

# **THE SMARTEST KID IN PETALUMA**

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## Chapter 1

"Norman, catch that flying sack of feathers and put him back in his cage!" screamed Mrs. Babbit from the kitchen.

"Luigi is not a sack of feathers, Mom. He's a *Glaucidium gnoma*, a Pygmy Owl," said Norman from the top of the stairs. He was used to his mom's screaming.

"I don't care if he's the King of Denmark, GET HIM OUT OF MY KITCHEN NOW!" Mrs. Babbit slurped her herbal tea, glanced at the morning paper and said, "And *Luigi* is a silly name for a bird."

"*Doris* is a stupid name for a sister," said Norman as he scrambled down the stairs, "*Petaluma* is a stupid name for a city; *artichoke* is a stupid name for a vegetable." He reached the bottom step. "But I have a sister named Doris, I live in Petaluma, and we had artichokes for dinner last night."

Doris, who sat watching cartoons turned, wagged her tongue at Norman and said, "Stupid Norman."

"Maybe if you didn't watch TV all day you could do something besides sticking out your tongue," said Norman. Doris flapped her tongue up-and-down, rolled her eyeballs, and shook her head violently back and forth. "You're doing better already," said Norman.

"Doris," said Mrs. Babbit, "making faces will give you wrinkles."

"Might be an improvement," said Norman as he motioned to Luigi. The owl deserted his perch on the spice rack and glided directly to Norman's shoulder. The bird had sharp talons, but was used to Norman's touch and never scratched him. Luigi perched on Norman's shoulder, surveying the kitchen.

"Do we have any bacon, Mom?" said Norman.

"No. Red meat is bad for you."

"I'll cook it til it's brown."

"Brown meat is also bad for you."

"What *do* we have?"

"Mom just made some fresh carrot juice," said Doris.

"Wonderful," said Norman. "Do we have any eggs?"

"No," said Mrs. Babbit. "I'm going shopping after work. I'll pick some up."

"Get some Oreos," said Doris, eyes still locked on the TV.

"You know how I feel about sugar, Doris. It's harmful, nearly poison, for growing children."

"What *is* sugar good for growing?" Norman smiled.

"Cavities," said Mrs. Babbit, sipping her tea.

Doris flipped to The Cartoon Network, just in time for *The Jetsons* while Norman grabbed an apple from a hanging basket of fruit. He took two bites and chewed silently, lost in thought. As Norman drifted, Luigi tiptoed down Norman's arm and inspected the apple.

"Norman," said Mrs. Babbit.

No reply.

"Norman!"

No response.

"NORMAN!!"

"What?" said Norman softly.

"You were drifting again, Norman," said Mrs. Babbit. "You know how it upsets me when you drift."

"I was thinking about my science project."

"You were *drifting*. Please don't drift. Get me another cup of tea. And don't let that *thing* eat your apple."

"Luigi doesn't even like apples. He's a carnivore. So am I. We're meat eaters," said Norman as he refilled his mother's teacup. "Being a vegetarian is a choice—"

"A choice I've made for the good of my family."

"—but eating meat is an *instinct*. All we ever eat around here is parakeet food. Nuts, fruits, and vegetables. Couldn't we ever, just once, have some sizzling, greasy, tasty bacon with eggs sunnyside-up, and pancakes smothered in maple syrup? With hot chocolate?" He returned the teapot to the stove and said, "Do you realize I'm the only kid in the whole seventh grade who *likes* hot lunch at school?"

"Where are you getting money to pay for hot lunch, Norman?"

"You know I work at McCormick's Grocery, a couple of days a week, after school."

Mrs. Babbit shook her head. "You're *not* supposed to eat hot lunch, Norman. It's filled with chemicals and preservatives—"

"And meat, and sauce, and cheese. All the kids say, *This pizza stinks. Last night at Round Table we had a large sausage and pepperoni with extra cheese and black olives.* So they give me their school pizza and ask me what I had for dinner last night. You know what I tell them?" Mrs. Babbit sipped her tea, Luigi looked at Norman quizzically, Doris blew her nose. "I tell them I had brown rice and artichokes."

"Tonight we're having stuffed eggplant," said Mrs. Babbit.

"Can't wait," said Norman as he trudged up the stairs with Luigi.

"Aren't you going to finish breakfast, Norman? It's the most important meal of the day," said Mrs. Babbit.

"Luigi and I'll share a couple of mice upstairs."

Mrs. Babbit finished her tea and said to Doris, "I wonder if we have enough slivered almonds for the eggplant?"

Doris smiled and said, "I wish we had a house like the Jetsons."

Norman entered his room and placed Luigi on his perch, a coyote skull on Norman's nightstand. Luigi stood seven inches tall, small even for a pygmy owl. He lacked the characteristic tufts of feathers that look like ears on owls. He had two black patches on the backside of his neck, giving him the appearance of having eyes in the back of his head. Luigi's head swiveled as Norman plopped down on the bed and stared at the ceiling. Norman had broken a small mirror and installed the glittering shards in the configuration of various constellations. On the ceiling he had, the Big Dipper, Orion, Ophiuchus, and Casseopia. In the far corner of the room, directly above his small, homemade telescope was the largest chunk of glass; Sirius, the Dogstar. Below the Dogstar, taped to the closet doors were posters of Norman's heroes: Albert Einstein and Jack London. Einstein because he was a great scientist. London because he left home when he was fourteen, hopped on a ship and sailed to the Yukon.

Norman sprawled on the bed dreaming of the Northern Lights and listening to his stomach growl when his brother Marcus entered the room. Marcus wore his *Casa Grande*

*High School Wrestling* t-shirt and was sweating from every pore. "How far?" asked Norman. Luigi fluttered from the coyote skull to the computer monitor.

"Just three miles," said Marcus, "I've got baseball practice this afternoon." Marcus dropped to the floor and started cranking out situps: *One, Two, Three*. "How's school, Sport?" Marcus asked through clenched teeth.

Norman glanced up at the constellations and thought about taking down Opiuchus and putting up the Pleiades. "Fine. Perfect."

"You sure?" *Thirteen, Fourteen, Fifteen*. Sweat dripped into Marcus' eyes.

Norman decided against the Pleiades and wished he could tell Marcus about Mr. Forrester, Tom Allen, and a girl named Darcy. "Yeah, everything's just excellent."

"I don't believe you, Sport," Marcus grunted. *Thirty-two, Thirty-three, Thirty-four*.

Norman shrugged. "There is *one* thing that's going great. My science project. Watch this." Norman bounced from the bed to the computer. *Forty-eight, Forty-nine, Fifty*. Marcus finished his situps with a groan. Luigi deserted his perch on the computer and returned to the coyote skull. Norman touched his lucky nickel, taped to the base of the monitor, punched two keys and a multi-colored bar graph exploded onto the screen. "Here's the data so far." Norman removed his glasses, cleaned them on his t-shirt, and replaced them. "It indicates that my assumptions about the mice's reaction to a frequency of three-thousand-eight-hundred Cycles Per Second are correct. There are a few minor inconsistencies, like—"

"Are you trying out for the track team this year?" asked Marcus as he rolled over and began his pushups.

"No."

"Why not?"

Norman's fingers flew over the keyboard and a new bar graph appeared. "Because I don't like to sweat."

"Sweating is good for you."

"Yeah," said Norman, "if you're a pig." Norman glanced over his shoulder at Marcus, who had just finished his pushups. His sweat-soaked shirt clung to his shoulders and chest. "Sorry, Marcus."

Marcus waved away the apology. "I worry about you, Sport. All you do is study." Marcus popped to his feet and rumbled Norman's hair. "You'd better get ready for school. Do you want a ride?"

"No. I'll walk."

"Why don't you ride your bike?"

"It's got a flat."

"Fix it."

"I'm too busy." Norman studied the computer screen, punched a key and said, "I like to walk. It gives me time alone to think."

"You'd better hurry," said Marcus as he closed the door.

"Yeah. See you later." Norman stared at the computer screen another minute before backing up his work and shutting it off. He dressed for school and, as usual, his stomach tightened and he felt the familiar ache that accompanied him to school every morning.

Norman never thought seventh grade would be like this.

## Chapter 2

Norman shuffled through his math papers and thought about today's lunch menu:

Chili-n-chips

Veggie sticks with Ranch Dressing

Pear cup

Brownie with Cool Whip

Milk

A textbook slammed into Norman's left shoulder, interrupting his delicious daydream.

"How's Norman-the-Nerd today?" said Tom Allen.

Norman didn't reply.

"I'm doing fine. Thanks." Tom examined the dirt beneath his fingernails. "Just fine, except for one little problem. I don't have my math homework." Tom laughed, with his mouth wide open and his head thrown back.

Norman saw that bits of food were lodged between his yellow teeth. "You should brush your teeth more often. Maybe twice a month?"

"That's real clever," Tom laughed again, reminding Norman of a dog-faced baboon he'd seen on *The Discovery Channel*. "Real clever. That's why I've let you do my math homework for the past two months. I wouldn't trust anyone else."

"Thanks," said Norman.

"You're welcome," said Tom. He snapped his fingers. "Hand it over."

"I didn't have time to do it last night," said Norman, straightening his glasses. "I was busy with my science project."

"Your science project?" Tom pressed his face close to Norman's. "Have *my* homework done by lunchtime." He punched Norman on the shoulder and sauntered down the hall.

Norman returned to his math homework, but only for a moment. The bell rang, signaling the last moment, mass migration to homeroom. Norman tucked his math papers away, picked up his books and scurried down the corridor. Kenilworth Junior High School's halls were cold and dimly lit, they reminded Norman of the caves he and Marcus explored last summer. While walking with his books he imagined that the students leaning against lockers were bats that hung in groups from the ceiling of the caves.

And the biggest bat of all was Mr. Forrester.

He had beady eyes, a screechy voice, and radar. No matter where Norman was or what he did, Mr. Forrester seemed to know. Norman reached the homeroom door just as the tardy bell rang. Big Bat Forrester leaned against the blackboard and said, "Cutting it a bit close, eh Mr. Babbit?"

"I prefer to think of it as having good timing," said Norman.

Mr. Forrester's dark brown, almost black eyes glared at Norman for a moment, then he blinked and moved away from the blackboard. His glasses perched on the end of his slanted nose. He wore white socks with black dress shoes. The teacher hurried through roll call and read the day's announcements. Then he massaged his pointy chin and said, "It has come to my attention," he paused, "that there are students who are doing their fellow students' homework." His eyes swept the class. "This, of course, is grounds for suspension. I need not say more, eh?" His moist eyes settled on Norman for a moment before Forrester sat and shuffled papers on his desk. "Radar," said Norman softly, "just like a bat."

The spitball hit Norman in the neck, behind his left ear. Norman's hand searched out the soggy lump, seized it and flicked it into a garbage can. Without turning around he said, "Hi, Chris."

"Hey, Normy," said Chris, "how you doing?"

"Okay."

"You don't sound okay."

"That's because I'm not," said Norman. "I was lying."

Despite the fact that Kenilworth had strict rules against eating in hallways Chris bit into an apple the size of a softball. "So what's wrong?" said Chris, juice dribbling down his chin.

"I think Forrester found out I'm doing Tom Allen's homework."

Chris took a huge bite and said, around his food, "You're not *doing* his homework. You're a victim. Tell Forrester the creep's making you do it. If you didn't, he'd stomp you."

"What would Tom do if I told Forrester?"

"Stomp you."

"So what should I do?"

Chris finished the apple and tossed the core at a wastebasket. He missed by three feet. "I think you should do two sets of math homework every night."

"Thanks for your help, Chris."

"Hey," Chris pounded Norman on the back, "what are best friends for?"

"There are times I don't know," said Norman.

"Are you working at McCormick's after school?"

"Not today. I've got some homework to do," said Norman.

"On your science project?"

"Yep. It's due next week."

"I know," said Chris. "I'd better get started on mine."

"You haven't started?"

"Nope," said Chris. "Let me borrow that little telescope you made for the fifth grade science fair."

"That wouldn't work."

"Why not? We're big seventh-graders now, at Kenilworth Junior High, Petaluma, California, U.S.A."

"But our seventh grade science teacher helped judge our fifth grade science projects. Remember?"

"So I'll paint it purple."

"Chris—"

"It was worth a shot."

They turned a corner and slipped into English class. Chris sat down, inserted a stick of gum and actually managed not to doze as Mr. Carlson reviewed yesterday's assignment. Norman pulled out Tom Allen's homework, hesitated, then worked the first problem.

Lunchtime at Kenilworth was an organized brawl. Brown-baggers scooted into the cafeteria, plopped down on the cold metal benches and started gobbling. The hot lunch line snaked along the far wall and out into the hall leading to the eighth grade wing. Eighth graders readily gave cuts to seventh and eighth graders, making the sixth graders wait until last. Vegetable missiles and unwanted desserts flew from table to table. Once a week, on cue, two students would start fighting in the hot lunch line. When the teacher supervising lunch ran

to break up the fight the students would pelt each other with carrot sticks, peach cobbler, and empty milk cartons.

Today the air traffic was minimal. A pear cup flew from the eighth grade table toward the seventh graders but Howard Bennett spotted it in flight and yelled "Heads up!" Two girls ducked and the airborne pears plopped harmlessly to the tiled floor. Mr. Lopez, the PE teacher, stormed over to the eighth grade section and started interrogating. When Mr. Lopez' back was turned Chris scooped up the squashed fruit and hurled it at the eighth grade table.

The fruit cup hit Billy Golding on the shoulder. Golding stood and glared at the seventh graders until he saw Chris laughing and pointing at him. A strict system existed at Kenilworth: the eighth grade ruled the seventh and the seventh ruled the sixth. It was tradition.

But tradition faded when the seventh grader was Chris Forte. Chris was 5'11" and the son of a former professional boxer. Chris was one of the best football players in the school and had beaten every upper classman on the wrestling team. Billy Golding saw Chris, then sat down, pretending he preferred pear stains on his shirt.

Chris elbowed Norman, "Those jerks pick on every sixth and seventh-grader except me. What a bunch of chickens."

"What?" said Norman.

"I said they're a bunch of chickens."

"You're right," said Norman. "And here comes King Chicken now."

"Hello children," said Tom Allen, as he approached the table. "I believe Norman-the-Nerd has something for me?"

Norman handed Tom the completed math homework.

Tom slapped him on the back, "Nice doing business with you, Norman. I'll see you in Algebra." He walked slowly away, nodding to Mr. Lopez as he passed.

"I'll be doing his homework for the rest of the year," said Norman.

"We only have three months left," said Chris.

"That's a comfort," said Norman. He started to get up from the bench.

"Norman?"

"Yeah?"

"You want my pear cup?"

Norman nodded and sat down. He gulped down the pear and swallowed the sweet cling syrup.

Mr. Lewis leaned back in his chair, pretending to nap. His General Science class milled around finding seats at the lab tables. Stools scratched floors; voices hummed and buzzed. Norman sat in the back watching Mr. Lewis. Without opening his eyes Mr. Lewis grabbed a 500 ml beaker from his desk. He raised it to shoulder height and dropped it.

The crash quieted the room.

Eyes opened, Mr. Lewis said, "What principle have I just demonstrated?" He gazed at a sea of puzzled faces. "Darcy," said Mr. Lewis, "do you know?"

Darcy twisted her soft brown hair around a finger, shook her head and said, "No."

*She is so pretty,* thought Norman, *I wish I had the guts to ask her to a dance.*

Mr. Lewis asked Clarence Bleeker the same question. Clarence said, "You've demonstrated the fact that, that, if...if you drop glass it breaks."

"When you woke up this morning, Clarence," said Mr. Lewis, "did you know that glass breaks when you drop it?"

"Yeah," said Clarence.

"Then what have you learned?"

"Nothin'."

"Exactly," said Mr. Lewis. "Norman? What principle have I destroyed school property to demonstrate?"

Norman stopped staring at Darcy. "The First Law of Thermodynamics."

"Thank you," said Mr. Lewis. "What is the First Law of Thermodynamics?"

"The energy," said Norman, "going into a system, minus the energy coming out of a system, equals the change in energy stored in the system. In this case, the energy holding the molecules of glass in the shape of a beaker was released as sound when it shattered."

"Excellent, Norman. Perfect."

Norman wished he could disappear into his lab table. Why did teachers always call on him when they wanted *THE ANSWER*? Why did he always feel badly about being smarter than the other students? They were bigger, stronger, and faster and they never let him forget it as they elbowed him out of the way in lunch lines or PE.

Mr. Lewis roamed through the classroom explaining another Principle of Science.

Norman gazed at Darcy, thought of stuffed eggplant for dinner, and tried to remember if he had left water for Luigi.

## Chapter 3

"C'mon Chris, please?" said Norman. "I'll help you with your homework."

"You already do."

"I'll help you more. I'll do your science project for you."

"You're too busy with your own project," said Chris.

"Does that mean you'll do it?"

"Why do you want to learn how to box? Fighting never solves anything."

"That's because you win all *your* fights," said Norman.

"Norman, you've never been in a fight."

"That's because I run away."

"Then go out for track. Go jogging with Marcus."

"No," said Norman. "I want to learn how to box. I need to know how to fight."

"Okay," said Chris, "put these on." He tossed Norman a pair of gloves.

"Thanks." Norman looked at the gloves and fiddled with the laces. "How?"

"This should be fun," said Chris.

Chris Forte's garage doubled as a gym. A bench press stood in a corner. Bicycles suspended on hooks hung from the ceiling. Barbells and dumbbells littered the floor. A punching bag hung from a beam. Norman, stripped to the waist, threw futile, lifeless, listless punches at the bag.

"HIT IT!" yelled Chris.

"I am hitting it," said Norman, poking at the bag with his right hand.

"Stop," said Chris. He removed Norman's glasses. "Now at least you *look* like a fighter."



"There's a big problem with me looking like a fighter, Chris."

"What?"

"I can't see the punching bag."

Replacing Norman's glasses, Chris said, "Hit it. Put your body into it."

"What do you think I've been doing?" He held up his fists. "What are these?"

"Put your *body* into it." Gloveless, Chris attacked the bag with a swiftness and grace that only existed in Norman's imagination. Left jab, left jab, right cross. Chris stepped back and said, "What did you notice?"

"You hit the bag hard. Quick and *hard*," said Norman. "I want to do that."

"Like Mr. Lewis says in science class, observe." Chris threw a three-punch combination. "What did you *observe*?"

"Fists. Contact. Power."

"Did you see my feet?"

"No."

"Watch my feet." Chris launched a four-punch combination.

