could watch swarms of satellites fly by. But my family never had

that kind of money. Space travel was not ever in the cards for the Millonis. It's another key reason why space wasn't on my travel bucket list.

But after Mom stopped talking to the deep-voiced colonel, she asked me to come back into the office. She knew I was standing just behind the door, so she didn't have to speak too loud when she asked me. When I was in the office, she motioned for me to sit down in the chair on the other side of her desk. "Amaya," she said. "In three weeks I'm going to the moon and you're coming with me."

My mouth dropped.

Earlier, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Now I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

Mom told them the only way she'd go on the mission was if her daughter could come with her...as an assistant. They had told her it was an unconventional request, but if it was the only way Mom would go, they'd approve it.

"Sorry to cut in, Amaya, but I must inform you that a fracture has appeared in the polymer of your spacesuit: Right thigh. Should this fracture tear, there will be an instant loss in pressure and you will be crushed instantly."

Please ignore and continue recording, Inix.

"Very well, Amaya. Recording will continue with your next word."

We went through two weeks of intense training. They even made a size-appropriate space suit for me. Mom and me, we went through all sorts of training sessions: to learn to walk in the suits in zero gravity, to learn to eat in space and go to the bathroom...that was a weird one. It was in these training sessions that I met Inix for the first time and learned how to interact with her. One training session in particular I

really liked was when Mom and me sat in this pod thingy and they spun it around faster and faster and faster and faster. It was like an amusement park ride. It went so fast it felt like my skin was peeling off my body. They said it was to test our ability to manage g-force. Mom threw up, but I laughed and screamed the whole time. It was so much fun. That training made a lot of sense when we boarded the ship and lifted off into space. It takes a lot of energy and speed and force for a ship to get into space. If your body can't handle it, you just can't do it.

The idea was for us to be in space for four days. My part was pretty easy. I had to carry Mom's research equipment and help her with her notes. I had to help her any way I could. She told me she wanted me to be a barnacle, attached to her all the time.

Mom wouldn't let go of me from the second we launched. And the higher we climbed, the tighter her grip got. I wanted to tell her she was hurting me, but the pain was okay, because I know I was there more for the support than for carrying her stuff. Mom didn't like heights. She didn't like flying. They were two of her greatest fears.

Government space travel is nothing like consumer space travel. There were no windows in the part of the ship I was in, so I couldn't see the Earth getting smaller and smaller behind me. The seats weren't even that comfortable and the belt around my waist and across my chest was so tight, I could barely breath. Hearing the ship's pilot say in my helmet comm, "We've touched down on the surface of the moon. Prepare to disembark," made me feel the same way I feel when I reach the end of being grounded for two weeks and I get back all the things I lost.

Once the engines were off and cooled, we checked our spacesuits and our systems the way we were taught in training, we retrieved our equipment from secured hatches in the ship and we engaged our gravity boots. Then there was this

loud, echo-y whooshing sound and a door in the floor of the compartment we were in slid open revealing a ladder and a rocky, white surface.

“Do not let go of me,” Mom said as we climbed down the ladder.

There is about one-sixth the Earth’s gravity on the moon, so everything feels lighter and dreamier. Mom’s equipment on Earth weighed almost a hundred pounds, but on the moon, it was like carrying our cat Rufus on my back. I felt like an Olympic weightlifter or a superhero. I felt invincible and magical. When my feet touched the ground, they kicked up loose rocks and moon dirt, making it all swirl around my legs in a strange dance before it floated back down to the ground and settled.

I had not been briefed on any of the technical aspects of the mission, because I’m a kid and I really wasn’t supposed to be there in the first place. Mom said she was my commander and her direction was the only direction I was to follow when it came to doing my part. Mom and I started walking one way from the ship and the three other crew members split off in three separate directions the other way from the ship. Mom had a GPS hologram in front of her directing us toward the site where the dandelion was growing. It wasn’t far, because I could see a tiny stroke of yellow at the horizon line.

But before I tell you about what happened next...before I tell you what happened to us, I want to tell you how I felt when I first saw the Earth. I had been so transfixed with the floating rocks and dirt at my feet I hadn’t yet looked up. It was my mother saying, “Amaya, look!” that made me raise my head. And there, in the black of space was this cloudy blue half circle, triple...no, quadruple the size of the moon when you look up at it from Earth. My eyes widened and my heartbeat strengthened. I suddenly felt overwhelming love for my home planet and just as suddenly, I felt overwhelming homesickness. I had only been gone for two days, but I wanted

to be back there so badly. Everything I had ever hated about life on Earth left my mind. From where I stood, the Earth's fragility and strength became so much more clear. I wanted to reach my arms out and hug it and tell it everything was going to be alright. I wanted to tell it that we're fixing the damage we caused from all those years of neglect...from taking it for granted. Tears fell from my eyes. My bottom lip quivered. Inix felt the change in my body and reassured me that what Mom was doing right now, and what scientists all over the world and our solar system were doing right now, was for the betterment of the Earth and for humanity. I had never felt such love as I did in those few moments my mother and I looked up at the Earth together.

Voices of the other crew members were clicking on and off in my helmet. I tried ignoring them, but what they were saying became too distracting. Someone found a patch torn off a spacesuit. Someone else found a piece of visor from the helmet of another spacesuit. Then I heard someone say they found blood. "There's so much blood," they said.

Mom's voice rose up over the panic. "Inix, cut all communications in Amaya's helmet, save for mine," she said.

"Yes, Antoinette," Inix replied.

And instantly, I could only hear Mom's heavy breathing.

She tugged on my arm. "Amaya, let's get moving," she said, trying not to sound worried or scared. But both of those things were in her voice. She couldn't hide them from me.

We reached the dandelion in fifteen minutes. As we neared it, I thought I was seeing a mirage. The dandelion looked so out of place. It looked so fake. So perfect.

"This isn't right," Mom said. "There's nothing on the moon that would allow this plant to grow. Absolutely nothing."

Mom turned to me after she said that. She looked into my eyes and she said, "I'm sorry I brought you here, Amaya. I thought a mother-daughter adventure was what we needed to get ourselves out of our sadness."

As she spoke to me, the dandelion disappeared underneath the surface. It was like a hand we couldn't see had grabbed its roots and pulled it down with great force. A second later the ground around us exploded, sending rock and dirt upwards. Mom grabbed me and pulled me into her spacesuit. There was so much noise and confusion. The moon dust in the air blinded us. It paralyzed us in place. I could only feel Mom's grasp on me.

And then I couldn't.

There is a weird fish I once learned about in school called the Pacific footballfish. It lives in dark ocean waters thousands of feet down and has this arm-like filament that extends outward from its head. At the end of the filament is a bulb, which it can light up. It uses this bulb to attract prey. In the pitch dark waters, a little light can be hypnotic. So, the Pacific footballfish lurks in the dark, waiting for smaller fish, or squid, or crustaceans to cross its paths. And that's when it strikes. It pulls its prey into its mouth, where its needle-sharp teeth shred the unlucky sea creature to teeny tiny bits.

I only saw flashes of the creature with the dandelion attached to its head. It was the size of a school bus, but moved as fast as a cheetah. It had a long tail and scales and claws and giant teeth. Its teeth were as big as me and they were pointed. I screamed. I screamed so loud, but my scream was suddenly lost in all of the other screams now echoing through my helmet. For some reason Inix had turned my comms back on. I could now hear through the comms that the creature circling around me wasn't the only creature on the moon with us.

Rocks smashed down. On me. All around me. Trying to deke them out was hopeless, because of the cloud of dust and dirt I was trapped in.

I remember moments of clarity, though. Moments between seeing the writhing beast and the chaos it was causing, when the Earth appeared. When I could see stars twinkling. It was

in one of those moments of clarity that I saw the creature's tail coming at me. I closed my eyes as it connected with my body with such a force that I was thrown high up in the air. The collision caused the antigravity in my spacesuit and in my boots to fail. It caused me to keep going up.

Up. Up . Up.

I was winded.

And hurt.

Oh gosh, I hurt so so much. Everything inside of me felt broken.

Focusing on the pain and my inability to catch my breath made me ignore the distance now growing between me and the moon's surface. It also made me not see the creature coming at me again. The creature hit me hard. And this time, it knocked me unconscious.

When I came to, I was out here. Floating aimlessly.

"All life-preserving systems and all remaining communications will fail in one minute, Amaya. If you're going to send this recording, please send it now."

Thank you, Inix. Continue recording.

"Very well. Good bye, Amaya."

Good bye, Inix. Thank you for being here with me.

"You're welcome, Amaya. Recording will continue with your next word."

I cried a lot the first few hours. I cried and I screamed for help. Inix told me over and over again that direct communication was down. But she also told me she could relay a recorded message to Earth off a passing satellite. That got me thinking about everything I've ever done and

everything I never got to do. And then I cried even more. I thought about Mom and that look in her eyes when she turned around. She always talked about her mother's sense. I think it really kicked in at that moment. I missed her so much those first few hours out here alone. I was so scared without her. But then...but then this unbelievable calm came over me. The sadness of loss I felt was replaced by the anticipation of what would be gained from this experience. Mom and I didn't talk a lot about Dad after he died. But when we were at our saddest, we would remind ourselves that one day we'd be with him again. One day we'd all be together as a happy family again.

It's my twelfth birthday today. The stars are in attendance and the gifts coming to me are endless. So let me share one of these gifts with you: this message. I send it so no more lives are lost. So one more mystery is solved. I know it's sometimes hard to believe what kids say, but believe me when I say this... Stop going to the moon! There is only pain and death there. If anything, try to secure it. Put a giant cage around it so those creatures can never leave.