"I saw that," said Norman. "Leverage. You planted your feet and used your body as a fulcrum. That brings the large muscles of the back and legs into play, increasing the power and velocity of your punches. I get it."

"You're amazing, the way—"

"Thanks."

"—you can even make boxing sound boring." Chris smiled, "Try *doing* it."

Norman swatted at the bag. His punches were slightly brisk. He worked an almost quick combination.

"Plant and throw a punch," said Chris. "Use your body."

Norman nearly rocked the bag with a right. Chris watched him flail at the bag for another minute. Sweating, Norman stopped and smiled at Chris.

"Norman?"

"What?"

"Why do you want to box?"

"I have my reasons." Norman pushed his glasses up with the thumb of his glove and started swinging.

"Come and eat, Norman," screamed Mrs. Babbit. The stuffed eggplant steamed in the center of the table. Doris and Marcus waited patiently.

"Norman!"

No reply.

"NORMAN!"

"I'll go get him," said Marcus.

"No. That boy has to pay attention. He's always drifting."

"Mom, he's studying," said Marcus.

"He studies too much," said Doris. "He's weird. He has cages full of mice and a bird that eats grasshoppers."

"Hi," said Norman, stepping into the kitchen.

"Norman, I've been yelling for five minutes."

"Sorry Mom," said Norman. "I was reading."

Doris stuck her tongue out at Norman and dug into the eggplant, scooping sections of the purple vegetable onto her plate. Marcus helped himself to a giant serving of eggplant and four scoops of brown rice. His sideplate contained a huge salad with sprouts, cherry tomatoes, and sunflower seeds. Norman's mother had a smaller version of Marcus' dinner. There was never any conversation at the Babbit's dinner table. Mrs. Babbit insisted that each bite be chewed at least twenty times to insure proper digestion. It was difficult to speak while chewing so intensely. Dinnertime also reminded her of Mr. Babbit who was killed in a car accident the year after Doris was born. The dinner table was not Mrs. Babbit's favorite place.

Norman, empty plate in front of him, shattered the silence, "I wonder why they call it *eggplant*? It's purple."

"Eat something, Norman," said Mrs. Babbit.

"At least it's shaped like an egg."

"Eat," said Mrs. Babbit.

"It doesn't taste like an egg. If they named it after how it tasted they'd call it a *Slimy-Shiny-Rubber-Plant*."

Marcus laughed; Doris and Mrs. Babbit did not.

Norman turned to Doris. "Get it? *Eggplant* doesn't taste like *eggs*."

Doris slapped at Norman and knocked over her glass of iced tea. Mrs. Babbit pushed away her plate and threw her napkin on the spreading puddle. She said, "Another dinner ruined. I do my best for this family, but *nothing* ever works out."

"And it's all Norman's fault," said Doris. "Like usual."

"I've got a migraine," said Mrs. Babbit. "I'm going to bed." She left the table.

"I'm not cleaning this mess up," said Doris.

"You knocked it over," said Norman, "you clean it up."

"No," said Doris. "*The Lion King* is on television." She hopped over the sofa that divided the kitchen and the TV room. She flipped on the TV and flopped down on the couch.

"Even for a first-grader," said Norman, "she's a brat."

Marcus, chewing, nodded. "Aren't you going to eat anything?"

"Yeah, I'll have some toast."

"I'll finish up and help you with the dishes."

"Take your time." Norman smiled, "*Chew your food. Chew your food.*"

"You're a funny little dude, Sport."

Making toast was a ritual for Norman. It had to be white bread toasted to the perfect golden color. Then a one-quarter inch layer of chunky peanut butter had to be spread from crust to crust. Then cinnamon and sugar had to be sprinkled evenly over the top. Then the toast was packed back into the toaster oven to re-warm. The toast was perfect when he bit through the gooey peanut butter and felt his teeth crunch into the crusty toast. Then the bread wasn't chewed twenty times. It's chewed three times, maybe four if the peanut butter sticks, then swallowed.

Quickly.

Norman ate toast as a meal at least four times a week. Tonight's four-piece-batch was perfect and Norman smiled as he and Marcus cleared the table.

"How's school?" said Marcus.

"Fine."

"Are you having problems with someone?"

"No." *Marcus*, thought Norman, *you sound so adult.*

“You sure?”

“I’m not having a problem with someone. I’m having problems with everyone.”

Marcus filled the dishwasher with soap, shut the door and switched it on. “Junior high is tough, Normy.”

“I know,” Norman wiped the counter with a dishrag. “I know.”

Norman sat in his room staring at Tom Allen’s math assignment. “I’m not going to do it,” he said to Luigi, who was perched on the computer. The bird flew to Norman and perched on his leg. Norman looked at the posters on his wall. Jack London smiled crookedly; Einstein gazed into the distance. Norman shook his head, “Okay Luigi, Doris is a brat, school stinks, Mom thinks all problems are dietary, Dad’s gone, Marcus wants to take Dad’s place and can’t—and *I’m* talking to an owl.” Luigi hopped from Norman’s leg to his arm. “Here’s problem Numero Uno, Tom Allen and Mr. Forrester. Tom makes me do his homework and somehow Mr. Forrester knows. If Mr. Forrester catches me I’m in trouble. If I tell Marcus what Tom is doing he’ll beat Tom up, then Tom will beat me up and I’ll be known as Norman-the-Nerd who can’t fight his own battles.”

Norman snapped his fingers.

“I’ve got the solution. I’ll just ask Marcus to beat me up; you know, cut out the middle man. I’m going to bed, Luigi. You’re lucky you’re a bird.”

## Chapter 4

“Norman!” said Mrs. Babbit. “Wake up! Get that bird off your bed.”

“Grumpf?”

“Wake up or you’ll be late for school.”

“Huh?”

“Right now, Norman.”

Norman sat up, Luigi perched on his shoulder. Norman mindlessly stroked the owl’s light brown feathers.

“I wish you’d get rid of that bird.”

“What’s for breakfast?”

“Cucumber juice and banana bread,” said Mrs. Babbit.

“Can I have a couple of scrambled eggs?” said Norman. “Please?”

“If you hurry, yes.”

“Mom?”

“What, Norman?”

“Can I borrow dad’s big telescope tonight? The moon is eclipsing Spica and—”

“Your father’s telescope isn’t a toy, Norman.”

“I’m not a *child*, Mom.”

“I’ll consider it.”

Mrs. Babbit left the room. Norman sprang out of bed and said, “I’ll consider it, which means, **No Way**.” He put on his glasses, grabbed clean clothes and sprinted down the hall to the bathroom. With luck he’d beat Doris to the facilities this morning. He rounded the corner; the bathroom was empty.

Norman washed his face, pulled his pants and shirt on and began to brush his teeth. He spit, rinsed, and spit again. He said to himself in the mirror, "If I can just account for the minor loss of weight in the CONTROL group. Maybe if I recalculated the amounts of food I'd find the difference."

Chewing on the minty-tasting toothbrush, he walked down the hall to his room. Norman nudged the door open with his foot. Luigi slept, perched on the coyote skull. Norman approached the computer, touched his lucky nickel, and booted up. He read the flashing screen and accessed another file. He made a note to recalculate the data, stored the information and turned the computer off.

He returned to the bathroom, but the door had been locked. He pounded on the door and said, "Let me in!" But it sounded like, "Lemme min!" because his mouth was filled with a toothbrush, toothpaste, and saliva.

"What?" said Doris from inside the bathroom.

"Lemme min now! I haffa *smit*!" ("Let me in now! I have to spit!")

"What?"

Norman pounded on the door, "Lemme min, I fas in fere virst!" ("Let me in, I was in there first!")

"What?"

"I haffa *smit*."

Mrs. Babbit appeared in the hall, "Norman? Why are you bothering your sister? *She's* getting ready for school."

"Fe fon't lemme min the vatrum." ("She won't let me in the bathroom.")

Mrs. Babbit said, "What?"

"Fe fon't lemme min the vatrum."

"Norman, I can't understand you."

"Vat's cooz Foris fon't lemme in the vatrum. I haffa *smit*."

"I can't help you if I don't know what you're saying, Norman."

Norman shook his head, groaned slightly, and swallowed twice. "Nevermind."

Kenilworth Junior High was an ancient, drafty building that reminded Norman of a funeral home. It dominated the top of East Street and was surrounded by houses, which except for their color were identical. Three-bedroom, two-bath houses with as much individuality as the miniature, green Monopoly houses. The only break in the houses was Kenilworth Junior High and Mr. McCormick's Grocery. McCormick's, located at the bottom of the East Street hill, was owned and operated by Paddy McCormick. Norman had worked at McCormick's, on and off, for over a year. He swept, stocked shelves, and broke down boxes. Norman's goal was to save enough money to buy a real telescope, like his dad's. But between trips to Burger King for double-bacon cheeseburgers he had only saved fifteen dollars.

Just about enough for a lens cap.

Mr. McCormick usually had a joke or a riddle for Norman, but today, as Norman passed the store, Mr. McCormick barely managed a wave. Norman shuffled into the store, "How you doing, Mac?"

"Not well, Sonny. Not well."

Norman scrutinized the store: apples and oranges were scattered over the floor, eggs were smashed, groceries were scattered. "What happened?"

"Kids. Probably no older than you." He shook his head. "The second time this month. They break in, have a smash-up and leave. They don't even *steal* anything. I'm asking you Norman, whatever happened to good old-fashioned burglary?"

Norman shrugged.

Mr. McCormick bent slowly and plucked an apple from the floor. He tossed it to Norman. Put a shine on it, Sonny. It'll be good as new."

"Thanks, Mac." Norman started munching.

"Hadn't you be running along to school?"

"No. I'm early. I'll help you clean up."

"Suit yourself, Sonny." Mr. McCormick started sweeping fruit and torn cereal boxes into a corner. "'Tis a crime worse than thievery. This, when people are starving worldwide."

"Did they break a window to get in?" Norman stacked magazines on the counter.

"No." Mr. McCormick tossed aside his broom. "C'mon to the storeroom with me."

Janitorial supplies were piled in the far corner of the damp storeroom. Canned foods were stacked neatly on shelves. Produce bins held corn, potatoes, and carrots.

"Why didn't they mess up the storeroom?" said Norman.

"Then they couldn't see the fruit of their labors. The game, I suppose, is to chuckle at me when they stop by after school to buy a fifty-cent candy bar." Mr. McCormick yanked a giant handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose like a foghorn. After carefully folding the baby-blanket-sized-kerchief he said, "Quite a honker, this nose?" He winked. "We all have certain gifts in life, mine are this store and this oversized nose. And, despite these allergies, my nose is certainly better off than my store." He smiled again. "Come here, I'll show you where the little buggers get in."

The odd duo weaved through the produce bins. "In the old days, before these fancy refrigerators, we kept things cool with real ice. There was an iceman with a horse drawn wagon full of ice. He'd drop off block ice twice a week. More often in summer, less in winter." Mr. McCormick pointed to a 3' X 3' hole in the wall.

"I always wondered what that was," said Norman.

"The iceman would drop the ice in here from the outside and cover it with sawdust."

"Sawdust?"

"For insulation. The sawdust was packed around the ice and kept it from melting. And it's through this hole that the bleeding vandals enter."

"Why don't you board up the hole?"

"I have." Mr. McCormick pointed at a piece of corrugated tin that was propped against a case of Campbell's Chicken-n-Stars. "I nailed these inside and out—against the cats and possums. But the humans rip the outside sheet off, slide down and kick this one in." He shook his head. "If I could afford it I'd fill the passage with cement. It'd be a shame, though, filling the ice-chute up. Like destroying a wee bit of history. A taste of the past."

"Will you be here after school?"

"Of course."

"I'll stop by and help you clean up."

"You've got your studies, Sonny. They are more important than an old man pedaling comestibles."

Norman was halfway to the door and accelerating. "See you later, Mac."

"It has come to my attention," said Mr. Lewis as he paced through the rows of lab tables, "that some students have yet to choose a subject for the science fair." He glanced at Chris, who had just popped a Twinkie into his mouth.

The whole Twinkie.

"May I remind the class that the science fair is less than a week away?" Mr. Lewis returned to the front of the classroom. At last glance we had three undecided students.

"Clarence Bleeker. Have you found a project?"

"Yes. Photosynthesis."

"Very good. Mike Caldwell, have you chosen a topic?"

"Butterflies," said Mike.

"Again, quite good. Chris Forte, what will your project consist of?"

Chris swallowed, "Science. A whole bunch of science."

"Excellent, considering this is a *science* project. A book report on *Moby Dick* would hardly be suitable—"

"Moby Dick's a whale, Mr. Lewis. That's science."

"Moby Dick," said Mr. Lewis, "is a metaphor."

"That's funny," said Chris, "I thought whales were mammals. I saw on *Animal Planet*—"

"Chris," said Mr. Lewis, "what is your science project?"

"My project," said Chris, "is concerned with Industrial Chemistry and is entitled, *The Miracle of Teflon*."

"Wow, could you tell the class more?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Top Secret."

The bell rang as Mr. Lewis began to reply. Instead he said softly: "Class dismissed."

Norman found Chris in the hall. "*The Miracle of Teflon*? What's that all about?"

"I don't know. I'm hungry and I was thinking about pancakes and my mom makes these great flapjacks on this big Teflon griddle dad bought her for Christmas last year. I just made it up." Chris ripped open a bag of Fritos, "Want some?"

Norman grabbed a handful of chips. "Chris, Mr. Lewis will be expecting a project about Industrial Chemistry."

"I know, I'd better think of something, huh?" Students swirled and jostled around Norman and Chris. "I'll see you in the cafeteria," said Chris. He handed Norman the bag of Fritos. "I've got to stop at my locker."

Norman nodded and shoveled Fritos into his mouth. He thought about Mac's store, dinner, and his science project. Another few Fritos made it from the bag to his mouth. Norman strolled around the corner and bumped into Mr. Forrester. "Mr. Babbit," said the teacher, "are you eating in the hallway again?"

"No," said Norman.

"What do you mean, *No*? I saw you chewing and there is food in your right hand, eh?"

"I meant, 'No, I wasn't eating in the hallway *again*.'"

"Allow me to rephrase the question. Are you eating in the hallway, Norman?"

Norman looked at the bag of chips. "Yes."

"You know what that means?"

"Detention?"

Mr. Forrester scribbled on a small pad of pink paper, ripped off the top sheet and handed it to Norman. "Today after school."

"But I can't today. I promised Mr. McCormick—"

"Don't be late."

Norman shook his head and extended the bag of corn chips, "Want some Fritos?" Mr. Forrester pointed at a wastebasket and walked away. Norman dumped the chips and said, "He probably sleeps upside-down in his garage."

Chris was already busy forking food into his mouth. "What took you so long?"

Norman waved the pink detention slip.

"Your first one?"

"Yeah."

"Don't worry about it." Chris snatched the slip from Norman, ripped it up, and tossed it at Norman.

"Why'd you do that?" Norman brushed the pink snowflakes from his shoulders.

"They aren't serious about those things." Chris munched. "If you don't show up, they just call your parents."

"That's all?" Norman stared at his lunch tray. "Do you know what my mom will do? She'll say, *I can't begin to tell you, Norman, how sorry and disappointed and absolutely ashamed I feel.*"

"She'll say *that*?"

"She always does when I'm in trouble."

"I'm lucky, my mom just whacks me with the nearest kitchen utensil."

"I'm not done. Then she'll say, *What am I going to do with you? I feed you properly, I give you a good home and this is the thanks I receive? Marcus is a Senior in high school and he has never, not once, gotten a detention.* Then a migraine will send her to bed for the day. Thanks, Chris." Norman pushed away his hot lunch.

"You gonna eat that, Normy?"

Norman shook his head, glanced up and saw Tom Allen.

"Got something for me, Norman?" said Tom.

"I haven't done it yet."

"Why not?"

"I've been busy."

Tom looked at Chris and said, "What are you staring at?"

"You."

"Chris," said Norman. "Please don't."

"You too stupid to do your own homework, Tom?" said Chris.

Tom stepped forward and Chris started to stand.

"Sit down, Chris, I'll do his homework."

Chris settled back onto the bench. Tom said, "See why I have Norman do my homework? He's *smart*." Tom turned and retreated through the cafeteria.

Chris slammed his fist into the table, rattling the lunch trays.

Norman opened his math book.

## Chapter 5

Norman's afternoon schedule varied from the normal seventh graders'. Before lunch he had General Science with the seventh graders; but then he had eighth grade Algebra when other students his age had PE. As a result he had to take PE during sixth period with the eighth graders.

He hated PE.

The coach bellowed instructions and the hotdog jocks pushed everyone around. Showers were mandatory and towel snapping was another time-honored Kenilworth tradition. On Fridays Norman and several others ran a gauntlet of eighth graders armed with wet towels. Mr. Lopez was always conveniently deaf on Fridays. He'd hate to give his star baseball players detentions. They would miss practice and *that* would hurt the team. Who cares if Norman and the others had welts that wouldn't allow them to sit comfortably again until Sunday?

This month's sport was soccer, which suited Norman just fine. He could jog along the fringe of the action knowing no one would ever pass him the ball. He stayed close enough to the game to keep the coach from shrieking at him, but distant enough to avoid contact with any sharp elbows, knees, or cleats.

Today, as he shadowed the soccer game, he made and re-made lists in his mind:

### THINGS TO DO

- 1) Finish my science project
- 2) Try and get out of PE. Maybe take Spanish?
- 3) Help Chris with his Science Project
- 4) Learn to box
- 5) Beat up Tom Allen

No. New priorities

### THINGS TO DO

- 1) Prove Mr. Forrester is a bat and have his body donated to science
- 2) Find a traveling circus that would buy Doris
- 3) Speak to Darcy
- 4) Learn to box
- 5) Beat up Tom Allen

### THINGS TO DO

- 1) Talk mom into meatloaf for dinner
- 2) Get out of detention
- 3) Find a way to use dad's telescope to view the eclipse
- 4) Buy a gun
- 5) Shoot Tom Allen

Yes!

That's not a bad idea. Murder Tom Allen and get sent to prison. They serve meat in jail, I could write to Darcy and I wouldn't have to deal with Doris.

Satisfied, Norman glanced to his left. Fifteen combatants, seven dressed in red, eight in blue, charged toward him. Norman turned and sprinted away from the mob. Like a pack of dogs they pursued. He cut to his right and realized they weren't after him, they wanted the soccer ball. When they were ten feet away Norman spotted the slowly rolling ball. Out of fear he stepped forward, swung his leg and kicked the ball.



The black-and-white ball sailed softly over the heads of the fifteen, bounced once and was booted into the goal by a red-shirted player as the coach's whistle blew. "Red team wins," bellowed the coach. "Nice pass, Babbit."