Thank you for listening. Thank you for continuing to work on saving those who are left. Thank you.

Inix, se—



Something's Wrong With Igby's Brother

Sammy dropped the black crayon on the kitchen table and watched it roll over the edge and onto the floor. When it abruptly stopped rolling, he looked up at his family and said, "I drew a family portrait. Just like the one in the hallway. Except we're not all wearing white t-shirts in this one."

"Let's see what you got there, Bud," Sammy's dad said.

Sammy held up the drawing with both his little hands and his dad snatched it from him. "Well, look at that, it's all of us," he said. "There's Mom and Igby and me and you and... wait, who's that Sammy?"

Behind the crudely drawn stick people that represented each member of the Collins family was a drawing much more realized than the other four, but lighter, like an eraser had gently passed over it. It was a grey figure in the shape of a very tall person who's head was cut off by the top of the page. The person appeared to be wearing a baggy coat and gloves that were five sizes too big for the hands inside them. One of these gloved hands was rested on Sammy's shoulder.

Sammy's dad held the drawing up so Igby and his mom could see it, too. He pointed at the figure and repeated, "Who's that, Sammy?"

Sammy got all antsy in his chair. He scratched his head and a little chunk of his blond hair stuck up straight. He chewed on his bottom lip and said, "Mmmm. Ummm."

"There's just the four of us in the family," Igby said. "Who's the tall guy?"

Sammy's eyes moved from his family to a spot just over his dad's shoulder, near the kitchen door. "Should I tell them," he said.

Everyone slowly turned and looked at the spot where Sammy had directed his question, but no one was there.

"Who are you talking to, Sweetie?" his mom asked.

"Okay," Sammy said. "I won't."

The family returned their confused looks to Sammy who had a big fake smile plastered on his face. "It's just grandpa Joe," he said. "I thought I'd add him to the drawing, because I never got to meet him."

Sammy's dad laughed uncomfortably. "I don't remember my dad being that tall, but okay...if that's what you say."

Sammy excused himself from the kitchen table and ran off leaving the drawing with his family. "Well that was weird," Igby said.

"He's six years old, Igby," his mother said. "You know how active a six year old's imagination can be."

"But Mom, I think something's wrong with him. I hear him sometimes at night..." Igby said and lowered his voice to a near whisper, "talking."

"Everyone talks in their sleep, Igby. I've heard you talk in your sleep many times."

"No, Mom. I hear him talking to other people. Like he's having conversations."

"People?" Igby's dad said.

"I don't know if it's actually people," Igby said. "But he's talking to something and there's more than one of these somethings he's talking to."

"Oh, you two," Igby's Mom said. "Kids play. He's probably

just playing with all his toys. No need to always make it into something spooky.”

Igby climbed into bed after a long day of learning about parallelograms and the Parthenon, after soccer practice and tuba lessons, after his allotted half hour of video games and mandatory hour of reading. Most nights it took him forever to fall asleep, but his exhaustion level was at an all-time high and he knew he'd be snoring the second his head hit the pillow.

He turned his bedside light out and flopped over onto his side. As he lowered his head down onto his pillow he heard a scratching, shuffling sound. It was coming from under his bed.

The bed shifted.

Igby sat up and turned the light back on. He looked over the edge of the bed and caught a glimpse of bluish-grey hair disappearing underneath it. His mattress started to rise. Then it lowered back down.

Rise.

Lower.

Something was under his bed. And it was huge.

Igby grabbed the sides of his mattress so he wouldn't tumble off of it and he rode it like an innertube in a topsy-turvy waterslide. He opened his mouth to scream for his mom and dad, but his scream was cut off when his bedroom door swung open.

The bed dropped back down to where it was supposed to be.

Sammy stood in the doorway looking at his terrified older brother. “Igby, I need a hand with something,” he said after a few seconds of silence.

“Sammy, go get Mom and Dad, quick!” Igby screamed.

“There’s something under my bed. I think it might be a bear, or a Sasquatch.”

Sammy got down on his knees and bent over, placing the top of his head on the floor. A perfect angle to see under Igby’s bed. Sammy awkwardly nodded his head and stood back up.

“Igby, there isn’t anything under your bed,” he said, then repeated, “I really need a hand with something.”

The bed was vibrating. Something, indeed, was still under it, breathing heavily. “What’s going on, Sammy?” Igby asked. “What’s under the bed? Did you let an animal into the house?”

“There’s nothing under your bed, Igby,” Sammy said in a tone that suggested there obviously was. “And what you shouldn’t do is check, because I really wouldn’t want you to be eaten by the thing that *isn’t* under your bed. So I think what you should do right now is slowly get out of your bed and come and give me a hand.”

Igby didn’t know what to think. His brother had become quite the little joker since he turned six a few months back. It was like a switch had been flipped when they all sang, “Happy Birthday” and a personality that hadn’t existed up until that point was turned on. Sammy would run around the house saying the most outlandish things and always chuckle afterwards and say, “Just joking” or “J K.” But in the past few days, the “J Ks” and “Just jokings” stopped being said. Sammy, instead, started redirecting his family away from anything strange that might be happening. Something had changed with Sammy, but Igby wasn’t about to test his luck finding out what that something was.

“Okay, Sammy,” he said and carefully slid out of his bed. “Let’s go give you a hand.”

He took hold of Sammy’s little hand and they made their way to Sammy’s room. In the hallway behind him, he heard heavy footsteps running in the opposite direction.

The scream ripped through the house, echoing off of walls and cupboards, waking Igby and Sammy.

It was their mom screaming.

Igby had fallen asleep on a pile of clothes in the corner of Sammy's room after helping find Sammy's favourite toy truck that had mysteriously gone missing. The disorientation from not being where he was supposed to be when he woke up made him fumble and stumble as he scrambled to find out what was wrong.

"Stop," Sammy said, bringing Igby to a halt at Sammy's bedroom door. "Everything's fine. I'm sure she just stubbed her toe or caught her finger in a sliding door."

Memories of the weird day before started to creep into Igby's head: the strange figure in Sammy's family portrait, the thing under Igby's bed. "What's going on, Sammy? You've been acting really strange lately."

Sammy made the same big, fake smile he had made the morning before. Through clenched teeth he said, "Nothing's going on. Nothing at all. Please let me deal with this new nothing, Igby, and please stay here. Please please please."

Sammy hopped out of his bed and ran past Igby and out of his bedroom. There was no way Igby was going to stay put. His mom sounded like she'd seen a ghost, and by the way things had been going lately, Igby wouldn't have been surprised if that was actually the case.

He tiptoed up to his parents bedroom and peeked in. His mom and dad were standing next to their bedroom closet looking down at Sammy. Sammy had his back against the closet door and was fast stepping in place, like he had to pee. Or he was nervous. "I'm sure you didn't see what you think you saw," he said.

"It was there! Plain as day," she said, terror still finely woven into her voice. "Move out of the way and let me show you."

“No.”

“Sammy, stop this,” his dad said. “Your mother obviously saw something in the closet. It’s freaked her right out. There might be something dangerous in there. Like a wild animal or a burglar.”

“It was a skeleton!” she screamed. “I told you, I saw a skeleton!”

“Mom, there isn’t a skeleton in your closet. That’s just silly,” Sammy said.

“I slid my dresses over and its bony arm fell onto my arm. I can still feel it, ewwww,” she said. “There is a skeleton in there and I want it out!”

Sammy scrunched his face. “Mom, I don’t feel so good,” he said and started to cry. “I think...I think I’m going to barf.”

Igby thought, *he’s good*. Her motherly instinct would kick in and she’d momentarily let go of the skeleton she thought she saw in her closet.

“Baby,” she said and placed her hand on his forehead. “You don’t feel hot. Jim, go get him a glass of water. I’ll go get the ginger candies out of the bathroom.”

Worked like a charm.

Igby’s mom rushed out of the bedroom, followed closely by his dad. Igby’s dad saw his eldest son as he rushed by. “Igby,” he said. “Go run a facecloth under warm water and bring it back here. Your brother isn’t feeling well.”

“But, Dad!!!” Igby said. “He’s messing with you.”

“Don’t make me ask you twice,” he said from down the hallway.

Igby peeked back into the bedroom. Sammy was still hunched over, moaning. Maybe he really is sick, Igby thought. Maybe these are all strange, perfectly explainable coincidences.

He kept his eyes on Sammy for a few more seconds, then ran to the bathroom to fetch his brother a moistened towel.

“What’s the deal with your brother?” Igby’s best friend Cameron asked as they hung out next to the soccer goalpost during recess.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, he’s weird.”

“Isn’t everybody’s little brother or sister weird? I mean, your brother is seven and he still carries that comfort blanket around with him.”

“I guess that’s true,” Cameron said. “My parents say they’re going to slip it out of his hand when he’s sleeping one night soon and burn it. ‘Consequences be damned,’ they said. Whatever that means. But no, I was walking past Sammy’s classroom this morning on my way to the bathroom and I saw him sitting cross-legged in a corner near the door, staring at the wall.”

“Maybe he got in trouble,” Igby said. “Maybe he was in a time out. That’s not so weird.”

“Maybe,” Cameron said and wiped his nose with his jacket sleeve. “But that’s not the weird part. He was talking to himself. Or, it sounded more like he was talking to someone else. Like he was having a conversation with someone who wasn’t there. I hid on the other side of the wall and listened for a minute.”

“What was he saying?”