"Since I kicked it with my eyes closed," said Norman to no one in particular, "I'd say it was an *exceptional* pass."

"C'mon," screamed Mr. Lopez, "let's get in there and shower. C'mon Ladies, let's move it."

Norman jogged off the field, again lost in thought. He was jarred from his drifting by a shoulder to his back that knocked him to the ground. He rolled over, straightened his glasses, and saw two blue jerseys. One of them mimicked the coach, "Nice pass, Babbit."

"Thanks," said Norman. "Jerk."

A blue jersey pulled Norman to his feet, "What'd you say?"

"Jerk."

The blue jersey flung Norman to the ground.

"Jerk," said Norman, again.

He was yanked to his feet again, "What'd you say?"

"I'm going to say, *Jerk*, and you're going to knock me down again," said Norman. "Right?"

"Right," said the blue jersey, who hurled Norman to the turf. The blue clad warriors marched away laughing.

"You know," said Norman, "I'm actually looking forward to detention."

"Mac?" yelled Norman. "Are you in there?" He glanced at his watch, 4:17 PM. Why was the store closed? "Mr. McCormick?"

"Go away."

"It's me, Mac. Norman."

"Go away."

Norman pounded on the door, "I need to talk to you."

The door inched open, "I thought you were dropping by after school?"

"I had detention for an hour. Why aren't you open?"

Mr. McCormick swung the door open, "C'mon in, Sonny." Norman entered the store. The floor was swept clean, but the shelves were bare. "I didn't open today."

"Why not?"

"There isn't much to sell. Look around, Norman."

"You have all that stuff in the back. I'll help you stock the shelves."

Mr. McCormick shook his head and smiled. "I'm tired, Sonny."

Norman had never considered the grocer an old man, he was just another adult. But now in the weak light of the store, Mr. McCormick looked ancient and fragile and dusty. The Irishman shook his head and continued, "I've received some bad news from home."

"Did they vandalize your house too?"

"Not my house, Sonny. Home. *Ireland*."

"Oh."

Norman's *Oh* wasn't a question, but Mr. McCormick answered, "My brother died today."

Norman stared at Mac: gray hair, wrinkled hands.

"I'm no young spring chicken," he winked at Norman, "and my brother was nearly ninety-years-old. But it's still a loss."

“My father died when I was five,” said Norman.

Mr. McCormick ruffled Norman’s hair. “See there, now, but it’s a cruel and funny world. I’m here all day crying in my beer like a milksop sissy because my brother’s gone.”

“It’s okay to feel bad. Until this year, I didn’t talk about how I felt—except to Chris. He was sitting next to me, in Kindergarten, when my mom came in crying. I didn’t go to school for a week and when I returned Chris was the only kid who’d talk to me like he used to. He said, ‘I know how I’d feel if my father died’ and that was it. So I know how I’d feel if my brother died, Mac.”

Mr. McCormick extended his right hand. Norman shook it solidly. “You’re a better man than I, Norman Babbit.”

“I’m sorry about your brother, Mac.”

“And I about your father,” said Mr. McCormick. “Run along now, Sonny. I have to make some phone calls.” Mr. McCormick closed the door softly behind Norman.

As Norman walked down the street he heard the deadbolt click into place.

## Chapter 6

“And where have you been until this hour of the evening, young man?” Mrs. Babbit clattered her teacup down on the table. The noise informed Norman and Marcus that a migraine was due in four minutes. Even Doris momentarily unglued her eyes from the TV. “We finished dinner an hour ago.”

“I stopped to talk with Mr. McCormick.”

“Until seven PM?”

“No. Then I went to Chris’ house.”

“Couldn’t you call from Chris’ house?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Three minutes to migraine.

“Because,” said Norman, “you can’t dial a phone when you’re wearing boxing gloves.”

Marcus smiled, “Boxing gloves?”

“Yeah. Chris is giving me boxing lessons and I’m helping him with his science project.”

“Why do you want to fight?” said Mrs. Babbit. She raised a hand to her left temple. Two minutes to migraine.

“Because,” said Norman.

“Because why?” said Doris who had traded the TV for the drama unfolding in the kitchen. “Is someone beating you up?”

Norman stared at Doris until she turned away. Then he said to his mother, “Yesterday and today after school, I was at Chris’ and he gave me a couple of boxing lessons. That’s all.”

Mrs. Babbit shook her head vigorously. Under one minute and counting. “Doris, go to bed. Marcus, finish the dishes. Norman, just—” She turned, waved and trudged up the stairs. “Say goodnight to the boys, Doris.”

“Good night, Marcus. Good night, Stupid-Weirdo-Norman.” Doris followed her mother up the stairs.

Marcus waited until Mrs. Babbit and Doris had reached the top of the stairs, then said, "What's up with the boxing, Sport."

"I'm good at science. Why not the *science* of boxing?"

"It's as good as anything else. Do it; go for it," said Marcus. "Have you eaten?"

"I'll have some toast."

"That's all you ever eat."

"That's all I like. Besides meat. Barbecued beef, burgers, chicken livers."

"Chicken livers?" said Marcus as he unloaded the dishwasher.

"Dog meat. Horse meat. Monkey meat. I'm a carnivore, a meat-eater."

Marcus tossed Norman a towel. "You're also a dishwasher. C'mon."

"How come Darling Doris, the TV addict, the obnoxious second grader can't help?"

"Mom thinks she's too little."

"Last Saturday I saw her beating up the little Mendez kid next door." Norman swiped lazily at a dish with his towel and placed it, still wet, in the cupboard. "I should get *her* to teach me how to fight. The Mendez kid says something to her, kid stuff, and she pushes him, then bops him in the face. His hands go up to his face and she kicks him in the shins. Then Mrs. Mendez steps outside. Doris sees Mrs. Mendez and lets the kid take a swing at her. The poor kid doesn't even come close but the mom swoops off the porch and starts walloping the poor little guy. Too little? No way."

Marcus placed the last dish in the cupboard and said, "Norman?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you having trouble with someone?"

Norman listened to the evening house-sounds: his mother running bath water; Doris sneaking in ten more minutes of TV in Mrs. Babbit's bedroom. He nodded.

"Who?"

"Lots of people."

Marcus hopped up on the counter, a forbidden maneuver in the Babbit household.

"C'mon Sport, a name."

Norman hopped up beside his brother. "An eighth grader named Tom Allen."

"Donald Allen's brother?"

"Red hair? Big stupid grin? Bad breath?"

"Sounds like a miniature Donald. He's a punk, too."

"Must be hereditary. Tom Allen makes me do his math homework."

"You said Tom was in eighth grade."

"I'm in eighth grade math." Norman punched his brother in the arm. "I got the brains in the family."

Marcus pretended that Norman's thump had hurt his bicep. "And that's why you want to learn to box. To stomp Tom Allen?"

"Yeah."

Marcus slid off the counter. "Do you want me to talk to him?"

"No."

"Tell a teacher."

"Then I'd be a squealer."

"Tell the Principal."

"No."

"So," said Marcus, "what *are* you going to do?"

"Tom's homework," Norman laughed. "He'll flunk the final."

"But if you—"

"Marcus," said Norman, "I know you feel more responsibility since dad's not here. But I'll work through this myself. Thanks."

"Fighting never solves anything."

"I've heard that."

In the silence that followed the boys heard the bathtub draining and music from *The Wheel of Fortune*.

"I'm tossing Doris into bed," said Marcus.

Norman sprang off the counter and stumbled as he landed. He shadowboxed leisurely, then started making toast. He'd finished the first piece of golden-toasted-whitebread-smeared-with-peanut-butter-and-sugar-cinnamon when Marcus returned.

"Will you be done soon?" said Marcus. Norman's mouth was too full to answer. He nodded *Yes*, swallowed, and stuffed in another slice of toast. "You want anything to drink?" asked Marcus.

Norman pantomimed milking a cow.

"Milk?"

Norman nodded. Marcus poured two large glasses of milk and returned to the table. Norman sipped, swallowed and said, "Thanks."

"I'm worried about you," said Marcus.

"Why?"

"All you ever do is study."

"I like studying." Norman wiped away his milk mustache with the back of his hand. "And, I work at Mr. McCormick's. I have hobbies: astronomy, my rock collection, my science project, Luigi."

"That's studying, Sport."

"Are you embarrassed to have a nerd for a brother? Marcus I *like* studying. Do you want me to be a boneheaded, homerun hitting, jumpshooting, bowling jock?"

"Bowling?"

"Bowling or armwrestling or badminton—"

"Horseshoes?"

Norman laughed, "I can't stay mad at you, Marcus."

"That's *mad*?"

"Yeah. Couldn't you tell?"

"I worry about you, Sport."

Norman finished his milk. "Do you remember much about dad?"

"What brings that up?"

"What do you remember?"

"Swimming in the summer at Spring Lake. We'd have waterfights. I'd stand on his shoulders and jump off. You were usually in the waterweeds, collecting polliwogs and minnows."

"Do you think Doris remembers him at all?"

"He died when she was one. Probably not."

Norman finished his milk. "I remember his smell."

"What?"

"His smell. When he came home from work he'd smell like sweat and sawdust. Then he'd shower and shave and smell like ice."

"What does ice smell like?"

"That blue stuff he put on after he shaved."

"Aqua Velva."

"Right. He smelled icy, like the North Pole. That's the stuff I'm gonna wear when I start shaving. Aqua Velva."

Marcus pinched Norman's cheek, "Only five more years, Babyface."

Norman stood in the middle of the kitchen and raised his fists. "C'mon chicken."

Marcus stood, faked a punch and whipped Norman into a headlock. "Say *uncle*."

"Aunt."

"Say *uncle*."

"Cousin."

Marcus increased the pressure slightly, "*UNCLE!*"

"Niece."

Marcus released him, "God, you're stubborn."

"Tough. I'm tough." Norman shadowboxed. His ears were crimson from the headlock.

"Okay, you're tough. You want to watch some TV?"

"No," said Norman, "I'm going out back with my telescope."

"Mind if I tag along, Professor?"

"Why not?" said Norman. "You might even learn something. Jock."

Norman, hunched over the eyepiece, scanned the northern portion of the sky. "Those are the pointer stars of the Big Dipper, *Dubhe* and *Merak*. Look."

Marcus hunkered over the telescope. "Why are they called pointers?"

"Because," said Norman, "if you connect them with a line and continue the line northward you will be able to locate Polaris. The North Star. Watch."

Marcus stood; Norman sighted down the tube of his reflecting telescope and located Polaris. "Take a peek."

Marcus squinted through the eyepiece, "Too cool."

"And," said Norman, "if you follow the handle of the Big Dipper in the opposite direction, you'll always be able to locate the bright star, Arcturus. Move over, dummy," said Norman. He swung the telescope around. "Follow the *arc* to *Arcturus*." He bent over and centered the star in the viewing field. "Look."

"It's like a diamond," said Marcus.

"If I had dad's scope I could show you binary stars and optical doubles. I could also show *me*, I've only read about most of this stuff."

"This homemade scope's just fine, Sport." Marcus stretched. "I'm freezing. You coming in soon?"

"Yeah. The eclipse is in half-an-hour."

"It's bedtime for this guy."

"Do me a favor, Marcus?"

"Yeah."

"Wake me up in the morning. I want to go jogging with you."

"You got it, Sport."

## Chapter 7

Halfway around the track Norman stopped. Marcus strode away. He said, “I told you I wasn’t going to wait.”

“I know,” said Norman.

Marcus nodded and powered into the far turn. Norman resumed his jog-shuffle around the crushed-brick track. The early morning air was thick and soupy with fog. Petaluma was only thirty miles from the Pacific and morning fog was common in the spring; Norman was just happy the misty blanket hadn’t obscured his view of last night’s eclipse.

The track at Casa Grande was surrounded by tall eucalyptus trees. Rock hard eucalyptus berries and dead crescent-shaped leaves littered the track. Two overweight ladies shared the oval with Marcus and Norman. The pair was dressed in matching purple jogging suits and reminded Norman of Christmas ornaments with legs. No matter how slow Norman scuttled or walked he moved faster than the purple ladies.

Norman wasn’t feeling as pooped as he’d expected, despite the fact that he hadn’t run since last year—except for PE—when Chris secretly entered him in the Junior Olympics mile run. As his feet crunched the brick and his lungs sucked in the moist morning air, Norman drifted:

### PROBLEMS

- 1) Collect final data and type up science project conclusions
- 2) Deal with Tom Allen
- 3) Find time to work at Mac’s and SAVE THE MONEY FOR A TELESCOPE
- 4) Learn to box
- 5) Get Darcy to acknowledge my existence

### SOLUTIONS

- 1) Weigh the mice and compare before and after results
- 2) Hire a hit man?
- 3) Work at Mac’s today and DON’T STOP AT BURGER KING!
- 4) Work out with Chris after dinner
- 5) Win the Nobel Prize?

While pondering these problems and possible solutions Norman had plodded twice around the track. He had passed the Christmas ornaments once and had been passed by Marcus twice. But he wasn’t aware of passing or having been passed as he circled, drifting on automatic pilot. Marcus eased down to Norman’s pace, “Hey Sport, that’s enough for the first day. You’ve done six laps.”

No reply.

“If you don’t stop now you’ll be too sore to run tomorrow.”

No reply.

“NORMAN!”

“What?”

Marcus shook his head. “It’s time to get home.”

“Good. I’m hungry. Are there any eggs in the house?”

“Yeah, mom went shopping yesterday.”

“Any bacon?”

“Good one. Amusing.”

“Just hoping. I *love* bacon. Crispy, hot greasy bacon. Bacon in sandwiches with lettuce and tomatoes. Bacon and melted cheese on burgers. Cold bacon crumbled over salads.”

Marcus latched onto Norman’s sweatshirt and towed him across the parking lot to the van. “Bacon’s not good for you.”

“If it makes me happy, it’s good for me. *That’s* health food.”

“Get in the van.”

After a breakfast of scrambled eggs, toast, and grapefruit Norman bounded up the stairs to his room. “I’ve got a great idea, Luigi.” The owl didn’t reply, but Norman continued, “I’ll do Tom Allen’s homework, but I’m gonna do it *wrong*. I’ll teach that Neanderthal to mess with Norman Babbit.” Luigi flew from the coyote skull to Norman’s shoulder. Norman smiled, sat at his desk, and for the first time in his life, purposely miscalculated an Algebra equation.

“Hey Normy,” yelled Chris, “wait up.” Chris, his mouth stuffed with an entire box of raisins, caught up with Norman in the crowded hallway. “Did your mom blast you last night for getting home late?”

“A little. No big deal.”

“You coming over today?” Chris gulped down the raisins and fished a bag of Korn Nuts from his backpack.

“Yeah, but after dinner.”

“Why don’t you—*crunch, crunch*—just eat at my house,” said Chris. “We—*crunch*—could box after dinner.”

“And when we’re done boxing, I could help you with your science project.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Chris. “I’ve—*crunch*—finished it.”

“In two days, without opening a book, you’ve finished a project on Industrial Chemistry?”

Chris nodded twice, *Crunch, crunch*.

“You can’t even spell Industrial Chemistry.”

Chris finished the Korn Nuts and dropped the bag on the floor.

“That’s littering,” said Norman.

“No it’s not. I’m creating work for the janitor. If it wasn’t for slobs like me, the school district would fire him. He wouldn’t be able to support his wife and kids. In a year he’d be homeless. By not using wastebaskets I’m creating employment and stimulating the economy.”

“What a patriot,” said Norman.

“We all have to do our part.”

The duo rounded a corner and entered English class. If Mr. Forrester was a bat, Mr. Carlson, the English teacher, would be a weasel. Squinty eyes, sloped nose. He even moved like a weasel, with short, choppy steps. He could walk sideways as quickly as he could forward. His brown weasel-hair was streaked with gray. Mr. Carlson’s eyes were always bloodshot and he dressed like an usher at a funeral: black pants and coat, shiny black shoes, white shirt, and a thin black tie. The shoulders of his coat were dusted with a permanent powdering of dandruff.

"Today," said Mr. Carlson, as the students settled into their seats, "we will be diagramming sentences." He scanned the class with his bloodshot eyes. "Row three will rise and advance to the blackboard."

Row three: Howard Bennett, Lois Thompson, Chris and Norman, Mike Caldwell, and Darcy Norton walked to the board. Howard tripped and the class laughed. Norman stood to the left of Darcy. He smiled at her; she didn't seem to notice.

"The sentence you will be diagramming is," everyone stood poised and ready to write as Mr. Carlson said, "*A sense of humor keen enough to show a man his own absurdities will keep him from the commission of all sins, or nearly all, save those worth committing.*" After reciting the quotation three times, everyone had it copied and Mr. Carlson said, "Do you know who said that?"

"I sure do," said Norman. He felt warm from his jog and content from a big breakfast.

"Who?" said Mr. Carlson.

"You did," said Norman.

"It was," said Mr. Carlson, looking down his bony weasel nose, "Samuel Butler. You may proceed with the exercise."

The sound of squeaking chalk filled the room. The complicated sentence caused the student's diagrams to look like cracks in a windshield. Norman, as usual, was the first finished. As usual, he was correct. As usual he felt guilty. Howard Bennett scratched his head. Darcy printed neatly and precisely, but didn't have a clue.

But even Darcy's botched and spindly diagram beat Chris' effort.

His attempt reminded Norman of a squished spider: angles pointing everywhere, with no pattern. Norman, Howard, Mike, and Darcy stood watching Chris.

The Lone Diagrammer didn't notice. He labored as if he were painting a fence on a warm summer's day, with broad confident strokes.

Whistling.

"Norman," said Mr. Carlson, "you have a big problem."

"Me?" He examined his diagram.

"Your problem, Norman, is Chris," said the teacher. "I'm appointing you as his tutor."

"Okay," said Norman, who already helped Chris with most of his homework. "I can handle that."

"But," said the black clad weasel, "there is a reason you should take this tutorial quite seriously."

Norman, clueless and confused said, "Why?"

"Because the score Chris receives on next week's test will also be *your* score, Norman."

Norman stared at Mr. Carlson's red-rimmed eyes. He could taste the eggs he had for breakfast as his stomach flip-flopped. "I'll help him, but I deserve *my* grade."

Mr. Carlson's thin lips twitched into a smile. "Row one, take the board."

Row three returned to their seats as the weasel droned on, but Norman didn't hear the sentence, he sat at his desk with his face buried in his hands.

## Chapter 8



Norman shuffled through the rest of the day like a zombie. He ate lunch with Chris and answered several questions in science. He glided through PE without once touching the soccer ball then cruised through Algebra on automatic pilot.

He didn't even enjoy slipping Tom Allen the wrong answers.

After school he shuffled down the hill to McCormick's Grocery. Mac leaned against the cash register, wishing a customer "Good Afternoon". After the shopper exited, Mr. McCormick said, "Norman, what do you call a deer with no eyes?"

Norman slung his books unto the counter, "I don't know."

"No—eye—deer," said Mr. McCormick.

"Funny," said Norman, who smiled for the first time since English.

"What do you call a deer with no eyes and no legs?"

"*Still*, no—eye—deer. Get it?"

"Yeah."

"Have you one for me?"

"No," said Norman.

"Oh," said Mr. McCormick. "I was wondering if you were going to show up today."

"I have to. I need money for that telescope."

"I thought you'd have saved enough last summer."

"I would have, but—"

"But what?"

"My mom's a vegetarian, Mac."

Mr. McCormick nodded as if that made perfect sense. "I've arranged some labor for you, Sonny, but it's not glamorous work. Follow me." Norman followed Mr. McCormick. They stopped in front of an ancient walk-in freezer. "This thing hasn't worked in years." Mr. McCormick opened the door and a naked lightbulb illuminated the mossy green interior. "But I'm going to resurrect it. Fix her up. New racks, new compressor, another light bulb or two." He pointed to a bucket and a stiff-bristled brush. "But first, Sonny, I need you to scrub it."

Norman shuddered looking at the tomb-like freezer. "Whatever you say, Mac."

"Ah, but you're a good man, Norman Babbit." Mr. McCormick smiled, "There's something else you can do for me?"

"What?"

"Think up a riddle or two while you're in here. I could use some new material."

"Yeah," said Norman, "you could."

"Away with you." Mr. McCormick exited.

Norman filled the bucket with water and splashed in some soap. He carried the bucket to the freezer, leaving a trail of soapy water. He entered the freezer and the door swung shut behind him. The dank, damp, moss-smelling freezer reminded him of the caves near Placerville.

Every summer Norman and Marcus spent two weeks with their Uncle Pete in Placerville. They'd fish, pan for gold, and explore the caves. Uncle Pete called it *spelunking*, but by any name, it was Norman's favorite.

Outside, the summer sun would beat down on you, but once you entered the cave the air was cool, smelling of animals. Norman and Marcus, both wearing miners' helmets with the built-in flashlights, would explore the caves for hours. The weirdest sensation of tunnel vision existed in caves because you could only see where the flashlight beam in your helmet pointed. Peripheral vision was eliminated; you had to concentrate on what was directly ahead. Ninety-

nine percent of the cave was a mystery and your imagination ran wild. Monsters and two hundred year old cavemen, things scientists weren't supposed to believe in, stormed through Norman's brain. Sounds were magnified in the caves. A trickle of water resounded like a river, a rock dislodged by your boot crashed like an avalanche; your breath was distant thunder.

Last summer they were caving—spelunking—and found the coyote skull that Luigi now used as a perch. Marcus carried the bleached skull out of the cave and showed it to Uncle Pete. Pete examined the skull and said, "Darned if that don't look like your cousin Jake. We've been looking for him since sixty-seven."

"What is it, Pete?" said Norman, "a dog?"

"Looks like a coyote," said Pete.

"What's this?" Norman showed Pete a groove on the left side of the skull about the size of his little finger.

"That," said Pete, "is a gunshot wound."

"How old is it?"

"How should I know?"

Norman said, "May I have it?"

"Mom would shoot *you* for bringing home a skull," said Marcus.

"Anything that would aggravate your mother," said Pete, "is just fine with me. Bring it home. Use it as a vase. Keep it on the kitchen table." He laughed and slapped his belly.

"Maybe we can find another one and give them to Nora for bookends."

Norman finished scrubbing green scum from two walls of the freezer. He dropped the brush into the bucket of cold, green water and carried it from the freezer. He dumped the bucket in the huge enamel sink and made his way back into the store. While Mr. McCormick was bagging groceries Norman drifted, thinking of his science project. Lost in thought, Norman opened his notebook and began writing. The customer exited and Mr. McCormick said, "What are you figuring, Sonny?"

No reply.

Norman raised his eyes to meet Mac's, didn't reply, and returned his concentration to the notebook.

"Must be working on that new riddle for me," said Mr. McCormick. He snatched a broom and swept the floor.

Three minutes later, Norman said, "I got it, Mac. I just have to see if there is a substantial weight loss in the thirty-eight hundred CPS group!"

"My exact thoughts."

"See you, Mac." Norman snapped shut his notebook and gathered up his books.

"I believe in paying for a job well done," said Mr. McCormick, "What are you charging me?"

"Whatever you think is fair," said Norman. "Bye."

"Wait, Sonny. You owe me a riddle."

"Uh."

"Come on with it."

"Uh, uh, Why are fish so skinny?"

"Why?"

"Because they eat *fish*."

Mr. McCormick leaned on his broom. "Needs work, Sonny."

“Bye.” Norman was *gone*.

## Chapter 9

Marcus’ girlfriend, Suzanne, sipped tea with Mrs. Babbit at the kitchen table. Doris sprawled in front of the TV in the living room. “Hi Doris,” said Norman. Doris waved at him without removing her eyes from the tube. “Nice to see you, too,” said Norman. He turned his attention to the kitchen table.

“Norman, your bird made a mess today,” said Mrs. Babbit, “please clean it up. When are you clearing those mice out of the pantry?” She slurped her tea.

“Monday or Tuesday,” said Norman.

“Please get us some more tea water,” said Mrs. Babbit.

“Sure.” Norman smiled at Suzanne.

“Say hello to Suzanne.”

“Hello, Suzanne,” said Norman, as he poured the hot water.

“Hi Norman,” said Suzanne, motioning she didn’t want any more water. “Marcus has been telling me about your science project. It sounds interesting.”

Norman noticed the way her dark hair cascaded over her shoulders; the way her fingers cradled the teacup. Norman wondered if he’d ever have a girlfriend. “Yeah, the project’s going pretty good. Would you like to see it?”

“Norman, don’t bother Suzanne with your silly mice,” said Mrs. Babbit.

“I’d love to see your mice, Norman,” said Suzanne. “Thanks for the tea, Mrs. Babbit.”

As they entered the pantry Suzanne said, “Thanks, Norman. Your mom was about to drown me with that tea.”

“She gets pretty, ah, intense at times.”

“That’s a considerate way to phrase it.” The pair stood in front of Norman’s project. “Looks impressive, Norman. What’s it do?”

“Here are thirty male white mice.” Norman cleared his throat. For a three minute period every morning at six-thirty this fifteen-hundred CPS, that’s Cycles Per Second, buzzer sounds for five minutes.”

“You get up every morning at six-thirty to ring an alarm clock for mice?”

“No,” said Norman, “I rigged this timer.” He pointed to an alarm clock with wires connecting it to a battery. The wires from the battery were connected to a piezo buzzer on the mice cage. “The buzzer sounds for another five minutes at six-thirty PM. In the spare bedroom there are thirty mice who hear a thirty-eight hundred cycle per second buzzer, also at six-thirty AM and PM.”

“Why the spare bedroom?”

“I wanted them in my room, but Luigi disturbed them. He eats mice.”

Suzanne shuddered.

“I have the control group in Marcus’ room.”

“Marcus mentioned that he couldn’t listen to his CD player.”

“It needs to be quiet. The mice can’t hear anything in the buzzers’ frequency.” Norman pushed his glasses up onto the bridge of his nose and jammed his hands into his pockets.

“Each of the cages have water bottles and three identical play wheels. The mice are given the

same amount of food every morning and the leftover food is weighed each night. I weigh the mice once a week. All this data is entered into my computer. All I have to do is collect the rest of this week's data, write a final analysis and print out my conclusions." Norman smiled, "Any questions?"

"Only one," said Suzanne.

"What?"

"Why are you doing all this?"

"Oh yeah," said Norman, "my hypothesis. I think that hunger and food consumption, can be controlled by environment. What I am trying to prove is that systematic exposure to a specific frequency can actually increase or decrease appetite."

"So?"

"You ever diet?"

Suzanne looked embarrassed, "Yes."

"Difficult?"

She nodded.

"Effective?"

"Not always," she said.

"Would you like to decrease your appetite by listening to *music* twice a day?"

"That would be great."

"If this experiment works as I think it might *and* the results can be applied to humans, you may be able to diet by listening to music of a specific frequency during breakfast and dinner."

"That's amazing," said Suzanne. She leaned over, poked her finger through the cage and spun the exercise wheel.

"Don't," said Norman. "If the mice want to exercise they must do it on their own. If one group is forced to exercise more than another it will affect their appetites and invalidate the entire data base."

"That makes sense," said Suzanne. "You're quite a scientist, Norman."

"Thanks."

"I have another question."

"Shoot."

"Why isn't there any food in your pantry?"

"Mom doesn't allow canned food in the house. Only fresh, organic, vegetarian stuff: therefore a pantry becomes a spare room."

"Suzanne," said Marcus as he squeezed into the pantry, "I've been looking for you." He winked at Norman, "Trying to steal my girl?"

"No," said Norman, turning red. He picked up the alarm clock and stared at it.

"We'll leave you and the mice alone," said Marcus.

"Luck with the experiment," said Suzanne.

"Thanks," said Norman. He replaced the alarm clock. "Marcus, tell mom I'm eating at Chris' tonight. I forgot to tell her when I got home."

"She hates when you eat at Chris'."

"That's why I forgot to tell her."

## Chapter 10

Dinner with the Forte family was Norman's dream come true. Chris was the oldest of four boys. Four hungry meat-eating boys who were big, boisterous and well fed. Mr. Forte stood 6'2" and weighed close to 240 pounds. His coal black hair fell almost to his shoulders. Norman thought he looked like Tarzan in a business suit. Mrs. Forte was a large, laughing woman with sparkling brown eyes and prematurely gray hair. The boys looked just like Chris in increasingly smaller versions: black hair, dark eyes, and crooked grins.

Right now those grins were smeared with barbecue sauce.

Norman and the Forte family crowded around the kitchen table and feasted on a platter of BBQ chicken, corn on the cob, baked potatoes, and ravioli. No matter what the family ate Mrs. Forte prepared pasta. In the past few years Norman had eaten: pork roast and spaghetti, pork chops and tortellini, meatloaf and lasagna. Her maiden name was *Giambatista* and she considered any meal without pasta sinful.

Tonight's ravioli were stuffed with cheese and spinach and done in a tomato-garlic sauce. Norman took several of the ravioli and placed them on his plate, but the Fortes speared them straight from the platter and popped them into their mouths. "Today at work," said Mr. Forte, shaking his head, "you'll never guess what happened."

"What," said Chris. It wasn't a question, just a flat statement between bites of chicken and potato.

"This guy walked into my office and says he's interested in buying some computer hardware." He swallowed a ravioli. "So I show him my catalogs: IBM, Gateway, Dell, Apple—you name it. But I just couldn't please the guy. He finally says, 'Where's the bathroom?' I tell him and he leaves. As soon as he's gone I notice my gold pen is missing. So I run down the hall to the bathroom. I knock over a secretary and papers fly everywhere."

"This is gonna be good," said Chris.

All the boys, including Norman, had stopped eating and stared at Mr. Forte, "I smash into a repair cart and knock over two computer monitors. I finally reach the bathroom and crash through the door."

"Yeah?" said Norman.

"And the guy who stole my pen is climbing out the window. He's halfway out so I grab his left leg—"

"Yeah?" said Norman.

"—and I'm pulling his leg and pulling his leg."

"Yeah?" said Norman.

Mr. Forte smiled and ruffled Norman's hair with his paw, "Just like I'm pulling your leg, Norman."

Everyone, except Mrs. Forte, laughed. The youngest, Harvey, laughed until he started choking. Chris pounded him on the back, dislodging a piece of chicken and knocking Harvey's face into his plate. When Harvey returned to an upright position he wore a small baked-potato beard. Mrs. Forte said, "You shouldn't tease our guests like that, Jonathan."

"These guys were just as suckered as I was," said Norman.

"Not me," said Chris.

"Your tongue was so far out you could have hung laundry on it," said Norman.

Harvey, recovered from his choking spell and Chris' heavy-handed remedy said, "You were bug-eyed, Chris. The only one who wasn't fooled was mom."

"Well, Harvey, you see, I've only heard that story forty or fifty times," said Mrs. Forte. "This year."

"Enough yakking," said Mr. Forte, "let's get these dishes done. Peter clears. John stores leftovers. Harvey washes. Chris dries."

Norman picked up his plate and attempted to rise. His progress was halted by Mr. Forte's right hand, which spread across *both* of Norman's knees. "Guests in this house do not do dishes. Peter, come get Norman's plate." Mr. Forte released Norman's legs and said, "Chris says you've devised a top-notch science project. Tell Julia and me about it."

Norman explained the details of his project while the Fortes nodded politely.

"So," said Mr. Forte, "how's Chris doing on *his* project? He tells us you're his advisor."

"His project is going well," said Norman.

"How well?" said Mrs. Forte.

"I...can...honestly say that he hasn't made a single mistake so far," said Norman.

The four boys clanged and bustled around the kitchen in an awkward ballet with dishes, soap, and water.

"What *is* his project," said Mrs. Forte, "he keeps telling us it's Top Secret."

"I know he's not working for NASA," said Mr. Forte.

Chris saw his parents huddled, talking to Norman and inched over with the pan he was drying. Mr. Forte said, "Dry!"

Chris retreated to the sink.

Norman cleared his throat, "Chris' project is concerned with Industrial Chemistry. More specifically, Teflon."

"Teflon?" said the Fortes.

"Yeah," said Chris, holding up another pan. "I've had plenty of experience with it." He dried the remaining dishes quickly. "Hey Dad? Are we going to box tonight?"

"I don't think so, Chris. I'm stuffed."

"But Dad," said Chris, "Norman is depending on you. I said you'd give him some boxing lessons."

Norman nodded, "It's important."

"Stand up, Norman," said Mr. Forte. "Show me what Chris has taught you so far."

Norman took a boxer's stance; fists clenched, balanced on the balls of his feet. "Good form. Proper balance." Mr. Forte stood and held out his open hands. "Jab." Norman swatted at the huge palms as Mr. Forte spoke: "My father and grandfather were both professional boxers. I missed the seventy-six Olympic team by one punch." He pointed to his chin. "It hit me right here."

Mrs. Forte laughed. "Now *that's* funny."

"Boxing is part of my heritage. Everyone in my family has been involved in the sport in some capacity and I know as much about it as anyone. Jab, jab. Good. Jab again."

The Forte boys gathered around the kitchen table.

"I can tell you everything you need to know about fighting in one sentence." He lowered his hands.

"What?" said Norman, still posed for action.

"Never forget, I'm speaking from a lifetime of experience—"

"What?" said Chris.

"It takes a good man to fight and win," said Mr. Forte, "but it takes a better man to walk away."

Norman, behind his clenched fists, looked puzzled.

"That's it?" said Chris. "That's the boxing lesson? Normy gets pushed around all day, everyday, bullied into doing other people's home- work and you tell him to walk away?"

Norman unclenched his fists and lowered his arms.

"Run on home, Norman," said Mr. Forte. "We'll lace up the gloves another evening."

"Thanks for dinner, Mrs. Forte," said Norman. "See you guys." He waved at Chris and the brothers and walked toward the door.

Norman heard Chris as he shut the front door: "That's it? A better man walks away? Dad, I told Norman you were going to help him!"

Norman watched his shadow grow and shrink as he walked from streetlight to streetlight. Norman loved walking at night. In the darkness between the streetlights he could glimpse the brighter constellations. And in the semi-darkness no one could see how thick his glasses were. No one could see he was so skinny he had to jump around in the shower to get wet. That his chin was reddened from a rash of acne. Norman could relax at night; he could think at night.

#### WHY LIFE SHOULD BE LIKE A SCIENCE PROJECT

1) More organized. Projects have defined objectives and a prescribed amount of time to gather data

2) Less emotional. Projects don't get mad and push you around when you make a lucky pass in soccer

3) Safer. If my project doesn't prove my hypothesis I won't barbecue the mice. I'll just write up my conclusions

4) Projects make sense. Kenilworth Junior High doesn't make sense. The Babbit Family doesn't make sense

5) Conclusions.  $A+B=C$  therefore  $C-A=B$

LIFE is supposed to be the best teacher, but it seems I have to take the tests *before* I read the chapters

Norman drifted along the street, lost in his silent comparisons. A block from home, Norman leaned against a car and gazed up at Arcturus.

"YAAAAAAAAAAAA!" screamed Chris, jumping out from behind the car.

"Hi Chris," said Norman.

"*Hi Chris?* That's all I get? I run six blocks, the long way around, to get in front of you. I hide and wait to scare you, and it's *Hi Chris?*"

"OHHHHHHHHH-GODDDDDDD!" screamed Norman. "How's that?"

"Better. Thank you." Chris kicked the car's bumper. "Norman?"

"What?"

"I promise you, I'm really going to study for that English test. I'll get a good grade for us. For you."

"Thanks. I'll help you."

"Carlson is a major jerk."

"Carlson is the least of my problems," said Norman.

"I'm sorry my dad didn't help you more."

"Me too."

They stood silent. A cat yowled. Two cars passed.

"See you tomorrow, Normy."

"Yeah."

The friends turned and walked in opposite directions, in-and-out of the streetlights' glowing puddles. Norman turned and yelled, "Chris?"

"What?"

"What's a run-on sentence?"

Chris stopped, raised his shirt and scratched his stomach. "Ah, Pedro went jogging and he ran on and on and on."

"Oh God," said Norman. This time he meant it; Chris scared him.

## Chapter 11

"Hey Sport, wake up," said Marcus.

"Whaaat?"

"Do you want to go jogging with me?"

Norman sat up and stretched, "Now?"

"Why do you think I'm dressed like this?" Marcus stood over Norman in gray sweat pants, an Oakland A's cap and a San Francisco 49ers jersey.

"Because you don't know whether it's baseball or football season?"

Marcus hauled back the blankets. "C'mon, I'm not driving to the track, just run the warm up with me."

"Let me check my mice."

"Do it when we get back. They won't starve."

The fog hung over Petaluma like a dirty sheet as the brothers began their morning jog. They headed down Ely Road, past houses that were just waking up. The sun had barely risen and lights were still illuminating most of the kitchens. "You should have been there, Marcus," said Norman. "Chicken, ravioli, baked spuds. It was fantastic. I had seconds, thirds. I could have had fourths. There was barbecue sauce dripping off the chicken—"

"I *like* being a vegetarian. I wouldn't eat meat if it was on the dinner table."