“‘I think you guys are safe.’ That’s what he said. And then he said, ‘but you have to stop leaving my room. I can’t keep making them think you’re not there forever. Especially, when they start seeing you. You told me not to tell them about you. You told me they’d never see you.’ That’s what he said before I couldn’t hold my pee any longer and had to leave.”

“Okay, I guess that is a little weird,” Igby said. “Ever since he turned six, he’s been different. And over the last couple of days, strange things have been happening around my house.”

“Strange things? Like what?”

“Well,” Igby said and thought for a moment how to explain it to his friend without sounding weird himself. “Well last night, I think there was something under my bed and just when I was about to look, Sammy came into my room and convinced me to go to his room with him.”

“Something was under your bed? Like a dog? Or a raccoon?”

“Much bigger. But I couldn’t look, because if I did, it would eat me.”

“Really?”

“That’s what I think Sammy was trying to tell me. And then this morning my mom said she saw a skeleton in her closet. And when we were all going to look, Sammy got sick. Or pretended to get sick. It was all very...convenient.”

“Whoa,” Cameron said.

“There’s been other weird stuff, too. I don’t know if I should be worried for Sammy’s mental state or for the safety of my family.”

The recess buzzer blared. They stood there silent for a few seconds.

Then Cameron kicked the goalpost and said, “My mom always says to me, ‘Better out than in.’”

“What?”

“You know, if I have to fart or burp or cough. If I try to hold it in, it causes all sorts of discomfort and weird stuff to happen inside of me. And there’s always a little gas or air that slips out the harder I try to hold it. Maybe that’s what’s happening with your brother.”

“I don’t think it has anything to do with farts and burps.”

“No, of course not,” Cameron said. “But maybe he’s holding onto something in his head that’s so big and uncomfortable, little bits of it are leaking out. Maybe you just have to figure out a way to relieve the pressure.”

“Okay, well now you’re sounding like a weirdo,” Igby said and ran back to class.

It was a most normal night at Igby's house. His mom and dad watched their adult television shows and laughed about adult problems Igby didn't understand (and hoped he never would), while Sammy coloured in his colouring book at the kitchen table and watched cartoons on the family tablet. Igby sat across from him most of the night writing a report about Shetland ponies. It was their short legs that drew him to the subject matter. Their short legs made them look so goofy. Between writing sentences, he'd watch his little brother for several seconds at a time, looking for abnormalities in his behavior, like talking to himself, or looking at things that weren't there, or doing creepy things.

Since getting home from school, no one had mentioned any of the strange things that had gone on the past two days in the Collins' home. This lead Igby to question whether or not they had actually happened at all. As he brushed his teeth and stared at his foamy mouth in the mirror before bed he thought, is there something wrong with *me*?

He fell asleep quickly and dreamed about Shetland ponies hiding under his bed. It was a pleasant dream.

A bump against his bedroom door woke him.

His digital clock read 3:43am.

"Hello?" he whispered.

There was more bumping, but further down the hallway now. And now Igby heard heavy footsteps. He jumped out of bed and tiptoed to his door. He opened it a crack and peeked out.

Three translucent children, glowing a dull yellow, were walking towards Sammy's room.

"Ghosts," Igby whispered.

There was a girl and two boys, all about Igby's age and all dressed in overalls. Their hair was messy and their faces were smudged with dirt. They all carried various-sized rock

hammers and they all wore boots that left fading footprints on the carpet. To Igby, they looked like they were from movies that took place in the olden days, when Grandpa Joe was a kid.

When the ghosts reached Sammy's room, they walked right through his closed door.

Igby ran down the hallway and flung open Sammy's door.

"Ahhhhh!" he screamed, putting his hands over his mouth to muffle the end of the scream. Dozens of eyes turned to look at him. Then to look past him to see if his parents had woken. Igby could only imagine what would happen if the two of them came running down the hallway at that moment.

Sammy's room was filled with nightmares and Sammy was in the middle of it, sitting on his bed crouched into a small ball, wishing it to stop. The ghost children were sitting on the floor playing with Sammy's toys. A green-haired beast was squeezed underneath Sammy's bed. A skeleton danced in the moonlight shining through Sammy's window. A couple of zombies were tied up to the legs of Sammy's bedroom desk with shoe-laces, arms out in front of them, moaning and mumbling the word, 'Brains.' A man-sized bat was hanging upside down from Sammy's running ceiling fan, spinning round and round. A giant with a long nose, wearing an overcoat covered in pockets was peeking out from Sammy's closet.

"Igby, help me," Sammy cried when he saw his brother. "They were only in my head at first. Now they're everywhere. And I don't want them to hurt any of you."

"How did they get in your head?" Igby asked.

"The kids at school," Sammy said. "They all like to tell scary stories. And I can't ever forget them. And the harder I try, the more real they become. I want them to go away. I hate them, Igby."

Igby thought back to his conversation with Cameron at recess. Better out than in. "Tell me the stories," Igby said. "Tell me all of them."

“Why would I do that?”

“Because...because maybe the stories need to be told, Sammy. I think sometimes we think we shouldn’t tell a story because we’re worried about how it might affect others. But I think stories are like wild animals, Sammy. I think they need to be set free to survive and thrive. Tell the stories, Sammy, and set these things free from your mind.”

“But then they might get trapped in your mind, Igby.”

“Well, I’ll tell the stories to Cameron and I’ll tell him to tell someone else.”

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt to try,” Sammy said.

Igby went into Sammy’s room and closed the door behind him. He carefully stepped between the monsters packed into the room and he climbed up onto Sammy’s bed, scrunching himself up next to his little brother. “Okay,” he said, “tell me about the skeleton.”

“Well, a few days ago Timmy said he heard his dad talking to a friend about keeping a skeleton in his closet. So when his dad left for work, Timmy spent an hour looking through the closet for the skeleton. And all he could find was clothes and a peanut-butter jar filled with old coins.”

When Sammy finished his story about the skeleton, it disappeared from his room.

“Look,” Igby said. “It’s working.”

Sammy continued to tell Igby stories until the sun came up. It was one of the best nights in Igby’s life.

And for one whole day after that, the Collins’ house remained still and peaceful.



The Chemistry Set

The shop smelled like musty clothing that had been in a rubber bin up in an attic for three seasons. It smelled like damp towels used to dry off a dog and left on the floor for days. It smelled like my grandma. It was an old smell, which made sense. The place sold antiques and collectibles from a time way before I was alive. It was a time, when I imagine, dinosaurs still roamed and my dad still had all of his hair. I'm kidding, of course. My dad never had any hair.

The shop was called *Cleo's Curiosities, Collectibles and Cool Old Things* and my mom insisted we check it out. I told her I'd fight her every step of the way there and every step we took when we were inside. My interest in the past was about the same as my interest in my brother's soccer career: Zero! Zilch! Nada! I told her I'd rather go anywhere on Earth than a shop that sold old things. With my dad and Glen, my fourteen-year-old German Shepherd, we had enough old things at home already.

She laughed and called me a little comedian as we walked into *Cleo's*. Then she said, "Sweetie, I follow your every whim and fancy, wherever it may lead us. And I rarely make a stink

about it. I'll make you a deal. Give me fifteen minutes in here and I'll let you pick out something to take home with you."

"From here?" I responded with dramatized horror.

"You might be surprised by what you find in here."

"I already know the meaning of 'boring', Mom. So I won't be surprised at all when I find that..."

She laughed again, then sped away from me leaving me in front of a rack filled with yellow-tinged and faded postcards. I randomly picked one off the rack. It had a couple of chubby, red-cheeked angels playing violins while floating above a snow-covered church and a bunch of trees with burning candles attached to their branches. The text on the card read, 'Merry Christmas To You.' I flipped it around and saw it was from 1943.

"I hate this place," I mumbled, just loud enough for the lady standing next to me looking at postcards to hear.

I put the postcard back on the rack and wandered down the shop's tight aisles. Along the way I knocked over tin robots and wooden figurines with my index finger, I smelled stinky artisan soaps and I turned the handle on an ancient record player.

"Hey," someone said loudly. "Can't you read?"

I knew they were talking to me, because a big sign next to the record player stated DO NOT TURN THE HANDLE!!!! The sign really did have that many exclamation marks on it, too. So how could I not turn it?

"Sorry," I said, "I just saw the sign now."

"Are you in here by yourself?"

I turned around. A lady as old as the stuff in the shop was walking towards me. She had lots of wrinkles and yellow and brown spots all over her arms and cheeks. Her hair was completely white, but it had a little shock of robin's egg blue running through it, which was kind of cool. She wore these big ol' glasses with frames the same blue colour that was in

her hair. But here's the kicker. The dress the old lady wore, which was shaped like a parachute on its bottom half, was the same blue as the rims of her glasses and the blue in her hair. She must've really loved that blue!

I chuckled and said, "I wouldn't come into this place by choice. No way. I'm here with my mother. She guilted me into it."

"Well Missy, I've had my eyes on you since you were looking at the postcards," the old lady said. "There are a lot of breakable and irreplaceable items in here and you're going to have to be a little more careful. Or your mother's going to be spending a lot more money than I'm sure she's intended to."

She folded her arms and glared at me. I briefly saw my grandma in the old lady. I saw the way my grandma looked at me that time I broke a clay pot my mom had made for her when my mom was my age. It wasn't anger in their eyes. It was disappointment. I'm guessing it was disappointment I didn't have more respect for the past.

But how could I respect something I had absolutely no connection to?

I wanted the old lady to get away from me, so I said, "I'll be more careful. Promise."

I guess my serious tone sold it, because a little smile crept onto her face and she said, "Good." Then she pointed to one of the aisles and said, "If you head down that one over there, you might actually find something that interests you."

I felt her eyes boring into the back of my head as I walked away from her without saying another word. What I really wanted was to say, "Lady, there isn't a thing in this place that could interest me." But then I'd have to continue conversing with her and I was just so over it. All I wanted was to find my mom and go home. If I had to go through the aisle she had pointed out to do so, then that's what I'd do.

The aisle was stacked with toys, mostly made out of wood and metal and cracked plastic. There were shelves full

of dolls in various states of undress, sitting, standing and lying flat on their faces. There were stuffed animals, many of which were torn and had stuffing erupting from the tears... many of which were missing eyeballs and limbs. Super duper creepy. Some of the shelves had toy cars and trains made out of chipped wood and cracked plastic and rusted metal. There was so much rust in this aisle, I felt I might need a Tetanus shot by just walking through it.

The old lady was so wrong! Nothing in the aisle was even remotely interesting to me. There were no screens I could play games on or recording devices I could record dance routines on or canvases I could use to paint pictures on. Everything was so very *off* down the aisle, until I reached the very end of it.

Through the various-sized windows in a collection of miniature houses, I could see a metal case about the size of a medium pizza box leaning up against the back wall. It wasn't the case that caught my eye, but the derpy boy on the front of it holding up a test tube in front of him, looking all smug at the glowing orange liquid inside the tube. It was the words written beside him.

...*For Boys*

I moved a few of the houses out of the way and pulled the case off the shelf. It was a folding case held together with a rusty latch. The case was all rusty, too, but I was committed at this point. On one of the case's doors was the picture of the boy I had already seen and next to him was another derpy boy. This kid was leaning over a desk and stirring up some liquid in a beaker while a glassy-science-y contraption bubbled and dripped in front of him. In faded letters above the boys it read, 'Gifford Chemistry Experiment Lab' leading into the words that made my blood boil, 'For Boys.' On the other door of the case was a bunch of rusted-over pictures of science-y things like nuclear reactors and lightening bolts and spinning atoms and space stations, and written between

the pictures was, 'Today's Adventures in Science Will Create Tommorow's America.'

"Ugh, so cheesy," I said and unlatched the case. I carefully pulled the doors open revealing a bunch of tubes and jars with faded labels on them. Most of them were empty, but some still had teeny tiny amounts of different coloured powders in them. There were also rusty spoons and corks and broken vials in the case. There was even a thermometer (stuck on 109 degrees) and an alcohol burner.

"It's a vintage chemistry set. Pretty neat, eh? You mixed chemicals and made big bangs and flashes and the most terrible smells."

I turned around and the old lady was near me again. I shrugged my shoulders.

"It's hard to believe they actually sold these things to kids. Some of the chemicals inside the set were extremely dangerous. They were poisonous or could burn you. I assume all of the chemicals in this set are expired or decomposed at this point. But I'm still selling it more as a collectible display piece for adults than an actual chemistry set."

"Then why is it in the toy aisle?" I asked.

"Well, it's mostly adults that buy these toys. The toys remind them of their childhoods or of their grandparents or older siblings or what have you. These are all collectibles. Not play toys."

"What's the point then?"

"I think you'll have a better idea of what I'm talking about when you're older."

"Ha, I'm never getting old," I snapped.

The old lady laughed. "You are quite the little character, aren't you?"

I gave her one of my big fake smiles and nodded my head in an exaggerated way. "So what's the deal with all the boys hooey all over it?" I asked.

"Well, those were different times. This set was made in

the early nineteen fifties and back then it wasn't proper for girls to be playing with chemicals. The industry of Science was male-dominated."

"What about Marie Curie?" I said, having recently learned about her in school.

"She was alive before that chemistry set was made. She was definitely the exception when she was living her scientific life. A wonderfully brilliant exception at that."

I must have had one of my confused looks on my face, because the old lady then said, "Some of the things that happened in the past can be challenging to understand and reconcile with. But we can't change the past. We can only learn from it and be better in the future."

Just then Mom turned into the aisle. "There you are," she said spotting the chemistry set in my hands. "I knew something in here would pique your interest."

"Awww, Mom, I don't care about this. I think it just stinks that it was made for boys."

"Those were different times."

"That's what the old lady said. I mean, this lady."

The old lady laughed and stuck out her hand. "Hi, I'm Cleo," she said shaking Mom's hand.

Mom smiled. "Oooh, I just love your shop," she said.

"Listen," I said, hijacking the conversation I knew was about to happen between Mom and Cleo. "If by saying those were different times, you mean they were worse times, then why do you have a shop devoted to them?"

Cleo grinned and said, "Like I said, without our past, we can not change our future. Plus, there's some really cool things from the past. That's why I put that in the name of my shop."

"That didn't answer my question."

"Oh looky look," Cleo said as she glanced over my shoulder. "I must attend to the customer at the counter."

She floated away leaving Mom and me alone in the creepy old toy aisle.

“You don’t really want that, do you?” Mom said. “There’s nothing you can do with it.”

“Ummm, I tend to disagree. I can look at it every morning when I wake up and I can get angry and get inspired to be better than all the horrible boys in my class.”

“I don’t think...”

“Mom, just let me get it.”

I didn’t really want the dumb chemistry set, but I didn’t want to leave without Mom having to buy me something. That’s just the way I rolled. I think the word she liked to use when I got like this was ‘spiteful.’ She often called me her Spiteful Sprite.

Mom tilted her head back and cursed under her breath. It’s what she always did when she knew she was defeated.

—

“Remember what Cleo said just before we left her shop, Molly,” Mom said as she hung her keys up and kicked off her shoes. “It’s just for display. Whatever’s still in there is old and probably harmless, but at one time it could have killed you.”

“Different *and* dangerous. I sure am glad I was born today, because the past sounds horrible! Mom, you know I couldn’t care less about this thing. I’ll just throw it in my closet with all the other toys I wanted but didn’t want. And then I’ll never think about the past again.”

“You’re sure lucky you’re cute, Molly. Because if you weren’t, I’d definitely be returning you to the shop I bought you at.”

“Haha, Mom. Funny not funny.”

I ran to my room fake laughing the whole way.

“Don’t forget you have jazz dance at six tonight!” Mom yelled as I slammed my bedroom door. That gave me three hours to draw and to practice my lip-sync for the new video I wanted to shoot. It gave me three hours to get my head back into the present. Where I belonged!

I tossed the chemistry set onto my desk (a little too fast) and the latch unclashed and one of the metal doors flung open. This caused several of the jars and tubes that were poorly held inside it to fall out and clatter all over my desk. It was a weird chain reaction as lids then popped off and corks popped out and powders and crystal-like substances all came into contact with one another.

When the glass jars and tubes stopped rolling and silence fell over my room, I was able to take in the mess I had created. But the mess only had my attention for a moment, because a little black rope of smoke began to rise out of one of the small piles of (supposedly) expired chemical. The smoke was hypnotic as it twisted and folded inside of itself as it rose up over the top of my desk mirror, then poofed out.

“That was close,” I whispered, but whispered far too soon. Just as I finished saying the word, ‘close,’ there was a BANG! and a giant flash of yellow and orange light. I stumbled back as a mini mushroom cloud of black smoke rose up from the same pile of chemicals, and ricocheted off the mirror and rolled over to me. I quickly closed my eyes and my mouth and prayed that one, I wasn’t going to die, and two, that Mom didn’t hear the explosion.

Mom hadn’t bust down my door after a minute, so I was sure that part of the prayer had been answered...unless, of course, I was dead already. I slowly opened one eye and then the other. Unless Heaven was a messy, filthy ten-year-old girl’s room, then I was sure I hadn’t died either.

The only fallout from the mini explosion was my desk mirror was covered from top to bottom in black soot. I picked up a t-shirt off my floor and went over to my desk. Keeping as much distance as I could between me and the pile of chemicals that hadn’t burned up, I stretched my arm out and wiped a streak of soot off the mirror.

In the exposed slice of mirror, I saw someone else’s room behind me. It looked like...a boy’s room! I turned around

quickly and saw my messy room.

"That's weird," I said and looked back into the mirror.

But someone else's room really was being reflected back at me. I wiped the rest of the soot off the mirror and took it all in. There was a baseball bat and a glove lying on the floor next to a pile of green plastic army men. A toy train was sitting motionless on a circle of track underneath the bed. The wall was plastered in cloth triangles with sports teams' names and logos on them. I think they're called pennants. All the toys and furniture in the room looked like it could be sold at Cleo's.

The bedroom door swung open and a boy about my age walked in. He was dressed in a striped shirt and overalls. His hair was slicked back and he had a forehead full of freckles. He was carrying what looked like the same old chemistry set Mom had bought me. But his was brand new! The colours on the case were vibrant and there wasn't a speck of rust anywhere on it. The boy had a smile on his face as big as a quarter honeydew.

He placed the chemistry set down on his desk and looked straight into the mirror. At me. "Alright Roddy," he said. "Let's make us the stinkiest smelling concoction ever. Ginny will never know what hit her." He laughed like a super villain and rubbed his hands together.

Just as he unlatched the doors on the chemistry set, a woman's voice echoed through the mirror. "Roddy Steven Bing!" she said. "Come downstairs right this very second and apologize to your sister."

"Awww, shucks," he said and turned away from the mirror. As he turned, the reflection of his room morphed back into the reflection of my room.

I wiped the mirror again with my dirty shirt, but this time instead of wiping off soot, I left soot streaks all over it. Roddy's room never reappeared.