Norman puffed along. "Do you know if dad was a vegetarian?"

"Kind of. He'd go along with it to please mom, but I'm sure he had a steak sandwich everyday for lunch."

The brothers plodded along through the fog. Norman, gasping, said, "Mom never talks about dad. How could I find out about him?"

Marcus slowed as if weighed down by Norman's question. "I don't know, Sport." He stopped. "I just don't know."

"I know he was my father and all that," said Norman, shuffling to a halt. "I just want to know what kind of person he was, you know?"

"Yeah," said Marcus. "I know."

"Where could I find out?"

Marcus shrugged. "Sorry."

"That's okay."

"You'd better turn back. I'm going all the way to the high school, then run some sprints on the track. If you turn back here it'll be a little over a mile for you."

"How far to Casa Grande?"



"Round trip, three miles."

"If you'd just shut up and let me run I can make it."

"Eat my dust, Sport." Marcus sped away into the hazy dawn air.

Norman ran evenly, but couldn't match his brother's pace. He settled into a comfortable stride and made it back to the house, two minutes ahead of Marcus; but Marcus had also run sprints on the track. Norman felt relaxed; all warm and loose. He fed the mice, ate five pieces of slightly overdone toast, showered, and caught a ride to school with Marcus.

Tom Allen sat in front of Norman's locker, legs crossed yoga-style. All around, lockers banged as students prepared for homeroom. The warm, loose feeling that even the overdone toast couldn't affect immediately drained from Norman. "Well," said Tom, "if it isn't Norman-the-Nerd."

"My name is *Norman*."

"Anyone named Norman *is* a nerd."

"What do you want?"

"Did you do my Algebra?" Tom stood.

"No," said Norman, "I didn't know your assignment. Your group is a few chapters behind my group."

Tom shoved a piece of paper in Norman's face, "Here."

Norman scanned the page. "Did you write this?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"It's not in crayon."

"Crayon. I get it. A Nerd joke." Tom grabbed Norman's shirt and banged his head against the locker.

"Ow."

Tom held Norman against the locker, "I'll pick it up at lunch, I need time to copy it."

Tom released Norman and sauntered down the hallway. Several students had seen Tom slam Norman against the locker, but no one said a word.

Norman stuffed the assignment into his back pocket and walked to homeroom, fighting the urge to massage the bump that had already formed on the back of his head. That would be considered weakness by everyone who had seen the incident; even if they'd done nothing to stop it.

Mr. Forrester read the day's announcements to his homeroom class: "Kenilworth's baseball team opens its season against Petaluma Junior High today at Luchessi Park. Please support your team, eh?"

Norman's left hand explored the back of his head. A knot half the size of a walnut had formed. He massaged it lightly. "What kind of school is this," he said, "ten kids see a jerk bounce me off a locker and no one says anything?"

"Excuse me, Mr. Babbit?" said Mr. Forrester.

"Nothing," said Norman, wondering how Forrester-the-Bat had heard his muttering. He pulled out Tom's paper and wrote in wrong answers so quickly that he broke the tip of his pencil.

"Track tryouts conclude today. The first meet is next Friday."

Norman found a good pencil and continued his bad calculations.

“Kenilworth’s Science Fair will be judged by an International Science and Engineering Fair official. The first place winner in each category will be eligible for the ISEF Regional, then the Nationals in Washington D.C.”

Norman dropped his pencil. The bump on his head stopped throbbing.

Washington D.C.!

A week in Washington D.C.! Visiting the Smithsonian, checking out the other science projects, The Aerospace Museum. Breakfast at McDonald’s, lunch at Burger King, dinner at Wendy’s.

Heaven!

Mr. Lewis told Norman he had been trying to obtain an ISEF sanction for the school’s science fair, but Norman never thought it would happen. He was sure to win first place for Kenilworth seventh graders. He’d advance to the Regionals, then, with luck, to the Nationals and perhaps even *international* competition. Norman picked up his pencil and yelled, “I’m going to Washington D.C.”

“Why,” said Mr. Forrester, “are you whooping like an aborigine, Mr. Babbit?”

“Because me and my mice are going on a trip,” said Norman.

“If you don’t want that trip to include a detour through detention, shut up.”

“Okay, sure. Thank you.” Norman flashed the *thumbs-up* sign to Chris, who was sneaking grapes into his mouth.

The bell rang. Chewing slowly, Chris walked over to Norman. “Why’d you scream, Normy?”

“Didn’t you hear about the ISEF and Washington D.C.?”

“Huh?”

“The announcements,” said Norman. Don’t you ever listen to homeroom announcements?”

“No.” The duo walked toward their English class.

“How do you know what’s going on?”

“I don’t care what’s going on. I like football and wrestling and this is baseball and track season.” Chris popped the last grape into his mouth. “Besides, announcements are so *mundane*.”

“*Mundane*?”

“Good word, hey Normy? It means, *of the world; commonplace; ordinary*.” Chris and Norman stopped in the middle of the hall. Students flowed around them like water around a river rock. “I learned another one, *ubiquitous*. It means, *seemingly present everywhere at the same time*. I memorized the definition, but I don’t think I’ll ever be able to work *ubiquitous* into a sentence.”

“Chris?”

“What?”

“You just used *ubiquitous* in a sentence.”

“Cool.”

They entered English class as the tardy bell sounded. Mr. Carlson, black clad, stood at the blackboard. His weasel head swiveled from side-to-side, stopping at the, barely, late arrivals. “Sorry we’re late,” said Norman.

“I, too, apologize for our lack of punctuality,” said Chris.

“*Punctuality*?” said Mr. Carlson.

“Yes,” said Chris. “*Timeliness, Promptness, Preciseness, Regularity, Punctiliousness* . Those are synonyms.”

Mr. Carlson said, “I don’t think—”

“I know,” said Chris.

The entire classroom laughed.

“I don’t *think* I’ve ever,” said Mr. Carlson, “heard you use a word with more than two syllables.”

“I’ve decided to increase my verbiage,” said Chris. He sat straight in his chair with hands folded. Chris usually slouched forward, resting his chin on the desk. Today, the students behind him couldn’t see over his 5’11” frame.

“It’s a pleasure seeing you take an interest in English,” said Mr. Carlson.

“The unbridled pleasure is all mine,” said Chris. “I’ve only studied for a small portion of one evening, and I’m already feeling pretty enriched.”

Laughter, again, filled the room. Norman finished Tom Allen’s Algebra, and Mr. Carlson droned on about the importance of prepositions.

\* \* \*

Friday’s lunch menu always fascinated Norman. Instead of listing the various mismatched items, he thought they should just write LEFTOVERS.

Today’s menu:

Hamburger Patty

Super nachos

Hash Browns

Celery-and-Peanut Butter

Brownie

Norman didn’t mind eating leftovers, but he resented being treated like an idiot. Did the cafeteria staff think he couldn’t remember that they’d been served nachos on Monday and hamburgers on Thursday? Did they think they could fool the entire student body by changing Hamburger-on-a-Bun to Hamburger Patty?

He chewed his hamburger patty and said, “Leftovers or not, it beats potato dumplings in soy gravy with poached zucchini.” Norman munched and scanned the cafeteria for Chris. It wasn’t like him to miss a meal. While searching the cafeteria/zoo, Norman saw Dave Davido collecting and eating brownies from the sixth graders. Dave was famous at Kenilworth for his speed in the 100 meter dash and his terrible complexion. Norman called him, secretly, “Pepperoni Face.” Norman also saw Darcy sitting with a gaggle of seventh and eighth grade girls. Janet Dalton spied Norman staring at Darcy, who whispered something to Louise Arnold, and the pair laughed. Norman looked away, but before his eyes left the cluster of girls he thought he saw Darcy smile.

Mr. Lewis, today’s lunch monitor, sipped coffee from a Styrofoam cup. Norman had to speak with Mr. Lewis about the differences and similarities in frequency reception between white mice and humans and what type of conversion factor would be necessary to apply his findings to humans. While Norman mentally reviewed these questions he felt a rough hand on his shoulder. Automatically, he opened his Algebra book, fished out Tom Allen’s homework and raised it over his head. Tom snatched it and skulked away. “It’s getting better,” said Norman to his empty lunch tray, “I didn’t have to look at the ugly toad.” Norman stood and weaved through tables to Mr. Lewis. “Great news about the ISEF sanction,” said Norman. “Thanks.”

"No problem," said Mr. Lewis, sipping his coffee.

"I need your help," said Norman.

"What?"

Norman had approached Mr. Lewis to ask about relative frequency ranges and conversion factors, but another question surfaced, "Mr. Lewis, a friend of mine has a problem and *she* wants to know if you can help him. Her."

"What's your friend's problem?"

"An older student slaps her around, picks on her, makes her do her homework." *Why did I say she?* Thought Norman.

"Has your friend spoken with a teacher?"

"Sort of."

"Would your friend consider telling a teacher? Me? Maybe? A name, so something could be done."

"I don't think that would help my friend. Thanks anyway." Norman turned and walked away.

The science teacher shook his head, crushed his empty coffee cup and flung it into a garbage can.

\* \* \*

Norman sat in the first row, fifth seat back. His Algebra teacher, Mr. Davies taught in a roving, energetic style. Mr. Davies never perched at his desk like Mrs. Fletcher or stood sentry at the blackboard like Mr. Carlson. He roamed the classroom like a jungle cat. He sat on students' desks, propped his feet up on the windowsill, slipped down one row of desks and taught from the back of the room. Today, oddly, he stood motionless in the front of the room. "The results of yesterday's homework assignments are revealing," said Mr. Davies. "We have two groups in this class. Group A's scores were consistent with their average. But Group B's average dipped significantly. And the fall in the group average is due to a single paper." He scrutinized the class. "Tom Allen, can you explain why you went from a two month average of ninety-three to yesterday's zero?"

"Everyone has a bad day," said Tom.

"In mathematics we deal in statistics and probabilities. Your performance yesterday cannot be explained in logical terms. How could you fail to answer a single question correctly?"

"I've been under a lot of stress," said Tom.

"Will there be an improvement in today's paper?"

"I doubt it," said Tom. He turned and winked at Norman. The wink blotted out his right eye like a dark cloud hiding the moon.

"Pay closer attention to your homework, Mr. Allen." Mr. Davies coughed. "We will now break into study groups. Group A will work the odd numbered problems on page eighty-four. Group B will finish yesterday's in-class project."

Tom waited for Norman in the hall. Norman's mouth was dry. He felt relatively safe, as long as other students surrounded him; but then he remembered the previous meeting between a locker and the back of his skull. He made a mental note to walk home by another route if Chris wasn't with him. Tom put his arm around Norman.

Norman shuddered.

"You know, Norman, I'm not surprised at all."

"Really?"

"Yeah. You're a smart kid. I'll probably learn Monday that I've zeroed today's homework."

"Probably."

"But I'm not worried," said Tom. "You know why?"

"No."

"Because we have a test on Tuesday and you're helping me pass."

"But I'm in Group A. We don't have the same tests."

"That's why you'll have to give me the answers *before* the test on Tuesday."

"How?"

"Simple," said Tom, squeezing Norman like a tube of toothpaste. "You're going to steal Group B's test for me on Monday."

## Chapter 12

After school Norman worked at Mr. McCormick's store. He had intended to finish scrubbing the freezer but the afternoon business had been brisk and he ended up helping Mr. McCormick bag groceries. Norman guided fussy customers to the proper aisle and carried the older customers' groceries to their cars. All afternoon, in the back of his head, he heard Tom Allen's arrogant voice: *You're going to steal Group B's test for me on Monday.*

When the afternoon's shopping spree had ended, Mr. McCormick said, "Norman, do you know what happened this morning?"

"No."

"I got to work early and I heard a noise in the back."

"Really?"

"So I grabbed my trusty weapon," he seized his broom and held it like a Samurai swordsman.

"The vandals?"

"Yes. I stormed into the back, swinging this cutlass and they scurried up the hole like the rodents they are. I didn't see their faces, but I got the last one in the rump with this. Mr. McCormick swung at an imaginary target. "The good news is they didn't trash the store. The bad news is I still can't afford to cement or plaster that hole shut."

"Just hammer the inside shut again. I'll take care of the problem as soon as I talk to my science teacher."

"Truly?"

"Oh yeah, Mac," said Norman. "For *sure*."

"I've said it before: you're a good man, Norman Babbit."

Norman left the store at dusk and walked home through the expanding darkness. He entered the house and, as usual, Doris sprawled in front of the TV set and his mother was preparing some assortment of inedible vegetables in the kitchen. "Where," said Mrs. Babbit, "on God's green earth have you been?"

"Mr. McCormick's," said Norman. "Working. I'm saving up for a real telescope—" he dropped a hint "—like Dad's. I stayed late because it was busy."

She poured soy sauce and white molasses into a skillet of sizzling vegetables. "Clean up for dinner."

"I'm not hungry."

"Even if you don't eat, you will join this family at the dinner table, young man."

Norman stared at his mother. When she left for work in the morning she was always perfectly dressed; not a hair out of place. Now her hair was ruffled and small blue-black pouches puffed up under each eye. She stooped over the stove. "I'm really just not hungry, Mom."

"Norman—"

"I'm going for a walk."

Mrs. Babbit sighed and continued to stir the vegetables.

Greene's Hill was nearly a mile from Norman's house. It was an isolated, oak-tree-dotted knoll above the lights of Petaluma. Tucked beneath his left arm, as he trudged up the hill, was Norman's homemade reflecting telescope. It was constructed of a thirty-inch cardboard tube, three-inches in diameter. A mirror was mounted in the bottom of the tube, with an eyepiece fitted into a wooden brace at the top. The telescope had then been mounted onto a wooden tripod.

Norman reached the top of the hill and spread the tripod. He breathed deep and stretched. Usually Norman charted the positions of constellations, noting how they rose and set throughout the year, recording his observations in an astronomer's notebook. He also tracked and recorded other celestial events: comets, meteorite showers, shooting stars.

But tonight, Norman simply sat in the dark for nearly an hour, happy to be quiet and alone. Finally, he aimed his homemade telescope at the brightest object in tonight's sky.

The moon.

Norman focused and automatically named the features of the moon as he panned from right to left. The Lake of Dreams, the Sea of Serenity, the Crater of Archimedes, the Sea of Rains, the Jura Mountains, and the Ocean of Storms.

He removed his eye from the telescope and viewed the flickering, artificial lights of Petaluma. The lights were softened by the increasing fog; fog which would soon obscure Norman's view of the heavens. Norman ran a hand through his hair, exhaled, and returned to his telescope: the Central Bay, the Sea of Nectar, the Crater of Agrippa, the Sea of Vapors, the Sea of Cold. Norman thought how peaceful he would be, all alone, on the cold and silent moon.

## Chapter 13

Norman lugged his telescope home feeling quiet, hungry, and tired. Marcus, Doris, and Mrs. Babbit were eating silently at the kitchen table, chomping each bite twenty times. "Hi," said Norman. He leaned his telescope against the wall.

"Where have you been?" said Mrs. Babbit.

Norman removed his glasses, breathed on them and tried to clean them on his dirty t-shirt. "What?"

"I held dinner nearly an hour," said Mrs. Babbit.

"I'm not hungry," lied Norman.

"Where *were* you?" said Mrs. Babbit.

Norman pointed at his telescope. "I went for a walk."

"Pretty long walk," said Doris.

Marcus smacked Doris in the back of the head.

Norman walked over to his telescope.

"Where are you going, Norman?" said Mrs. Babbit. "Have some dinner."

"No thanks," said Norman. "I'm gonna take a bath, check on the mice and go to bed."

"Hey Sport, you've gotta eat something," said Marcus. "Some toast. I'll make you some toast."

"No thanks." Norman plopped his little blue telescope over his shoulder and trudged up the stairs.

Norman had a ritual for taking his Friday night bath. First, he would disconnect the bathroom fan. He would then stuff towels at the base of the door to stop cool air from entering. Then he'd run the shower full blast on hot, steaming the room so that he could barely see across to the mirror. Norman would then run the water as hot as he could possibly stand it and settle back into the tub with a book. Tonight he read Professor Van der Kloot's book, *Behavior*.

Mr. Lewis had loaned him the book two months ago but Norman had been so busy with his science project, and Tom Allen's homework, he hadn't had time for extra reading. As he soaked in water hot enough to make tea he read the chapter title: *Synapses, Circuits, and Behavior*. This chapter dealt with the nervous system and how it affects behavior.

"Behavior," said Norman. "I wonder what kind of circuits and synapses make Marcus an athlete, Tom Allen a punk, and me a coward?" Norman raised the book above his head and gazed at his body half-floating in the tub. He squinted to zoom in on his feet. Long, skinny feet with crooked toes. Stick-man legs. A stomach turned bright pink by the hot water. His ribs protruded, barely covered by flesh. He tossed Mr. Lewis' book across the room. It landed soundlessly on the towels at the base of the bathroom door. Norman inhaled, lowered his head beneath the water and began counting: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5...he opened his eyes underwater; the hot water stung worse than the chlorine in the public pool...8, 9, 10, 11...Norman stifled the desire to breathe...14, 15, 16, 17...his heart pounded in his ears...19, 20, 21, 22...he wanted to pass out...27, 28, 29, 30...he broke the surface and sucked in the moist, steamy air of the bathroom.

"I guess I have to steal that test."

Norman washed his hair, drained the tub, toweled off, dressed, then checked his mice.

Luigi balanced on the back of Norman's chair; they both faced the computer. The owl always attached himself to Norman's chair as if he were protecting Norman from a strange-glowing-rectangular-computer-animal. Norman pecked at the computer keys much like Luigi pecked at his food. Norman entered the current weights of his mice. Saturday would be the last day he would collect any data. The data would be entered and arranged in tables and graphs, then analyzed. On Sunday Norman would print out his entire project: hypothesis, materials, procedure, data, and conclusions. Tuesday morning he and Marcus would move the mice to school and set up for the ISEF sanctioned judging on Tuesday night.

Norman smiled. He knew no one in the school would have a project as interesting or scientifically sound as his. He punched in the last of his data and daydreamed of Washington D.C. The Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, the KFC on Pennsylvania Avenue.

Mrs. Babbit quietly entered the room while Norman drifted at the computer. Luigi's head swiveled around. "Norman?" said Mrs. Babbit.

No answer.

She tapped his shoulder, "Norman?"

"Oh. Hi, Mom."

The computer's hum was the only sound in the room until Mrs. Babbit spoke again, "Norman, are you okay?"