"That was so weird," I said to myself. "That couldn't have been real. Could it?"

His name was Roddy Steven Bing. I had heard the woman say it as clearly as I had heard Mom say earlier that she wouldn't want me anymore if I wasn't cute.

I found my tablet under my pillow and opened up the Internet. Maybe there was something online about the kid that would prove he was real. It was a long shot, but I was willing to go long to prove I wasn't going loopy.

I typed his name in the search engine and watched as a list of newspaper articles came up on the screen. They were all written in 1953 and they all had similar headlines: LOCAL BOY DIES IN TRAGIC EXPLOSION.

I read the first article on the list. It said an eleven-year-old boy named Roddy Bing from Marsten County, which was a forty-five minute drive away from where I lived, died when he mixed together the wrong chemicals from a toy chemistry set.

My insides began to tingle.

Had I just looked into the past and seen someone just before they accidentally killed themselves? I started to sweat and wiped my head with my shirt, forgetting that it was covered in soot. "Oh my gosh," I said as I scrubbed the soot off me with another one of my shirts. "What do I do? What do I do?"

The past was the past. Over and done with. I had obviously just seen a reflection of an actual event. Like old news footage on YouTube or scratched up DVDs of Mom and Dad's wedding. Was it my place to try and do something about it? Was there anything I *could* do?

"Think Molly. Think," I said without realizing that my finger was absentmindedly circling through the leftover pile of crystalline chemical powder on my desk. I pulled my finger back ready to see my skin bubbling and peeling. But it was just smudged black.

The mix!

If I could find the right mix, maybe I could recreate the explosion that covered my mirror in soot and I could warn Roddy. Maybe I could change the past.

I picked up the glass jars and tubes, inspecting them one at a time. Most of the identifying text on their labels had faded away. I could read the odd word: chloride, ammonium, calcium, nitrate. It was all gibberish to me.

I swept the old pile of chemical powder off the desk and dumped out a tiny bit of yellow powder from one of the tubes in my hand. I could read the letters 'u' and 'r' on the label of the tube. What I was doing wasn't smart. I know that. Cleo and Mom would *kill* me if they saw me. Ooh, maybe I should rephrase that. *The last thing I want is for Mr. Pockets to take me away.* Cleo and Mom would be so mad at me if they saw me. But it didn't matter in my mind anymore. A life was at stake! If I could save a life, it was worth their wrath. And it was worth a chemical burn or two. Or even getting mildly poisoned. Right?

I added some powder from another tube and some powder from a jar with the word 'car' on it. This was black powder. It kind of looked like pepper or ground-up coal. I kept adding powders, waiting for the little snake of black smoke to rise up. Or for my room to blow up. But it never did.

There was one jar left from the ones that had initially fallen onto my desk. It was empty. The contents of the jar had to be the magic ingredient that made it all work. It just had to be!

The label on the jar was so yellowed and faded I could only read a few letters in each of the two words on it: 'Po u ni e'. It wasn't a lot to go on.

I left my room in search of answers. I wasn't going to get them from my brother, because the only thing he was interested in was soccer and soccer video games. And I wasn't going to get them from Dad, because he was away on a business trip. I had to go to Mom. She had been on planet Earth enough years to know a thing or two about a thing or two. But I had to be sneaky in my approach. She couldn't know I was messing around with the chemicals in the set.

“Mom,” I hollered as I ran downstairs. “Mom, I need your help!”

“I’m in the living room reading,” she said, directing me to her location.

She had a book about National Parks in her hand. She looked over the top of it as I entered the living room. “What is all over your face and hands, Molly? Don’t you dare touch anything in here,” she said.

I had forgotten about the soot all over me. Real smooth, Molly! The jig was up. I was going to have to use a version of the truth if I was going to get out of this. “I ummm...I accidentally tossed that stupid chemistry set onto my desk a little too hard and fast. It opened up and a couple of the jars inside it popped open.”

“I knew I shouldn’t have bought that thing for you.”

“No, Mom, it’s okay. I’m glad you did. It’s just...just ground up coal on me. I looked online. Coal isn’t dangerous in this state.”

“Well, it sure is dirty.”

“I won’t touch anything, I promise. But you know, looking at all the things in the set was actually a lot more interesting than I thought it would be.”

She lowered her book and raised an eyebrow. “Really?” she said. “I find that hard to believe coming out of your mouth.”

“Awww, Mom, you have to give me a little more credit. I put on the dumb act a lot, but that’s all it is. You know, I like the way people treat me when I act like this. They do more things for me and they let more of my bad habits slide.”

“By they, do you mean your father and me?” Mom asked.

I gave her one of the big, silly, fake smiles I’m known for and changed the subject. “This jar in the set was empty and I can’t quite figure out what was in it. The label is so worn. Do you think you could have a look at it? Maybe have a guess at what you think it is.”

"This all seems very suspect, Molly."

"Suspect?" I said and placed my hand on my heart. "You're making me sound like a criminal. I haven't done anything wrong. I swear."

"Okay. Okay," she said. "Show me the jar."

I handed it over to her.

"Should I be wearing gloves?" she asked as she took it from me.

"Doesn't matter now, does it?" I said and chuckled. "Should be okay, though. I've been touching it for a while now and I haven't grown a tail or had any teeth fall out."

"That's not encouraging, Molly."

She spun the jar in her hand and sounded out the readable letters. Then she said, "That's funny."

"What's funny?"

"I think this is potassium nitrate."

"Well how the heck would you know that? And what the heck is potassium nitrate."

"You know those stumps in the front yard that have been there forever?"

"Yes, I do," I said. "I've stubbed my bare foot on them many times."

"Last week your dad and I decided to go get something to get rid of them. It's called stump remover."

"Real clever name," I said and chuckled.

"Well, one of the main ingredients in it is potassium nitrate. Stay away from this stuff, okay?"

Stump remover. What a strange thing to exist on our planet. I thought tractors and shovels were used to remove stumps. Not chemicals. But it was the answer I was looking for and luck was on my side; we had some of it somewhere in the house. Now I just had to find it and hope I wasn't too late.

Jazz dance was excruciating. I couldn't focus on any of the steps and constantly bumped into the other girls. Everyone kept asking me if I was alright. Of course I said I was fine. I told them I had a big spelling test in the morning that was distracting me. As rotten as I could be at times, I tried to minimize my lying. History had proven to me that lies really were more trouble than they were worth.

My nightly routine usually included an hour in front of the TV at night, but after my late dinner I went straight to my room. I once again used the spelling test as my excuse. "Gotta study hard for it," I had said. "The top speller gets into the school's big spelling bee next month."

Mom bought it, but I don't think my brother did. He had scoffed at my excuse and said, "How do you spell liar liar pants on fire?"

I leaned up against the back of my bedroom door and listened for teeth being brushed and lights being turned out and doors being closed. When I was sure everyone was asleep, I retrieved the flashlight in my closet and headed down to the basement. The basement was where all of the gardening supplies were kept. It was also where I had heard ghosts on more than one occasion and seen a couple of rats the size of cats. But if the stump remover was anywhere, it would be there. Sacrifices had to be made!

I tiptoed down the stairs, stepping over the two steps that had creaks in them. I knew every spot in the house that made a sound when pressure was applied. I was a pro at sneaking around at night when everyone was asleep. That was the time when I'd get extra slices of pie or watch another hour of television without anyone knowing. It was the time when I could do anything I wanted and no one would question what I was doing.

When I got to the basement stairs I was far enough from everyone's bedroom door that I could turn the light on without causing suspicion.

The basement was split into four sections. Dad had labeled these sections: outside junk, inside Christmas junk, inside-slash-outside cleaning junk, and old stuff we should've thrown out years ago. I went to the cleaning corner of the basement and shuffled through brooms and rakes and car-wash soap and scrubbies in various stages of decomposition. Behind a box of Borax I spotted a yellow pail. I shined my flashlight on it and saw a picture of a stump.

Just to play it safe, I found a pair of rubber cleaning gloves and slipped them on. I took the pail of stump remover and quietly made my way back to my room.

My heart was starting to race, the same way it did before I went on the rollercoaster down at Playland. I didn't know what I was doing, but it felt significant. Like it was going to change the world. If I could save Roddy, maybe he'd grow up to be a famous scientist who discovers a cure for cancer or a politician that ends world hunger.

With my door shut and only my flashlight lighting up my room, I unscrewed the lid on the pail of stump remover and tipped it over the pile of chemical powder on my desk. A pinch of the salt-like material inside the pail sprinkled onto the pile, but no smoke appeared. I sprinkled a little more onto the pile, but still no smoke.

I put the pail down and put my gloved index finger in the pile and mixed it up. There was no chemical reaction. "Come on. Come on. Come on," I whispered. I picked up the random jars and tubes with chemicals still in them that were lying all over my desk and I started mixing the remaining chemicals all together. Nothing was working.

And then, they were all empty.

I started crying, which was strange for me. It happened without me forcing it, like I did when I wanted ice-cream or a little more attention. I stumbled back against my bedroom door and slid down to the floor. I cried and cried until I fell asleep and slumped over.

It was Mom pushing the door against me that woke me up the next morning. I was still in my clothes from the day before and I still had the rubber gloves on my hands.

"Molly, what's going on in here?" she asked when she squeezed through my door and saw my room, which was even more of a disaster than usual. "Molly, your desk is foaming. Is that..."

I peeled the rubber gloves off and stood up and wrapped my arms around Mom's waist and cried.

"Oh Molly, what's wrong?" she asked, pulling me in close to her.

I looked up at her with tears rolling down my face. "Mom," I said, "I just don't understand anything."

"It's okay, Molly. It really is," she said. "You're only ten years old. You'll live and learn as you grow. One day you'll understand everything you want to understand. Right now, though, let's clean up your room and get you ready for the day, okay?"

"Okay, Mom."

—

The next weekend Mom and I were downtown again. She was doing some banking next to *Cleo's Curiosities, Collectibles and Cool Old Things*. I asked if I could go into the shop. Mom did the eyebrow raise thing she does when she thinks I'm up to no good.

"It's all good, Mom. I just...want to say hi to Cleo. I won't leave the shop, I promise."

"Fine," Mom said. "I'll be ten minutes."

When I walked in, Cleo was at the counter helping a lady who had an old orange lamp in her hands. Cleo spotted me and held up a finger. I assumed it meant she'd come see me when she was done helping the lady.

And she did.

“I remember you,” Cleo said as she walked up to me. “You’re the young lady who got the chemistry set. Is it inspiring you?”

I looked around the shop and for the first time I realized just how beautiful all the old things in it really were. The shapes of the furniture and the lamps. The detail in the toys and the artwork. It was all so different from the things that existed in my present life.

“Ms. Cleo,” I said. “Do you think you could teach me about the past?”

Cleo smiled and said, “Of course I can, dear. You’re going to learn to love it.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“That’s a real nice smile you have there,” Cleo said and took my hand.



The Girl Who Drew Mouths

Angelica Friggs was a whole garbage bag full of trouble. At least, that's what her older brother, Todd, liked to say. "Just as smelly, too." Nine years old, and Angelica was still drawing on the living-room walls with crayons. Still cutting up the curtains to make clothing for the antique dolls her grandmother had given her. Still covering everything she could in paper mache, including the dog (on more than one occasion). "You can't cage my creativity!" she'd yell at her parents and her siblings whenever they tried to reprimand her. "It's like a wild animal. It needs to be free to roam and do as it pleases. Or it gets very upset."

One of Angelica's worst habits was drawing faces on inanimate objects inside her house and around town. She'd draw faces on mailboxes and fire hydrants, on electrical boxes and telephone poles, on pretty much anything she crossed paths with. Now it's one thing to damage your own family's property, but once you leave that property and start damaging property that doesn't belong to you...well, that's called vandalism. And vandalism is a crime.

The neighbourhood police officer, Officer Garrett, caught Angelica in the act of vandalism three times. Because she's a

juvenile, she didn't go to jail. Not even kid jail. Instead, she was sentenced to thirty hours of community service for each offence. That's ninety hours where she had to scrub graffiti off walls and pick up garbage along sidewalks and down alleys. But it wasn't a deterrence at all. Even after ninety hours of community service, the day after it was done, Angelica was out and about with a black felt marker in hand. She drew a big smiling face on the hood of her principal's car. It was a white car, so you couldn't miss it. Mr. Sneedy was not impressed and suspended Angelica from school for two weeks. Angelica's parents were forced to pay for the cleaning of the car and Angelica was grounded for an extra two weeks at home. Some of the stipulations of this grounding were she was not allowed to look at any screens, she was not allowed to touch any writing device and she was not allowed to paint, sew, or do any kind of craftwork.

"But what does that leave me?" she asked with tears flowing down her cheeks. "If I can't be creative, I may as well be dead."

"Now, Angelica, don't ever say a thing like that," her mother said. "You just need some time to explore other, less destructive hobbies. You can read books or do puzzles or play board games. There is an endless amount of things to do to fill up your day."

Angelica watched her mom lock up all of her creative supplies in the filing cabinet in the office. It was akin to watching her best friend Amy move away last fall. Sadness overwhelmed her. She ran to her room and slammed the door behind her and flopped down onto her bed, burying her sad face in her pillows and sheets. After a good hour-long cry, Angelica sat up on her bed and looked around her bedroom. The faces she had drawn on her walls looked back at her and tried their darnedest to prop up her spirits. One face had its tongue sticking out. Another had its eyes open so wide, they looked like tea-cup saucers. And one face, the

upside down one, had its nose on its chin and its chin on its forehead. Seeing this one, Angelica smiled again. "Thanks guys," she said to them all. "I can always count on you to make me feel better."

The next day, Angelica's mom took her to the local library. It had been a long time since she was last there. In fact, it had been so long, her reading level had jumped from "Early Reader" to "Middle Grade." While her mom perused books about gardening and fencing (the kind with the swords), Angelica snuck up to the area where the scary books were kept. She wasn't allowed to read the books, but she loved to look at the covers...covers that were adorned with monsters and ghosts and demons and serial killers. Most kids her age would have nightmares from those book covers, from all the blood splatter and fangs and glowing red eyes, but Angelica soaked them up, remembering every little detail, from the torn skin flaps dangling off of one cover's victim to the dismembered fingers in the frizzy hair of a demon clown on another cover.

She was looking at the cover of a book called *Revenge of the Zombie Sharks* when a book behind her tumbled off a shelf and hit the floor. At the same time, she heard someone say, "Ouch." She jumped, but she would never say it was because she was scared. She placed *Revenge of the Zombie Sharks* back on the shelf and picked the book up off the floor. The book's cover was mottled brown, like it had gotten wet in some places and it had a leathery texture to it. A single word was stamped, or branded into the cover. And that word was SPELLS. On the back cover someone had drawn a face with black crayon. Other than that, there were no gory pictures or illustrations anywhere else on it. There were no library logos stamped into it or Dewey Decimal Numbers taped onto its spine. Which meant the book probably didn't even belong to the library.

Angelica noticed a page near the middle of the book was dog-eared, so she opened it up to that page first. ANIMATE THE INANIMATE was the title on the top of the page.

Below the title was a brief paragraph that read, *Yes, give temporary life to the lifeless. Make friends with a rubber ball, a waterfall, or even a blank wall. Need a second opinion and you're all alone? Need some advice and you don't have a phone? Got a secret you're dying to tell? Spin this spell and all will be well.*

The instructions to the spell weren't too complicated. They said to say the four bold words in the spell while drawing eyes and then say them again while drawing a nose and then say them again while drawing the mouth on the object you wished to animate.

Four words and a little creative flair.

"Angelica!" her mom's voice rang out through the library causing a chorus of "Shhhh's" in response. Angelica shoved the book back onto the shelf between two other books and ran to meet her mother at the check-out desk. "Didn't you find anything?" her mother asked when she noticed Angelica's hands were empty.

"I did," Angelica replied and tapped her temple. "It's all in here."

"That's not how going to the library and reading works."

"Does for me. Can we go home now?"

"Okay okay, Angelica."

On the ride home Angelica repeated the four words in the spell under her breath. There was no way she was going to forget them.

"What's that gibberish you're mumbling, Angelica?" her mom asked.

"It's not gibberish, Mom. It's what's going to keep me busy while I'm grounded."

"Strange," her mom said, "but okay."

Angelica ran straight up to her room when they got home. She fished out a ratty, chewed-up tennis ball from underneath her bed. Her dog Chester liked to keep all of his toys under her bed. The tennis ball was the perfect inanimate object to test out whether the spell was real, or whether it was an

elaborate hoax perpetrated by a bored librarian. The tennis ball was basically garbage anyways, so drawing on it wasn't going to make any difference to anyone of importance..

Angelica unzipped her pillow case and quietly retrieved the felt pen she had hid in it before her mom locked up all of her art supplies. She had to have *one* pen. Even if she never used it, the comfort it gave her when she held it in her hands would help her get through her punishment. Like a teddy bear or blanket.

She turned the tennis ball over and over in her hands and found the perfect spot for the face. "Inimicos faciunt perfectum amicus," she said as she drew two quarter-sized googly eyes on the ball.

"Inimicos faciunt perfectum amicus," she said as she drew a bulbous nose on the ball.

"Inimicos faciunt perfectum amicus," she said again as she drew a big, toothy grin on the ball.

The ball shuffled in her hand. Angelica startled for real this time. She yelped and dropped it.

The tennis ball hit the floor and started to roll away. With each revolution, Angelica could hear different words coming from it. "Hey..." it said one time. And "Owww..." it said another. And, "What's the deal?"

The ball stopped rolling and turned itself so it could look up at her. "What have you done?" it said in a most serious tone.

The goofy face she drew and the serious tone coming out of its mouth didn't match. She didn't know the right way to answer the question, so she giggled.

"This isn't funny," the tennis ball said. "Not one bit."

"But it is funny," Angelica said. "I'm talking with a tennis ball."

"And I'm telling you not to use this spell anymore," the tennis ball said, "no matter how lonely or bored or curious you are. It can only lead to suffering. You're lucky, because you

put the emphasis on the right word...on the word 'friends'. And I'm one of the good ones."

"I didn't say, 'friends,'" Angelica said. "I just said a bunch of gobbledygoop."

"It's not gobbledygoop," the tennis ball said. "It's Latin and if it's said wrong it can..."

The tennis ball didn't finish its sentence, because its mouth became a drawing again. The spell had worn off, returning it to the ratty, gross chew toy it once was. Angelica figured it had been alive less than a minute.

She grabbed her felt pen and drew a face on her desk lamp, repeating the spell with each facial feature she added. Her careful insistence not to damage anything of importance was out the window. She wanted so badly to talk with more things.

The lampshade shook like it was hair being tussled. "Wow," the lamp said. "It has been a long time since I saw the world like this. Where am I?"

"You're in my room," Angelica said.

"And who might you be?"

"I'm Angelica."

"What an angelic name," the lamp said.