"Yeah," said Norman, still studying the computer screen.

"Marcus seems to think you're having some problems at school." She settled onto Norman's bed, a suspicious eye on Luigi.

"Seventh grade is just different," said Norman. "That's all."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Yeah, there's something you can do. Buy some meat! And snack cakes! And any cereal that's not granola! Banish all soy products from the kitchen! Stock the freezer with ice cream! We're at the top of the foodchain but we eat like iguanas or sea turtles!"

That's what Norman said on the *INSIDE*.

On the *OUTSIDE* he said, "How about meatloaf tomorrow night for dinner?"

"I'll consider it, Norman." Mrs. Babbit inspected the bedroom with her eyes; then her nose, "Don't you ever clean this room? It smells like bird in here."

"That's because of my roommate." Norman backed up his data and switched off the computer. Luigi hop-fluttered to his shoulder.

"You should keep that bird in the garage. Maybe then your room would be halfway decent and sanitary and..." She stopped speaking and looked at Norman. "I'm sorry Norman. I came in here to see if I could help you and I'm picking on you. Is there anything, besides meatloaf, that I could do for you?"

"Answer one question for me?"

"Just one?"

"A big one." Norman cleared his throat. "What was dad like?"

Mrs. Babbit sat silent, almost stunned, for a moment. "Your father, Norman, was different. He was probably the most intelligent man, person, I've ever known. He could have taught in any university if he chose to. But instead he did construction work. He built houses and apartments. He could have designed them, but he pounded nails and hung sheet rock and....I was always puzzled and slightly disappointed that he didn't pursue an academic career."

"Where did he work?"

"Any number of places," she said. "Then he settled with El Camino Construction. A small, independent place in town. It's over on—"

"East D Street. I've seen the signs."

She wagged her head left-to-right: "I must admit that he was happy with what he was doing; working construction by day to feed his family, then reading and stargazing through that huge telescope of his at night." She didn't quite smile, but the lines around her eyes softened for a moment.



Norman began to speak but his mother interrupted, “No, you may not use your father’s telescope.”

Norman nodded. Luigi ruffled his feathers.

“He had hair that was not quite auburn, but still not brown, and green eyes that saw right through you. He had pale, almost ivory skin; the sunburns he had while working construction were God-awful. He had long, elegant fingers.”

And then she smiled. A beautiful, sad and wistful smile.

“Norman, you resemble him in many ways. I don’t tell you often enough, but you are an important part of our family.” She pressed her lips against Norman’s forehead. Mrs. Babbit rose and stroked the wrinkles out of her skirt.

“Night, Mom.”

She opened the bedroom door. TV sounds drifted up the stairs. Mrs. Babbit cleared her throat and said, “Good night Norman.”

Norman gave Luigi some fresh water, then jumped into bed. He stared at the mirror-stars on his ceiling, then fell asleep and dreamed he was a huge purple tree frog clinging to the Great Wall of China—eating cheeseburgers.

He awoke in the middle of the night and stumbled out of bed. Luigi was wide-awake on his skull-perch. Norman stroked his lucky nickel, flicked on the computer and opened his Algebra book. He thumbed to the page he wanted and started typing. “I got you, Tom Allen. I got you.”

## Chapter 14

Despite waking during the night, Norman awoke early Saturday morning. After breakfast, eight slices of cinnamon toast, only two of them overdone, he scampered upstairs and knocked on Marcus’ door.

No answer.

Norman knocked two more times, then he entered. Marcus’ bed was unmade; a pair of Nike hightops were on the desk. The mouse cage was at the foot of the bed, with a dogeared Spanish II workbook on top. Norman placed the *Conversaciones en Español* text on the desk next to the hightops. Bending to pick up the cage Norman had a feeling he wasn’t alone.

Turning around he remembered why he always felt like that in Marcus’ room. The near wall had no furniture placed against it; simply a wall with a door. But the entire wall, and door, was covered with color pictures of sports stars. Marcus had clipped the pictures from *Sports Illustrated* and wallpapered his room with the photos. Norman, the CONTROL cage of mice in hand, was spied on by the images of Michael Jordan, Kevin Garnett, Shaq, Barry Bonds, Michael Vick, Sammy Sosa, Eddie George, Tiger Woods, and a hundred others who swam, hurdled, tackled, shot basketballs, and bunted. Norman always felt uncomfortable under the inspection of so many unblinking eyes. As he left the room he wondered how Marcus could sleep with a wall like that across from his bed.

From Marcus’ room Norman walked down the hall to the left, entered the spare bedroom and disconnected the 3800 CPM buzzer from the cage. With a cage in each hand he stepped—precisely, keeping the cages level—down the stairs. Doris, still in her pajamas, with an errant pigtailed plastered to her left cheek, watched *Muppet Babies*.

“Hey Doris,” said Norman, “do you want to help me weigh the mice and clean the cages?”

“No way.”

“I thought you liked my mice?”

“I do like your mice. I don’t like *you*.”

“Thanks for sharing.”

Norman entered the pantry and placed the three cages side-by-side-by-side. Except for the labels: CONTROL, 3800 CPM, 1500 CPM, the cages were identical. Each cage contained thirty squirming white mice. In each cage at least two of the three exercise wheels were spinning and a white furry form sucked at every water bottle.

But Norman had spent every morning during the last two months in the company of these ninety mice, and the three cages, to him, were as distinct as Marcus, Doris, and himself. The CONTROL cage was calm and orderly—for mice. The rodents were plump and healthy. The 1500 CPM cage was like the CONTROL cage except for two mice. These mice were this cage’s clowns and Norman had named them Ike and Zeke. Ike always tried to run on the outside of the exercise wheel. He’d hook his claws into the wire mesh of the wheel and try to climb on top. He’d make it halfway, then fly off into the air and land on his back, scattering cedar chips and mice when he landed. Zeke was less acrobatic. He would simply climb the cage and stay there like a child who is halfway up a tree and is too scared to continue upwards or return to earth. Several times during the last two months Norman had to unfurl Zeke’s claws from the cage and return him to the cedar chips.

The 3800 CPM cage was the jewel of Norman’s experiment. The mice in this cage were just as healthy and active, but they were noticeably sleeker. Throughout the experiment Norman noticed that this group left more food uneaten than the other two groups and, hopefully, the data would support his observations.

To complete the data gathering, Norman had to weigh the mice in each cage and arrive at an Average Cage Weight. He had weighed and averaged the mice two months ago; all three cages were almost identical in weight: plus-or-minus 3% variation. The new figures should show a markedly increased deviation, which would support his theory that appetite can be controlled, to a certain degree, by systematic exposure to specific frequencies during mealtime.

Norman had designed a little jacket for weighing the mice. The *jacket* was a washcloth with Velcro closures sewn into the corners. He would fish a mouse from the cage, wrap him in the jacket and pop him onto the scale. Whatever the mouse weighed Norman would subtract nineteen grams, to account for the washcloth-jacket’s weight. The scientific scale with PROPERTY OF KENILWORTH JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL stenciled on its side was on a pantry shelf. Norman set the scale on the floor next to the cages and calibrated it to 00.00. He unlocked the Control cage then realized he’d left his notebook in his room. “Patience, gentlemen,” said Norman, to the mice, “I’ll be right back.

Once again, Norman sprinted upstairs. He looked in his desk’s top drawer, but the notebook wasn’t there. “That’s right,” Norman said to Luigi, “I left it by the computer last night.” Norman touched his lucky nickel, and tucked his notebook under his arm.

That’s when he heard the scream.

It started low and built to a shriek that could shatter glass. The scream peaked, stopped suddenly, and then climbed to an ear-shattering note. Norman, notebook in hand, sprinted downstairs and into the TV room. Doris thrashed around on the floor like the victim in a

horror movie. Her stuck pigtail had come undone and flapped like a flag in the breeze. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Her face was crimson, creeping to scarlet. She stopped rolling, knelt, faced Norman and screamed: "AHHHHHHHHHH! MOUSE!"

"You *like* my mice."

"Only when they're *in* the cage."

"Doris," said Norman, "you got a lot of rules about mice." He spotted an escapee from the Control cage he'd left unlocked. The mouse cowered behind the TV. He tossed his notebook onto the couch and scooped up the mouse.

Doris pointed to the kitchen, "More mice."

Norman turned and saw a procession of mice marching through the kitchen. He placed the recently captured fugitive into his left pants' pocket. "C'mon and help me, Doris. If mom sees this she'll kill me."

"You deserve what you get, you stupid scientist." Doris returned her attention to the TV, concentrating on a *Froot Loops* commercial.

"Thank you, Doris," said Norman, "you've been helpful." Norman walked slowly past the escapees in the kitchen and counted the mice remaining in the Control cage. "Sixteen, plus one in my pocket. Thirteen loose mice." He plopped the mouse from his pocket into the cage, locked the door, and grabbed a paper sack off a pantry shelf.

And Norman began his rodent safari.

He immediately captured two mice still in the pantry, dropping them softly into the bag. He dropped to his knees and crawled into the kitchen. A mouse cowered in a corner: Norman grabbed it. "Three down, ten to go."

Norman crawled into the kitchen. A trio of rodents lingered by the refrigerator. Two were captured; the third scurried away. Norman stopped and listened. He heard a slight scratching sound by the cabinet where the granola and whole grains were kept. Norman crossed the linoleum on all fours like a bear stalking his last meal before hibernation. He opened the cupboard door. Five mice gnawed at a box of granola. Norman calmly plucked the mice one-by-one from the box of unsweetened multigrain cereal. "Ten down, three to go." Norman turned and bumped into a pink bathrobe. He glanced down and saw fuzzy brown slippers. He glanced up, "Hi Mom."

"It's not even nine o'clock, Norman, what are you doing?"

"Saturday chores."

"You have outdoor chores his week. Marcus cleans the kitchen."

"I forgot." The mice in the bag squeaked, shuffled, and shifted.

"What's in the bag, Norman?"

"Mostly air."

"What's in there besides air?"

"Mice."

"Mice?"

"White mice from my science project. A few got loose."

"How many is *a few*?"

Norman's legs ached from kneeling. He shifted positions, sat down, and said, "Thirteen." "Thirteen?"

"Yeah." Norman spotted a mouse nibbling at his mother's brown slippers. "Don't move."

"What?" Norman dove, nabbed the fugitive and dropped him in the bag.

"Norman, I'm going back to bed. I'm developing a—"

“Migraine?”

Mrs. Babbit nodded. “Wake me when you’ve ridden the house of rodents.”

“Including Doris?”

She stared down at her son. “That’s not funny, Norman. Not funny.”

“It wasn’t a joke.”

Mrs. Babbit turned and retreated, her slippers making a *swish-slap, swish-slap* sound on the kitchen floor.

Norman sat unmoving, listening for mouse noises. He didn’t hear any. He returned to the cereal cabinet and removed the box of granola. He poured a small pyramid of cereal in the center of the floor.

Marcus, dripping sweat, entered the kitchen. He looked at the pile of breakfast cereal, then at Norman. “It tastes better in a bowl with milk, Sport.”

“I’ve had breakfast. I’m trying to catch a couple of mice. That’s the bait.”

Marcus nodded as if it were perfectly normal for an eleven-year-old to use organic cereal to lure stray mice on a Saturday morning. Marcus crossed to the sink and gulped water straight from the tap. He wiped his chin on his shirt, “Where’s Doris?”

“TV.”

“Mom?”

“Migraine.”

“A migraine at nine-fifteen AM,” said Marcus. “Congrats, Norman, that’s a new record.”

“Shh.” Norman pointed at two mice inching toward the cereal. He let them almost nibble, handed the sack full of air and mice to Marcus and sprang on his prey. He captured the pair, and said, “Numbers twelve and thirteen.”

“Thirteen mice on the loose? No wonder mom’s in bed.”

“Open the sack.”

Norman inserted the final two escapees. “Thanks Marcus.”

“Are you coming to my baseball game today?”

Norman stared at his sweaty brother. “You go jogging the morning of your game?”

“Just a couple of miles. To keep loose.”

“Who are you playing?”

“Healdsburg.”

“I’ll be there. But I might be late. It takes me about three hours to weigh my mice.”

“Weigh your mice? Sometimes I worry about you, Sport.”

## Chapter 15

Norman and Chris arrived at the game in the top of the third inning. Casa Grande was in the field with Marcus at second base. There was a runner on first with one out. Suzanne and several friends sat behind the Casa Grande dugout, chanting, “Defense, defense, defense.” Chris and Norman settled onto the hardwood planks of the bleachers directly behind homeplate. Chris looked at the scoreboard and said, “Zero to zero. Good, we haven’t missed anything.”

“What you’ve missed,” said a man behind them “is a great defensive game. The most interesting part of a baseball game isn’t the number of runs scored.”

Norman and Chris turned around. The man wore a Mets cap and blue bib-overalls over a green t-shirt. "The most interesting part of a baseball game for me," said Chris, "is how the outfielders stay awake. No wonder all those pros take drugs. They need them to keep their eyes open."

"That's no attitude," said the Mets fan. "There a world of activity in the outfield."

"Yeah," said Chris, "if you're a butterfly."

"Or a gardener," said Norman.

"What sports do you boys like?" asked Mets.

"Football," said Chris.

"Astronomy," said Norman.

A crack of the bat returned the trio's attention to the game. A scorching ground ball bounced to Marcus' right. He dove and smothered the ball; from his knees he flipped the ball to the shortstop who danced across second base and strong-armed a throw to first, completing the double play. The meager crowd clapped their approval.

"See," said Mets, "a 4-6-3 double play. That second baseman is a good one."

"I know," said Norman. "He's my brother." Chris and Norman high-fived each other and moved three rows down, away from the commentator.

Casa Grande's leadoff batter in the bottom of the third was walked on four consecutive pitches. Marcus batted next. The front of his uniform was smeared with dirt, apparently that hadn't been his first diving catch of the game. Healdsburg's coach walked out to the mound to settle his pitcher down. "I've always wondered," said Norman, "why baseball coaches dress like the players. Basketball coaches don't wear shorts and football coaches don't wear helmets. Why do baseball coaches dress like that?"

"Are you asking me?" said Chris.

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"You're a jock."

"I don't know," said Chris. "Ask me a question about football."

"Okay. Who won the first Heisman Trophy?"

"I don't know," said Chris. "Who?"

"Jay Berwanger."

"How do you know that?"

"I heard it during a game of *Trivial Pursuit*. I remember things."

"Just watch the game, Einstein."

Healdsburg's coach had finished his instructions to the pitcher. Marcus entered the batter's box and the runner took a short lead off first. The pitcher wound up and delivered the ball. The pitch was high and inside. Marcus ducked back but the ball sailed inside and hit him on the jaw. He crumpled to the ground.

He wasn't moving.

Norman bounded down the bleachers to the Casa Grande dugout. An overweight coach, dressed like his players, tried to stop him but Norman scooted around the coach and sprinted to Marcus.

Marcus still hadn't moved. A thin stream of blood trickled from his mouth and puddled in the dirt. The umpires and coaches from both teams huddled around Marcus. Norman squeezed his skinny frame between two umpires and knelt beside Marcus. An umpire grabbed Norman by the shoulder. "I'm staying right here," said Norman. "He's my brother."

"I've called an ambulance," said the other umpire, snapping shut a tiny green cellphone. One of Casa Grande's coaches arrived with towels and a bag of ice. He used two towels as a pillow. Norman had snatched the ice from him and pressed it against Marcus' jaw, which was already swollen and discolored. The soprano whine of a distant ambulance disturbed the hushed silence of the baseball diamond. Norman looked up and saw Chris, standing beyond the circle of players and coaches, with Suzanne. Chris looked confused and concerned at the same time. Suzanne, pale and trembling, could barely hold back her tears.

\* \* \*

"All the X-rays are negative, Mrs. Babbit," said the doctor.  
"My God," said Mrs. Babbit, "I knew it."  
"Mom," said Norman, "negative is *good*. It means they didn't find any internal damage."  
"Really?" she asked the doctor.  
"Yes. You can take him home tomorrow," said the doctor. "We'd like to keep him overnight for observation."  
"Can we see him now?" said Suzanne.  
"For a few minutes, no problem," said the doctor.  
Suzanne, Mrs. Babbit, and Norman followed the pink-faced doctor down the corridor.  
"Where's Doris?" asked Mrs. Babbit.  
"She's watching television in the lounge," said Suzanne.  
"Go sit with your sister, Norman," said Mrs. Babbit.  
"I want to see Marcus," said Norman.  
"Go sit with your sister," said Mrs. Babbit.  
"*After* I see Marcus," said Norman.  
"I suppose she'll be fine. Come on, Norman."  
Marcus was drowsy, but managed a weak smile. Mrs. Babbit held his hand. Norman almost managed to look away as Suzanne kissed Marcus on the side of his face that wasn't swollen. Norman stood at the foot of the bed and said, "How you feeling?"  
"Big headache," mumbled Marcus.  
"I can imagine," said Norman. From the point of Marcus' chin to an inch below his left eye Marcus' face was purple. Both eyes were puffy.  
"Go home?" said Marcus, trying to speak without moving his jaw.  
"Tomorrow," said Mrs. Babbit.  
Marcus nodded and said, "Won?"  
"What?" said Suzanne.  
"Who won?" repeated Marcus.  
"Casa Grande did," said Norman. "Five to four in the bottom of the eleventh. The coach just called." Marcus, looking like a Halloween goblin, smiled and fell asleep.

Norman stroked his lucky nickel and booted up the computer. Luigi awoke and stared, unblinking, at the screen. "My final data entry," said Norman. He pecked in the weights of the mice, double checked his figures and determined the difference in weights for the CONTROL group, the 1500 CPM group, and the 3800 CPM group. The 1500 CPM mice were slightly lighter than the CONTROL group. The 3800 CPM group experienced a significant weight loss.

“Hey Luigi,” said Norman, “my hypothesis was correct. First the ISEF finals, then Stanford, then the Nobel Prize. All I have to do is print out my results and get these cages to school.”

With two keystrokes Norman backed up his data.

“Now let’s take care of another problem.” Three more keystrokes and the computer displayed a page with twenty Algebra problems arranged in two columns. “Twenty problems worth five points each and three extra credit problems worth three points,” said Norman. That’s been the format for Mr. Davies’ tests all year. There’s no reason for him to change now.” Norman flipped open his Algebra book, found three problems suitable for extra credit on his dummy test and entered them into the computer.

## Chapter 16

Dinner on Sunday was a tense and hushed affair. Mrs. Babbit had prepared teriyaki mung-bean casserole. When prepared properly Norman hated mung-bean casserole. Tonight’s, burned on the outside and runny in the center, was disgusting. The texture reminded Norman of critters he’d dissected in General Science. For dessert Mrs. Babbit had baked coconut-carob cookies. They were underdone and doughy.

Norman pushed the casserole around his plate, munched a little salad and drank four glasses of milk. Marcus utilized his bruised jaw as an excuse for not eating.

Doris loved it.

She had two huge servings of mung-bean and ate four cookies. Mrs. Babbit finally broke the silence, “Would you like a cookie, Marcus?”

He shook his head, *No*.

“I’ll take another one,” said Doris.

Mrs. Babbit passed the plate of cookies to Doris who snagged two and stacked them alongside her plate.

Norman poured his fifth glass of milk and said, “Are you staying home from school for a few days, Marcus?”

“Just Monday,” he said faintly.

“Will you be able to drive me to school on Tuesday? I need transportation for me and my science project.”

“Don’t bother him, Norman,” said Mrs. Babbit. “If Marcus isn’t well, you’ll just have to find another way to school for you and your rats.”

“They’re not *rats*,” said Norman. “They’re mice. Award winning mice that will win me a trip to Washington D.C.”

“Sure,” said Doris. “Washington.”

“What’s up?” said Marcus. Even Mrs. Babbit looked interested.

“The finals for the International Science and Engineering Fair are in Washington this year. I should qualify. The other projects in my class are butterfly collections and papier-mâché volcanoes. I have a *real* science project.” Norman pushed his plate away and folded his arms across his chest.

Mrs. Babbit stood, “That’s earth shaking news, but being a scientist won’t get you out of the dishes. Norman washes; Doris dries.”

"But Mommmmm," said Doris, "*The Muppet Movie* is on."

Mrs. Babbit wavered a moment, then said, "Then hurry up with the dishes if you don't want to miss it." She finished her tea and said, "Marcus, take a pill and go to bed. I'll be upstairs reading."

Norman sprang up and cleared the table. He sped between the table and the sink with plates, glasses, and silverware. "What's your hurry, Norman?" said Mrs. Babbit.

"I promised Chris I'd help him with his homework."

"Tonight?"

Norman scraped food scraps into the sink and flipped on the garbage disposal. He yelled over the disposal's metallic munching. "YEAH! TONIGHT!"

"YOU HAVE SCHOOL TOMORROW."

"I'LL BE HOME BY NINE."

"YOU CAN'T GO TONIGHT."

Norman flicked off the disposal, "I have to, Mom. I have to."

Mrs. Babbit rose and left the table, waving a feeble goodnight.

"I'll drive Tuesday," said Marcus, "don't worry, Sport."

"Thanks."

"Doris," said Marcus, "help Norman with the dishes."

"Okay," Doris slipped out of her chair, walked over to the sink and kicked Norman in the shin. "That's for talking back to mom."

"Ow. You brat. OW."

She stuck out her tongue.

Norman flicked water in her face.

"Just for that, I'm not helping you." She stomped from the kitchen and flipped on the TV.

"What a waste of DNA," said Norman.

"I'll give you a hand, Sport."

Norman, until this moment, considered his older brother invincible. Always cranking out push-ups and sit-ups and running all over town; but tonight he seemed weary and defeated.

"Take your pill and get to bed."

Marcus nodded, "If you go to Chris' don't be too late."

"I won't be. G'night, Marcus."

Obviously in pain, Marcus left the table and snuggled down onto the couch with Doris and *The Muppet Movie*.

Norman scrubbed and thought:

THINGS TO DO TOMORROW

- 1) Deal with Tom Allen
- 2) Study for Algebra test
- 3) Borrow some stuff from Mr. Lewis
- 4) Work at Mr. McCormick's
- 5) Visit El Camino Construction

The dishes were washed and dried and Norman was at Chris' before the sun set. The Fortes were just finishing dinner. An enormous platter of ribs, like a dinosaur boneyard, dominated the center of the table. Chris and his brothers were busy cleaning the kitchen, their faces smeared with varying quantities of BBQ sauce.

"Have a seat, Normy," said Chris. "We'll be done in a minute." Norman settled into the chair next to Mrs. Forte.



"How is your brother?"

"A little sore," Norman said. "He'll be okay."

"Thank God," she said. "I remember when Chris was hit by a pitch in Little League—"

"It wasn't a pitch," said Chris.

"—that's right, you were pitching—"

"I was playing third."

"—and the batter hit a line drive."

"Mom," said Chris, "it was our pitcher. He tried a pick-off play and beamed me in the head."

"It was terrifying, seeing Chris hurt. I was so relieved when the tests showed no signs of brain damage."

Mr. Forte spoke from the far end of the table, "Unfortunately they also found no evidence of brain *activity*."

"Funny, Pops," said Chris, drying his hands on a towel.

"Ready for that boxing lesson, Norman?" said Mr. Forte.

"Yeah," said Norman.

"Me too," said Chris. "I'm done here." He draped the towel over Harvey's head and followed them to the garage.

"Stick and move, Norman. Stick and move. That's it," said Mr. Forte. Chris and Norman circled each other in the center of the garage. They were both stripped to the waist. Norman was half-a-foot shorter and thirty-five pounds lighter than Chris. He looked like a refugee on a crash diet. "Work him to the body, Norman. The body."

Norman punched wildly. Chris side-stepped and Norman missed. Norman gathered himself and swung again. Chris tried to side-step in the opposite direction, but slipped. On his way to the floor Chris' face found Norman's right hand. The right hook connected.

Chris slumped to the concrete.

Norman jumped up-and-down three times.

But not in triumph.

In pain. His right hand throbbed inside his sweaty glove. "I think I broke my hand on your cement-block-head."

Chris stood and patted Norman, a little too roughly, on the head. "I think you broke my nose." He laughed and blood-bubbles exploded from his nose.

"I was aiming for your stomach, Chris."

"You missed."

"I know," said Norman, massaging his right hand. "I know."

## Chapter 17

"You don't look too bad with a purple nose," said Norman.

"Thanks," said Chris. "How's the hand?"

"Swollen."

The pair passed by McCormick's grocery. The patchy fog obscured their view of Kenilworth. Norman stopped. "Go on ahead, Chris."

"See you in homeroom, Normy."

Pushing the door open, Norman said, "Morning, Mac."

Mr. McCormick stood behind a pyramid of apples. "So, Norman, why did the turtle cross the road?"

"Why?"

"To get to the *shell* station." Mr. McCormick tossed an apple to Norman, who dropped it. "Not too adept at the National Pastime."

"I've never played baseball."

"Never? Even an ancient Irishman such as myself has played the game."

"When?"

"In the Army, during the Korean War."

"I'll be finishing the freezer today, after school," said Norman around a mouthful of apple.

"Take another day, Norman. I know it was an ungodly mess."

"Have you closed up the outside of the ice chute yet?"

"Indeed I have, Sonny."

"If I get the stuff I need from Mr. Lewis I can take care of that today; then I'll finish the freezer tomorrow."

"That's the boy."

"Thanks for the apple, Mac." Norman tucked his books under his left arm and waved goodbye with the apple.

Clarence Bleeker, Chris, and Norman were gnawing on a meat-like-substance that the cafeteria called *Salisbury Steak* when Tom Allen approached the table: "Do you losers mind if I borrow Norman for a moment?"

"No," said Clarence.

Chris glared down his swollen nose at Tom.

"Thank you," said Tom. "Keep his lunch warm. He'll be back."

Tom snaked his arm around Norman and whispered, "In thirty seconds a food fight will break out. That's when we slip out of this cafeteria. Slowly and calmly, so we don't attract attention."

Tom and Norman strolled to the far end of the cafeteria. When Dave Davido flung his Salisbury Steak, Frisbee style, at the sixth grade table Mrs. Fletcher sprinted to the table to stop the food fight before it started.

Too late.

Chris had already scooped up the contents of Norman's tray and propelled it in the general direction of Dave Davido. The so-called *meat* fell short of the mark, but assorted vegetables and cornbread bombarded the sixth graders. Tom and Norman slipped out of the cafeteria and sneaked down the corridor to Mr. Davies' room. Looking left, then right, Tom tried the door. "It's locked," said Norman, "we'll come back later."

"Not quite, nerd-boy," said Tom. He extracted a plastic Kenilworth Junior High Student Body Card from his shirt pocket and waved it at Norman. Tom slipped the card between the doorjamb and the lock and yanked the door open. "There ain't a door in the school I can't open." Tom grinned like a vulture over bloody roadkill.

"Cheating on homework is bad enough," said Norman. "This is breaking and entering."

"I haven't *broken* anything, and you'll do the *entering*, so I feel pretty good about it." Tom pushed Norman into the classroom. "You've got about five minutes to steal the test. Don't get caught. I'd hate to see you get into any trouble, Norman."

Norman hauled the door silently shut. The classroom had that muffled silence that empty schools, stadiums, and churches possess. The blackboard was scarred with calculations from the previous Algebra class. Mr. Davies' desk featured books, papers, a half-eaten-donut, and a framed snapshot of his wife and children. Norman had the family portrait in his palm when he heard a key turn in the lock. He replaced the picture as the door opened. Norman darted to the blackboard and began solving a problem left over from the previous class. His heart thumped as he heard footsteps approaching from behind. "Stay cool," said Norman. "Stay cool." The footsteps stopped; Norman felt a hand on his left shoulder.

"What did you say, Norman?"

Norman turned to see Mr. Forrester standing behind him. "I said, *Stay in school, stay in school.*"

"What are you doing in here during lunch hour, eh?"

"Norman gestured at the board, 'Algebra.'"

"Shouldn't you be at lunch?" Mr. Forrester tightened his grip on Norman's shoulder.

"I wasn't hungry," said Norman, as his empty stomach rumbled. "And we have a big test tomorrow. Anything wrong with a little extra studying, sir?"

"But the door was locked."

"Really?" said Norman. "It wasn't when I opened it. How else could I get in?"

Mr. Forrester squeezed goodbye to Norman's shoulder and examined the classroom like a detective hunting for the murder weapon. He opened Mr. Davies' desk drawer and examined the pencils and rubberbands. He tugged at the locked file cabinet drawers. "Get back to the cafeteria, Norman."

"Okay," said Norman. He returned the chalk to the tray. "May I stop at my locker first?"

"Sure," said Mr. Forrester, "but let me write you a hallway pass." He scribbled on a blue pad of paper.

"Thanks," said Norman. "I'd hate to get in trouble. Eh?"

From his locker Norman extracted a piece of paper. Across the top was typed: Eighth Grade—Group B." Two neat rows of problems ran in columns. Three extra-credit problems nestled together at the bottom of the page. Norman kissed the paper, "I may be a coward, but I am *not* a thief."

Tom Allen leaned against the far wall, running a hand through his hair repeatedly, as if searching for bugs. Norman handed him the phony test, "Here."

Tom snatched it, "Careful, you wanna get busted?"

"No. Bye."

"Where are you going?" Tom latched onto Norman's belt.

"Algebra class."

"Not without this." Tom slipped the fake test back to Norman. "You solve the problems and have the answers tomorrow morning. I need time to make a cheat sheet. And, *Normy*, if they aren't the right answers you are dead."

Norman wanted to tell Tom that he'd have the right answers but to the wrong questions.

## Chapter 18

A minute before they were dismissed Mr. Lewis said, "I need three volunteers."

"Volunteers for what?" asked Mike Caldwell.

Mr. Lewis tapped on the lab table with a glass stirring-rod. "I can't tell you until you volunteer. But I can promise you substantial extra credit."

"Okay," said Mike. "I volunteer."

"That's one," said the science teacher. Mr. Lewis looked hopefully at Norman, who avoided eye contact. Darcy slowly raised her hand, "That's two," said Mr. Lewis.

"What's in it for me?" said Chris.

"Extra credit," said Mr. Lewis, "and my undying gratitude."

"Forget the gratitude," said Chris, "how much extra credit?"

"A substantial amount."

"Put me in, Coach," said Chris, "I'm ready to play."

"That's three," said Mr. Lewis. "You three will present your science projects in class tomorrow. If they are mechanical in nature you will demonstrate how they work. If they are research projects you will explain your hypothesis, methods and conclusions. As I recall, Chris, your project is about Industrial Chemistry and Teflon, right?"

The bell sounded, drowning out Chris' feeble, "Yes."

As students flooded out of the room, Mr. Lewis said, "Norman, I have something for you."

Norman fought against the flow of students to the front of the room. "Here's that powdered sulfur you asked me for." Mr. Lewis held a white bag at arm's length. "What a stench, be careful with this stuff. It'll ruin any fabric it contacts."

"Thanks."

"What do you need that for?"

"A burglar alarm."

Mr. Lewis nodded. "Remember your friend's problem?"

"What? Oh, yeah."

"How's she doing?"

"Worse. A teacher couldn't help. Do you know any cops?"

Chris leaned up against Norman's locker. "I'm sunk," said Chris. "I need your help."

"With what?"

My science project. I've barely started it and I have to *demonstrate* it in less than twenty-four hours. What's that smell?"

"Sulfur," Norman spun the combination and placed the white bag of stink in the bottom of his locker. "I thought you had it all worked out?"

"I had an idea, but when I tried it I discovered it was impossible. Besides, I've been studying English so *we* don't flunk."

"Chris?"

"Yeah?"

"Why'd you open your big mouth and volunteer?"

"I wonder if Mr. Lewis would give me extra credit if I sat in front of the class for an hour and *didn't* say anything."

"You could call it *Breaking the Sound Barrier*. I don't think you'd get extra credit, but he'd appreciate it."

"I need your help, Normy. Tonight."

"I'll ask, but you know my mom. She almost didn't let me out last night."

"Please?"

"I'll try," said Norman, "but it might take a miracle."

Chris massaged his sore nose. "Please try." He wandered down the hall to his locker. "Industrial Chemistry and Teflon. I'm dead." He stopped, banged his head against a locker once, twice, and continued down the hall.

## Chapter 19

Norman had finished all but one wall of the freezer.

His hands were red and raw from the strong detergent and he was dizzy from the smell of bleach in the freezer. He climbed down the ladder, dumped the bucket and rinsed the brush. He grabbed his schoolbooks and waited while Mr. McCormick counted change back to a wrinkled old lady in a flowered dress. As she shuffled to the door, Mr. McCormick said, "What can I do for you, Sonny?"

"Two things." He handed Mr. McCormick the sack of reeking yellow powder. "I hooked up a string harness in the ice chute. Put this bag in the harness. As soon as anyone jostles the harness it opens and drops the sack to the ground. It's sulfur. It smells terrible, it smells like—"

Mr. McCormick sniffed at the bag. Even through the sack the noxious smell was disgusting and nasty. "It smells like my Uncle James after he'd been eating cabbage. This should keep the devil himself out of that chute."

Norman smiled at Mac's pronunciation of *Devil*. He said *Divil* and spat the two syllables out like poison.

"You said there were two things, Sonny?" Mr. McCormick set the sulfur a safe distance away.

"I'll finish the freezer tomorrow, Mac. But I was wondering if I could have an advance on my pay?"

The Grocer hit NO SALE on the cash register and it sprang open, "Big date tonight?"

Norman squirmed and shook his head.

"How much, Sonny?"

"A five will do."

The Irishman peeled a five from the register. "How does a midget say goodbye?"

"How?"

"With a *microwave*, of course." Mr. McCormick handed him the five.

"Your jokes are getting worse, Mac."

"But you can't find fault with the wages I'm paying."

The noisy diesel bus clattered across the railroad tracks, crossed the Petaluma River Bridge and stopped at the corner of Petaluma Boulevard and East D Street. Norman hopped down the bus' steps, crossed the boulevard and walked the three blocks to El Camino Construction. The construction yard was fenced by an eight-foot-tall chain link fence with two strands of barbed wire across the top. Pipes and plywood and bags of concrete were stacked inside the compound. Two forklifts were unloading bundled redwood shingles from a tractor-trailer. A small office, just a little larger than Norman's room huddled between two stacks of scrap lumber. Norman walked to the office and opened the door. It smelled of cigarette smoke. Two men, both dressed in plaid shirts and blue jeans, were arguing about the amount of wood needed to frame a house. Norman stood quietly, surveying the office. A huge silver coffee urn that reminded Norman of R2D2 was perched on a card table. An ancient desk littered with papers dominated the center of the office; file cabinets lined the far wall. A *Playboy* calendar hung above the file cabinets. The men in plaid finally noticed Norman.

Red Plaid said, "What can I do for ya, kid?"

"How long have you worked here?" said Norman.

"It's a miniature IRS agent," said Blue Plaid.

"Right," said Norman.

"I've worked here too long," said Red Plaid. "Much too long." He lit a cigarette and exhaled. Along with the smoke came the response. "Fifteen years. I've been here a little over fifteen years." He motioned at Blue Plaid. "This joker's been here twenty."

"Do you remember a guy that worked here six or seven years ago? His last name was Babbit?"

"Roger," said Blue Plaid. "I remember him. Kind of a strange character. Real quiet. He used to read on his lunch hour."

"Why are you interested in Roger?" asked Red Plaid.

"I'm his son."

"Oh," said Blue Plaid. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," said Norman. "I was real little when he died and I just wanted to find out about him. What he did for a living, what kind of guy he was. You know."

"Huh," said Red Plaid. He studied Norman. "Like this joker said, he was kind of quiet. Good hard worker; never complained. And he was always reading books."

"Big thick books," said Blue Plaid, "on Astrology. He was real deep into Astrology."

"*Astronomy*," said Red Plaid. "Stars and planets; not the *Psychic Friends Hotline*."

"I always get those two mixed up," said Blue Plaid.

"Here's a story about your Pop. What's your name?" said Red Plaid.

"Norman."

"Norman, this was at least ten years ago. We were doing that Sunnyslope Subdivision. Heavy equipment everywhere, grading the land, leveling out the little hills so we could lay out streets and start pouring foundations. We had an army of workers out there and Roger, he was foreman on that subdivision, stops everything. Everything." Red Plaid smiled, "You know why?"

"No." Norman shifted his weight from one foot to another. "Why?"

"In one of those little hills there was a fox who'd just given birth. She had these new kits suckling. Brand new. Roger stopped the whole operation for an hour while he gathered them all up in a blanket and drove them about ten miles out of town."

"I remember that," said Blue Plaid. "When we got done that day the boss took him into this office and screamed at him for half-an-hour. We could hear him yelling from across the yard. Then Roger comes out with this ear-to-ear grin. He'd do it again in a minute. Your father was a good man, Neal."

"It's *Norman*." His lower lip quivered and he looked down at the floor.