"Are you the same person as the tennis ball?" Angelica asked.

"Person," the lamp said and chuckled. "We're not people."

"What are you?"

"Well, it looks like I'm a lamp. And I have to be honest with you, I'm really darn hungry."

"You need to eat?"

"Everything that's alive needs to eat," the lamp said. "Of course, we need something particular to eat...and I think you can give it to me. I mean us."

"What do you need?"

The lamp didn't answer Angelica because the spell wore off leaving it a boring old lamp again.

Angelica looked around her room. She needed to find something else to bring to life quickly. They were so hungry. Probably starving. She had to help them. But what did they eat?

The faces on her bedroom walls, the ones she had made before she knew about the spell, seemed to speak to her without actually speaking. Without actually being alive. I think you know what you need to do, she heard them say.

She was still holding the felt pen she had used to bring the tennis ball and the lamp to life. "What harm would one more face do?" she whispered. "They'd never even notice it with all of those other ones up there."

She drew two dinner-plate sized eyes on her wall and recited the four words in the spell, remembering to put the emphasis on the word, 'friend.' Or at least the word she thought was 'friend'. She drew two nostrils on the wall and recited the words. Then she drew a big, smiling mouth on her bedroom wall, reciting the words as she did so. When the corner of the bottom lip connected with the corner of the top lip, the smile turned up side down.

"Inimicos," the wall said in a very low, very deep voice.

"Is that what you need to eat?" Angelica said.

The wall laughed. "The tennis ball warned you not to say the spell again, but you did. Sweet, Angelica, do you always do the opposite of what you are told?"

"Your voice is kind of scary. The other two had much friendlier voices."

"You were lucky with the tennis ball," the wall said. "Because you kept the emphasis on the right word all three times. But with the lamp, you messed it up on the eyes. Mmmm, the eyes got a good look at what was in front of them."

Angelica stepped back a few steps and tumbled onto her bed.

"This time around you got the emphasis right when you were drawing the eyes," the wall said and popped them out

comically like a cartoon character. This temporarily eased Angelica. She chuckled when the tips of the eyes touched the tip of her head.

“And you got the emphasis right when you were drawing the nose,” it said and flared its nostrils. “But when it came to the mouth, you got the emphasis right *for me*.”

“What do you mean by that?” Angelica asked.

The wall laughed. “Translated, the spell is actually just a statement. It states that enemies make the best friends. And do you know why that is Angelica?”

“No. That makes no sense. Why would you want an enemy as a friend?”

“Because it’s never really that big of a surprise when they end up deceiving you.”

The wall’s mouth opened wide and a long, slimy tongue shot out from it. The tongue wrapped around Angelica’s body and lifted her up off her bed. Then, in one fluid movement, the wall retracted its tongue back into its mouth with Angelica still wrapped in it.

The wall ate Angelica and was hungry no more.

—

A few weeks later at the local library a kid named Marcus Penny was looking at the covers of the scary books in the **HORROR** section. Marcus was at the library not by choice, but because he’d been grounded for playing video games when he was told not to. Part of his two-week punishment was to pick out three good-sized books and have them all read by the end of the punishment period. Reading really wasn’t Marcus’s thing. He was more into flying RC planes and drawing faces on walls.

Marcus was looking at the cover of a book called *The Maid is a Monster*, when a book behind him tumbled off a shelf and hit the floor. He was sure he heard the book say, “Ouch.”



A Clean Like No Other

Derrick Quigley is a dirty kid. He might just be the dirtiest kid you've ever met. But we're not talking about swear words and jokes about flatulence dirty here. Nope! We're talking straight-up dirt, like the kind your dad plants his pumpkin seeds in. Like the kind the dog drags through the house after he's had a fit of "the rolls" through it.

Derrick wears his dirt like a badge of honour, often proclaiming, "I am the dirtiest kid in the world and no one will ever be dirtier!" So getting Derrick to remove that dirt is akin to getting that iceberg away from the Titanic. Sorry, that was a bit of a dated reference most of you probably won't recognize. Let's just say, trying to get Derrick to wash his weeks' worth of dirt build up off of him is like getting in the ring with a trio of professional wrestlers and trying to pin them all at the same time. One. Two. No way! It's impossible!

When his parents say, "That's enough! We can't take it anymore!" Derrick runs around the house screaming bloody murder. He hides in closets or in the shed outside until they give up the battle. He'll hide there for days without food or water, if it means he doesn't have to shower or bathe. He

knows...oh, he knows eventually his parents' concern over his diet will outweigh their concern over his hygiene.

So Derrick is currently working on a personal best. He has alluded cleansing water for almost twenty-two days now. As you may or may not know, nine-year-old boys are yet to produce the type of natural body odour even a boy three or four years older might. But all of those cooking smells and bathroom smells and being-an-active-boy smells from the previous three weeks have seeped into his pores and have created a toxicity in him that makes people keep their distance. His parents no longer let him sit at the dinner table. His teacher, Mrs. Smegall, has banished his desk to the furthestmost corner of the classroom, a good ten feet from anyone else's desk. People on sidewalks cover their noses with their sleeves or handkerchiefs when they walk by him. It all makes Derrick the happiest little camper in his town.

Just before dinner the phone rings. Derrick's mom takes the call. He watches her nod her head up and down and tap her fingers on the counter as whoever's on the other end rambles on. She says things like, "I understand" and "that *is* very serious." The conversation seems to go on forever. Derrick's stomach grumbles. He wishes the conversation would end so he can eat his chicken nuggets, which are still on the baking pan on top of the stove, probably ice cold by now.

After about ten minutes, his mom says, "It will be dealt with ASAP. Thanks for the call." And she hangs up.

Both Derrick and his dad stare at her, saying with their eyes, "Well, what was that all about?"

"We have a little problem," his mom says. "It seems there's been one too many complaints at school about Derrick's ummm...smell, and until he washes himself, he's not allowed back there."

"Yes!!!" Derrick shouts and pumps his fists.

"No!" his mom says. "This is no longer funny, young man."

You will be showering tonight even if it takes your father and me carrying you into the shower and tying you up in there.”

“Mom, that’s cruel.”

“It’s tough love, Derrick, and I think right now that’s what we need to give you. We’ve let this go on way too long.”

Derrick pushes his chair out ready to make his escape when the doorbell rings. Everyone stops what they’re doing and looks toward the front door. “Pretty late for a visitor,” Derrick’s dad says.

Derrick needs to shift the focus from him. “I’ll answer it,” he says and runs for the door.

“Leave the chainlock on when you open it, Derrick,” his mom shouts as she follows him down the front hallway.

Derrick opens the door as far as it’ll go with the chainlock still in place. The front patio is dark and at first he thinks nobody’s there. He thinks that maybe they’ve been *Nicky Nicky Nine Doored*.

“It’s pretty dark out here,” someone says in a sing-song-y voice. “Maybe you could flick on the patio light.”

Derrick’s mom and dad arrive and one of them turns on the light. They all look through the open slice of door, one head resting on top of the other, like a Quigley totem pole. The front porch is empty.

And then it isn’t.

A man waddles into view from a hidden side of the porch. He looks like a series of beach balls stuck together into a person-shaped figure. He’s wearing a white suit with different-sized circles all over it. The circles are red, orange and blue. In one of his bubbly hands is a white briefcase. His other hand is repositioning the round-framed glasses on his face. “I’m Tim,” he says and smiles. “And I think I have just the thing you’ve been looking for.”

The Quigley’s step back and Derrick’s dad slides the chainlock off the door. “It’s a little late to be selling things, Tim,” he says.

“Ohhhh, you’ve misread me, family Quigley,” Tim says. “I’m not a salesperson.”

“Hey, how’d you know our last name?” Derrick says.

Tim laughs. The sound that comes out of his mouth sounds like tires squealing. He stops laughing and reaches behind his back. When he reveals his hand, a piece of paper is dangling from it. “You’re on the list,” he says and crumples the paper up before the Quigley’s can see anything. He shoves the paper in a pocket and smiles again.

“You are a smelly little man,” Tim says. “So much worse than they described.”

“I’m sorry,” Derrick’s mom says. “Who are you and why are you here?”

“Funny lady, I’m Tim. I thought we already established that.”

“Tim, what are you selling?” Derrick’s dad says with a hint of aggravation in his voice.

“Mmmm,” Tim says. “I sense our little back and forth here has reached its summit. Time to get to the meat and potatoes of this pitch and start our slide back home. Can I come in, or would you like me to stay out here?”

“Tim, we haven’t eaten dinner yet and we’re all starving,” Derrick’s dad says. “You’ve got two minutes.”

“Well goody good,” Tim says and lays his briefcase down on the porch. He pops it open and says, “I only need a minute.”

He shuffles papers around in the briefcase and pulls out a cardboard box the size of a fudgy brownie that is hidden underneath them. “Hello,” he says, “my name is Tim, and I represent a company called **Rid U Of Problems, Inc.** Our files say that you, the Quigley’s, have a problem. And I’m here to help you solve it.”

“A problem?” Derrick’s mom says.

Tim taps his toes and sings, “*Shorten Incorporated and you get Inc. Don’t wash your clothes and you might start to stink. Don’t*

wash your body and people will think, you're not a little boy, you're a piggy pig pig."

"How do you know so much about us, Tim?" Derrick's dad says.

"Folks, all I know is that pig doesn't rhyme with Inc, stink or think," Tim says and squeals again. "But I could smell this little fella from a block down. I was about to head home after a day of door-to-doors when I thought, I've got just the thing to make that stink go away."

"I don't ever shower or bathe, Mr. Tim," Derrick says. "I wipe my face with a damp towel now and then. But that's it!"

Tim holds up the cardboard box in his hand. "But do you like magic, little man? Because in this itsy bitsy little box is pure magic."

Derrick reads the word SOAP on the side of the box. Soap makes Derrick feel tingly and icky. Soap steals from him everything he works so hard to gain by not bathing or showering. "Soap isn't magic," he says. "It's poison. Like broccoli and weed killer."

"Mmmm, but the magic only works when you lather yourself with it," Tim says.

"Then it's no magic I care to see."

Tim looks at his bare wrist and says, "Well look at that, it seems my minute is up. I'm going to let you in on a secret, little man. People don't like people who stink. Take the soap and give it a whirl. Yes, it'll get you clean, but believe you me, it'll be a clean like no other."

"I'm sorry, Tim," Derrick's dad says. "We don't keep any cash at the house. We really are okay for the night. Thanks for stopping by."

"And thank you for listening to me," he says and tips his hat. "Here's the best part of this pitch. I'm not a salesperson, as we previously established. Gosh Willy! I'm a person who fixes problems. And I've reached my quota for fixing problems today. So this one's on me."

He hands the soap to Derrick's mom and says, "Real life, honest to goodness magic."

Tim closes up his briefcase, picks it up and waddles down the front steps into the dark street, whistling as he goes. Derrick's dad starts to shut the front door. In the last millisecond before it shuts completely, Derrick swears he sees Tim turn into a puff of mist and float up into the sky. But it's dark, so he can't be too sure.

"That was weird," Derrick's dad says as he locks the dead-bolt, then slides on the chainlock.

"That *was* weird," his mom says and shakes the box with the soap in it. "Magic soap is the silliest thing I've ever heard."

"All soap is magic. It makes odour and dirt disappear like that," his dad says and snaps his finger.

"Not my kind of magic, Dad," Derrick says.

"Well, there's going to be one magic trick tonight, that's for sure," Derrick's mom says. "After dinner, young man, I'm going to snap my fingers and you're going to be transported from the kitchen to the bathroom where you're going to shower. No ifs ands or buts."

"But, Mom."

"Uh uh uh, I said no buts."

"You're trying to kill me!" Derrick screams and runs away from them. He goes straight to the laundry room and shuts himself in a linen closet. He wraps a towel around his body and readies himself for a long stay.

Back up in the front hallway Derrick's mom and dad haven't moved. They know it's going to be a long night of fighting to get Derrick in the shower. So they're mentally prepping themselves for the battle ahead of them. His mom shakes the cardboard box in her hand again and turns the box over. On the back of the box is the line Tim had spoken, "A Clean Like No Other."

She opens the box and lifts it to her nose. One thing soaps have in common is good smells. She likes to buy soaps that

smell like lavender. It's probably one of the many reasons why Derrick doesn't like to clean himself. He hates the smell of lavender. She inhales a big whiff of the bar of soap in the box and gags. "Ewww," she says and tosses the box over to her husband. "It smells like...like..."

Derrick's dad tips the contents of the box out onto his hand and scrunches his face. "Dirt," he says finishing his wife's thought.

"Exactly," she says. "Just like dirt. That's horrible."

In the palm of Derrick's dad's hand isn't a bar of soap. It's a clump of hardened mud. "But maybe that's the magic that strange man was speaking of," he says. "Maybe it *is* soap. Maybe the trick about it is it looks and feels like dirt, therefore the dirtiest people don't mind scrubbing it all over themselves."

"That's a stretch."

"Why don't we give it a try," Derrick's dad says. "What's the worst it can do?"

Derrick's mother sighs. "I guess if he's under the water, it's *kind of* a win."

They find Derrick after a few minutes of checking closets throughout the house. The linen closet is a new one, so the search takes longer than most.

"Hey, Bud, listen up," his dad says through the closed door. "You really have to clean up a bit tonight or they won't let you back in school tomorrow."

"I don't care," Derrick mumbles.

"Derrick, honey," his mom says in her most lovey-dovey voice. "You do have to go back to school. If you don't, it will cause all sorts of trouble down the line. So we're going to make you a deal. If you get in the shower tonight, we'll let you wash yourself with dirt."

"What?" Derrick says. "That doesn't make any sense."

"It's something you've never done before," his mom says. "It might be fun to try. How many kids can say they washed themselves with dirt?"

“Is this a joke, Mom? Are you just saying this to get me out of the closet and into the shower?”

“No joke, Bud,” his dad says. “The bar of soap that weird Tim guy left is actually a clump of dried mud. It’s dirt! There’s no way I’d wash myself with it, but it might be cool to hear from you what it’s like to wash with mud.”

“Are you guys serious?” Derrick asks.

“Totally serious,” his mom says.

A few seconds pass and the linen closet door swings open. “It’s a deal,” Derrick says.

After a very late dinner, Derrick’s dad hands him the cardboard box with the mud soap in it. “Alright, Bud,” he says. “Try to stay in there for at least five minutes. And try to remember the whole experience. I want to hear all about it.”

“Okay, Dad,” Derrick says, then runs to the washroom.

After undressing and getting the water to the right temperature and turning the shower on, Derrick tips out the contents of the soap box onto his hand. It really does look like a clump of mud, he thinks. He steps into the shower. The water pouring over him feels like acid at first. It’s been almost a month since he last felt it on him. It burns at first, but then his body gets used to its temperature. The water has already begun to break apart the clump of mud in his hand. A soup of brown liquid and mud particles runs down his arm and splatters onto the floor of the shower.

“Here goes,” he says and steps out from under the shower spray. He rubs the mud soap onto his chest. It lathers up quickly into a thick, black foam. He rubs the foam over his arms and his face and his legs. He’s completely covered in the foam.

He sticks his arm into the shower spray and washes the foam away. But the skin on his exposed arm is too pink. It doesn’t look right anymore. He thinks his hand is balled up, too. But it doesn’t look right either.

“What’s going on?” he says as a strange tingling sensation covers his body.

The shower feels like its growing. The shower head is getting further and further away from him. He falls down onto his hands and knees and he snorts. He's scuttling around on the floor of the shower making clink clinking sounds no human should be able to make. The shower spray washes over him and he sees his hands are no longer hands. His feet are no longer feet. They're hooves.

Derrick squeals and leaps out of the shower pulling the curtain down with him as he goes. He slips and slides over the bathroom floor trying to get out from under the curtain and regain his balance. His brain is simplifying. All those thoughts of school and having to get clean and having to go to bed and go to Karate lessons are leaving him. The only thought that remains is to get dirty.

He squeezes through the partially-opened bathroom door and runs down the hallway squealing and snorting.

His mom sees him and screams, "There's a pig in the house."

His dad appears and says, "How the heck did a pig get in here?"

Derrick runs through both of their legs and heads for the front door. "Open the door, Jack!" Derrick's mom screams. "Let it out! Let it out!"

Derrick is squealing and jumping up and down banging his hooves on the door. His dad unlocks all the locks and opens it as quickly as he can. Derrick takes one last look at his parents and runs down the front steps and into the dark night. The last thing he hears coming out of the Quigley home is the door slamming behind him.

Derrick runs runs runs down the dark street searching for mud puddles and dirt piles. Up ahead, a big, white van pulls into an intersection and kills its engine. Derrick sees the movement, but his brain no longer registers what he sees moving.

The van is covered in different-coloured circles and pictures of sizzling bacon and writing that is unreadable in the

dark. It wouldn't matter even if it was readable, because Derrick no longer has the ability to read. The driver-side door opens and a bulbous figure steps out onto the road. The figure waddles to the back of the van, swings open the back doors and pulls down a ramp.

Derrick is getting closer. He sees the figure bending down and waving. Waving at Derrick to come towards it. He hears it whistling now and saying, "Come on, boy. That's a good little man."

Derrick runs up the ramp and into the back of the van. "That's a good little man," the dark figure says again and slams the van doors shut.

The van's engine starts up and the van starts to rumble. Derrick hears snorting and grunting and squealing all around him. Something bumps into him. Then something else bumps into him. The back of the van is filled with others just like him.

Get dirty, he thinks, as the van drives away.

Get dirty.

Get dirty.

Get dirty.

Get dirty.

Get dirty.

Get dirty.

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Get dirty.

Get dirty.



Christopher Millin is the author of *The King of Arugula*, *Fowl, Swine and Things That Send Shivers Down Your Spine* and *The Healing Sand*. When he's not writing, he's sporadically publishing **Crow Toes Quarterly Magazine**, an arts and literature magazine for children, and co-running **Levity Micro Gallery** in Nelson, British Columbia.

Molly

Zinnia

Igby

"Cleo and Mom would kill me if they saw me. Ooh, maybe I should rephrase that. The last thing I want is for Mr. Pockets to take me away..."

Angelica

Mr. Pockets: and other unsettling and unbelievable stories includes ten terrifying, heart-wrenching and tragic tales about the consequences ten particular kids face when they are careless, dishonest, snarky, dirty, aloof and arrogant. Or better put, it's about the consequences they face when they are normal kids doing normal kid things...

Garrett Kline is one of the ten kids mentioned above. He's past his curfew. But it's Halloween night, so it's easy to lose track of the time. That doesn't forgive him of the crime, though! He's sure his parents are still going to kill him when he gets home. Little does he know, it's not his parents he has to worry about...it's Mr. Pockets, who's waiting in the shadows, just around the corner.

Derrick

Jimmy "Fibs"

Amaya

Dominique

Garrett

Angus



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