"Another thing about your old man," said Red Plaid.

"What?"

"That man drank more coffee than anyone I've ever seen. Cups and pots and Thermos bottles full of hot black coffee. Never any milk or sugar. Just incredible amounts of black coffee."

"Thank you," said Norman.

The waitress approached Norman, who sat at the counter with his schoolbooks piled in front of him. "What can I get you?" she said. "Coke? Seven-up? Root beer?"

"No," said Norman. "Coffee."

"Coffee?"

"Yeah," said Norman. "Black."

## Chapter 20

"Chris, I can't come over tonight," said Norman into the telephone. "Mom was *hot* when I got home late from school."

"What were you doing after school?"

"Stuff."

"What kind of stuff?"

"Just stuff."

"Okay, don't tell your best friend."

"Don't worry, I won't."

Chris laughed. "Maybe you can help me over the phone. What do you know about Teflon?"

"I did a little research in study hall. Hang on." Norman pulled a piece of folded paper from his pants pocket. "Teflon," he read, "was invented by DuPont in nineteen-forty-three. Its chemical structure is chlorine and flourine arranged in a polymerized alkene."

"Great Normy, how do you spell that?"

"Polymerized?"

"No. DuPont."

Norman spent the next ten minutes spelling into the phone. Following the spelling bee Chris said, "A polymerized alkene. What exactly does that *mean*?"

"It means," said Norman, "that the eggs won't stick to the pan." Chris was silent for about ten seconds. "You still there, Chris?"

"Yeah. I'm thinking."

"That could be dangerous if you're not used to it."

"Shut up."

Norman did.

“Okay,” said Chris, “what kind of pot does food *really* stick to? Aluminum?”

“I’d say cast iron. Big black cast iron.”

“Okay. Thanks Norman. See you tomorrow.” Click.

“Yeah,” said Norman into the dead telephone, “see you tomorrow.”

“Wake up, Sport,” said Marcus. “Do you want to go jogging with me?”

Norman shook the sleep out of his head and stared at Marcus. He dressed in baggy gray sweatpants and a scarlet 49er jersey.

“That jersey clashes with your face. You should know red doesn’t go with purple.”

Norman rolled over and covered his head with the pillow.

Marcus ripped back the blankets, “C’mon lazybones.”

“Won’t jogging hurt your face?” asked Norman, muffled, from beneath the pillow.

“I jog with my feet, not my face.” He slapped Norman’s pillow. “C’mon Sport, let’s hit it.”

Norman rolled out of bed and dressed quickly. Luigi slept, perched on the coyote skull. Norman pointed at the owl. “Luigi’s the only smart one in the room, Marcus.”

The morning was clear and cold as the brothers started their third lap around the block. “Is your face hurting?” asked Norman.

“Why?”

“You’ve got the left side all scrunched up.” Norman forced his face into a lopsided grimace. “Like that.”

“I hope I’m not that ugly.”

“You’re worse. You’d scare small children and animals,” said Norman, “if any were awake.”

They jogged in silence for several minutes. “This,” said Norman, “is my last lap. I’ve got a few things to do before school.”

“I think I’ll run over to Suzanne’s for some orange juice.”

“Remember you promised to drive me and the mice to school today?”

“I haven’t forgotten about your precious vermin.”

“Potentially prize-winning vermin.”

“I won’t be late.” Marcus turned left, toward Suzanne’s, and sped away.

Norman walked the final quarter-mile.

After a quick shower and a breakfast of juice, toast, eggs and bacon—without the bacon, of course—Norman quickly entered the answers on Tom Allen’s dummy test. Then he loaded his three mice cages and display into the van. While waiting for Marcus, Norman planned:

#### THINGS TO DO TODAY

- 1) Set up my science project before school
- 2) Slip Tom the dummy test (a dummy test for a dummy)
- 3) Study at lunchtime for the real Algebra test
- 4) Help Chris study for Thursday’s English test
- 5) Stop by Mr. McCormick’s after school
- 6) Boxing lesson before dinner

Mr. Davies handed the Algebra tests out face down, settled himself behind the gray, steel desk and said, “Begin.”



Norman flipped his paper over and smiled when he saw the test's format; exactly as it had been all year; and exactly how he prepared Tom's fake test. "I'd have hated to give Tom too many wrong answers," said Norman quietly. He smiled and began solving the first equation.

Mr. Davies grew restless and began roaming around the classroom. He erased the black boards and cleaned the chalk trays. He arranged papers on his desk. He fiddled with the thermostat. He studied his students. Dave Davido chewed his pencil, Marcia Waites yanked unmercifully at her left ear, Norman concentrated on his test, Tom Allen studied the inside of his left wrist. Mr. Davies returned to his desk and scribbled in his gradebook.

"That wasn't so difficult, was it Norman?" said Tom Allen.

"I had a little trouble with problem seven, but it wasn't too bad."

"Not the test, stupid." He punched Norman in the chest. "Stealing it."

Tom spit on the inside of his left wrist and began rubbing out the answers.

"Easier than you'd think," said Norman, rubbing his chest.

"Good," said Tom, "because you are going to steal the next test for me too."

## Chapter 21

Mr. Lewis' science class looked like a flea market. Science projects occupied every square inch of counter and table space. The students sat in their own seats, but most of them had to peer over or around a project to see. The three volunteers who were to demonstrate their projects had them displayed in the front of the class on the first lab tables. Mike Caldwell had his butterfly collection, the same one his sister had used for a project two years ago, leaned up on a placard explaining commonplace facts about butterflies. Darcy Norton's project was a standard 3' x 4' display with pictures and careful, hand-lettered explanations. Chris' project consisted of a single Bunsen burner and a brown grocery sack.

After Mike Caldwell had explained his dusty and faded butterfly collection to the class, Darcy presented her project, *The History of the Microscope*. She had pictures of the compound microscope and informed the class that the Dutch scientist Janssen had invented it in 1590. She explained the difference between the electron and the field-ion microscope.

But all this information eluded Norman. It was as if Darcy was the specimen under observation and Norman were the microscope. Every word and gesture of Darcy's was magnified in his eyes. No detail escaped him. Her blue jeans with a rip below the left knee, a white scar the size of a dime on her right elbow, her crescent moon earrings. After Darcy had presented her final sketch to the class—an electron scanning microscope—Norman started clapping.

No one else joined in and Norman finished his brief ovation alone. On the way back to her desk Darcy hesitated in front of Norman and said, "Thanks, Norman."

He turned the color of Marcus' 49er jersey.

Before Norman had returned to his natural color Chris stood in front of the class setting up his experiment. He clumsily connected the Bunsen burner to the gas outlet and ignited it. The blue flame sputtered a moment, and then burned steadily. Without speaking Chris reached into his shopping bag. From the sack he pulled a dozen eggs, a jar of pickle relish, a carton of strawberries, a mixing bowl and various utensils. Chris popped a strawberry into his

mouth and extracted two frying pans, one made of cast iron and the other coated with Teflon. Reaching into the sack for the final time he dug out a chef's hat. He donned the hat and bowed to the class.

"Chris," said Mr. Lewis, "this is General Science, not Home Economics."

"I know," said Chris, "I got kicked out of Home Ec for eating the ingredients before the class could cook them."

"This project better be worthwhile, or you'll get kicked out of General Science," said Mr. Lewis.

Chris cleared his throat and touched his chef's hat, "The title of my project is *The Miracle of Teflon*. Rather than merely explaining the procedures, I will *demonstrate* them. Observe." He paused for dramatic effect. "Behold two types of frying pans. First, an old-fashioned cast iron skillet." He banged the skillet on the table, knocking over the flaming Bunsen burner. Chris calmly turned the gas off, set the burner upright and relit it.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Chris," said Clarence Bleeker.

"Scientific inquiry is not without its risks." Chris smiled. "To continue, the second pan is coated with that miraculous space-age substance, Teflon. As you all know, Teflon was developed by DuPont laboratories in nineteen-forty-three. Its chemical structure is carbon and flourine arranged in a polymerized alkene. Any questions so far?"

Alex Rhett raised his hand, "What are you doing?"

"Patience, Buckaroo, patience." Chris cracked six eggs into the mixing bowl and scrambled them with a wire whip. He then held the cast iron skillet above the burner's blue-and-yellow flame. "It takes a minute to heat up." The pan creaked and cracked. Chris poured the eggs in. They sizzled and smoked slightly. "Time now for my world famous strawberry and pickle relish omelet." He poured pickle relish onto the eggs and tossed in three strawberries. Chris selected a spatula and tried to flip the omelet, but it was charcoaled onto the iron skillet. A column of smoke circled Chris' head like a wreath. "Please notice that the eggs stuck to the iron skillet." He ran the skillet under water, creating a cloud of steam that mingled with the smoke.

"You're burning the school down, Chris," said Norman.

"We can only hope, Normy," said Chris.

"Against my better judgement," said Mr. Lewis, "continue your demonstration. And you'd better make a point, Chris."

Chris smiled at the teacher, his smile was not returned. "Now," said Chris, "for *The Miracle of Teflon*." He whipped up six more eggs and heated the Teflon pan. He poured the eggs in, added the strawberries and the relish, folded and flipped the omelet and scooped it onto a plate. The omelet was a perfect golden brown. Chris began eating.

"Chris," said Mr. Lewis, "this has been a *cooking* demonstration Martha Stewart would have been proud of, but it is not an acceptable *science* project. You haven't even offered a conclusion."

Chris swallowed, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and said, "A conclusion! Thank you, sir, for reminding me. Class, I have shown that eggs do not stick to Teflon. In fact, nothing sticks to Teflon. Pancakes don't stick, sloppy-joes don't stick, vegetables don't stick. NOTHING EVER STICKS TO TEFLON!"

"So what exactly is the Miracle of Teflon?" asked Mr. Lewis.

"Think about it," said Chris. "Nothing sticks to Teflon. How do they make the *Teflon* stick to the *pan*? It's a Miracle."

If Chris had any more eggs he could have fried one on Mr. Lewis' forehead. The teacher said in a low tone, "Your science projects will be judged tonight, ribbons will be distributed tomorrow. "Chris, I'd like to see you after class."

"What did Mr. Lewis say?" asked Norman.

"He delivered the standard teacher-speech about how I'm basically an okay kid who thinks he's a clown and I'm wasting my potential and yak-yak-yak." Chris shuddered.

"Norman, I am in such big trouble. He's gonna call my parents."

"Like a teacher's never called your parents before?"

"I took those pans without asking mom," said Chris. "No one ever touches her kitchen stuff. She's gonna kill me."

## Chapter 22

Norman stood on his bed gluing shards of mirror onto his ceiling. Luigi munched a grasshopper in his cage. Chris entered the room without knocking. He tossed two pairs of boxing gloves onto Norman's desk. "What are you doing?"

"I'm putting up the Perseus constellation," said Norman. He squirted Elmer's glue on the last bit of mirror and set it into the ceiling. Norman looked like the Statue of Liberty as he stood with his right hand extended above his head, holding the final star in place.

Chris motioned at the poster of Einstein. "That guy creeps me out. His eyes look right through you."

Cautiously, Norman removed his finger. The mirror fragment stayed. "Good," said Norman, "that's done. Now that my science project is finished I have time for some fun."

Chris picked up the gloves, "Like boxing lessons?"

"Yeah, but first I want to fix the flat tire on my bike."

"I'll help."

Norman's bike was his dad's old three-speed Raleigh with silver fenders, a book rack, and a headlight. After a few minutes of wrestling with wrenches and screwdrivers Chris and Norman had the rear wheel off. As he peeled the tire from the rim Norman said, "I enjoyed your science project, Chris. Real entertaining."

"I hope my dad thinks a *D* in science is entertaining."

"Did your mom yell at you for taking her pans?"

Chris helped Norman mount the new tire. "No. She just made me scrub every pot and pan in the kitchen, organize the Tupperware cupboard and mop the kitchen floor. I would have preferred a lecture."

Norman pumped up the new tire. "Done."

"Good, let's box."

Chris and Norman laced up the gloves and circled each other. Chris threw crisp jabs that snapped Norman's head back. Chris' long arms prevented the scientist from hitting the athlete. Norman smiled, and dropped his hands. Chris jabbed with his left hand. Norman anticipated the punch and leaned to his left.

Chris' punch hit only air.

Norman stood, again, in front of Chris with his hands down. Chris jabbed twice with his left, then hooked with his right. Norman ducked to avoid the jabs, then veered to his right. Chris' powerful right hand missed completely, throwing him off balance. Chris stumbled and Norman hit him twice in the stomach with right hooks and popped him on the chin with a straight left hand.

Chris smiled, faked a left hook and unleashed an overhand right. Norman avoided the blow and Chris stumbled to the floor. He sat on the cement and laughed. "I think I've created a monster. Where'd you learn to slip punches like that?"

"Remember what you told me when we boxed for the first time?"

"No."

"You said, *You're such a scientist, observe.*"

"Of course," said Chris. "That's something I'll *never* forget."

"I've been observing," said Norman. "You totally telegraph your punches. When you jab you're on the balls of your feet. When you throw a knockout punch you rock back on your heels. I suppose most people do."

"When you're fighting you watch my feet?"

"No. I can tell by your posture what you're doing. I don't need to see your feet."

Chris held out his right hand, "Help me up."

Norman offered his right hand. Chris snatched it, yanked Norman to the floor and flipped him onto the cold concrete floor. He knelt on Norman's chest. "Just remember, Normy, in a real fight there aren't any rules."

"Let me up and I'll give you a ride home."

"Okay."

Chris dislodged himself from Norman's chest and unlaced his gloves. Norman de-gloved himself, opened the garage door, and rolled his vintage Raleigh down the driveway. Chris, with two pairs of gloves dangling around his neck, hopped on the bookrack. Norman swayed and wiggled down the street until he picked up speed. Although it was old, the Raleigh, with its skinny tires was faster than any BMX.

Chris was home in two minutes.

On the return trip, Norman took a detour that led him past Darcy's house. She was nowhere in sight, but Norman still waved as he passed the yellow-and-white house. He continued down the road to the high school. The baseball, girl's softball, track, and tennis teams were all practicing. Norman lingered by the backstop and watched Marcus take batting practice. Marcus still crowded the plate on every pitch, challenging the pitcher to sneak one by. Norman's brother sprayed hits to left, center, and right. On the way home Norman passed Luchessi Park. A woman pushed a baby carriage. Two dogs growled over a Frisbee. Children hung, swung, and twirled on monkey bars. Two barbecue pits, abandoned since last summer, stood like sentinels. Norman's mouth watered for a rare, char-broiled burger.

## Chapter 23

Mr. Forrester read the announcements in his dull monotone: "Kenilworth's Squad finished fourth in yesterday's Spirit Competition. Our baseball team plays Cook Junior High in Santa Rosa this afternoon. Kenilworth's track team has a dual meet with Petaluma Junior

High at home.” The bat-like teacher yawned, then continued, “Third quarter finals week begins on Monday. Penny Hosking, your glasses have been turned into the Lost-and-Found. Winners of Kenilworth’s Science Fair are: Eighth Grade, Rex Evitch. Seventh grade, Norman Babbit. Sixth grade, Bernadette Burrell. All three qualify for the Regionals in Sacramento and a chance for the Nationals in Washington D.C.”

Mr. Forrester lowered the paper he had been reading from. “I suppose, Mr. Babbit, that congratulations are in order, eh?”

“You suppose?” said Chris. “Norman works for months on a kicking science project and you *suppose* he deserves congratulations?”

“Quite right, Mr. Forte,” said the teacher. “Congratulations, Norman.”

“Thanks,” said Norman.

“He’s a nerd,” said a voice from the back.

“Who said that?” said Chris.

“I did,” said Roger Thornton. “He’s a nerd. All he does is study. If I studied that much I’d win the science fair.”

“No you wouldn’t,” said Chris.

Roger stood, “Why not?”

“Because you’re stupid,” said Chris, standing.

“Chris and Roger—” said Mr. Forrester. The first period bell rung and the classroom emptied without incident.

Mr. Carlson distributed the English test to everyone except Norman. “Good luck, Chris,” said the teacher. “I’m certain Mr. Babbit wishes you luck as well.”

“Luck is for losers,” said Chris. “I’m prepared. I’m a lean, mean, English machine.”

“For Norman’s sake, I hope so,” said Mr. Carlson.

“If you care that much about my grade,” said Norman, “be fair and let me take the test.”

A murmur of approval sounded throughout the room.

“No,” said Mr. Carlson.

“I have every confidence in Chris, but at least let me *see* a test.”

“Why?”

“So I can see what to study for next time,” said Norman.

“Commendable,” said Carlson. He walked his weasel-walk down the row of desks and handed Norman a test.

Norman read: *PART 1. A Verbal phrase contains a participle, an infinitive, or a gerund. Identify each in the following sentences.* Ten sentences followed.

*PART 2. An elliptical expression is one from which something has been omitted. Locate and explain the elliptical phrases in the following sentences.* Ten more sentences.

Norman didn’t read PART 3. He folded the test in half, “Good luck, Chris.”

“What was that, Norman?” asked Mr. Carlson.

“Nothing,” said Norman, “absolutely nothing. The same as my grade.” He glanced at Chris who flashed Norman a confident grin and began scribbling furiously. Norman opened his science book and read about electrons.

Chris scratched his head and snapped his pencil in half. Howard Bennett and Mike Caldwell stared at each other, then nodded. Howard signed his name to the test and without answering one question, walked to the front and turned his test in.

“Done so soon, Mr. Bennett?” asked Mr. Carlson.

Without replying, Howard returned to his desk. Mike Caldwell signed his test and turned it in unanswered. Lois Thompson, Alex Rhett, and Clarence Bleeker did the same and sat at their desks quietly. "Do you realize you are all receiving *F*'s?" asked Mr. Carlson.

"Yep," said Chris, turning in his, and Norman's, test.

Janet Dalton, Louise Arnold, and Darcy Norton all signed and turned in their blank tests. Roger Thornton scrawled answers and said, "I'm not flunking a test for that nerd."

"Thanks guys," said Norman to Mike and Howard. "I know you planned that."

"Planned what?" asked Howard. "Mike and I just decided to hand in our tests. Carlson ain't fair, what he did to you."

"Howard would have flunked anyway," said Mike.

"Those other guys done it on their own," said Howard. "We didn't plan nothing."

## Chapter 24

"Your Algebra tests," said Mr. Davies, "are quite interesting." He continued walking through the room, distributing the tests. "Norman, ninety-seven. Stacy, ninety-two. Clifford, a nice improvement to eighty-seven. Last and absolutely least, we have a zero. A goose egg. Zip. For Tom.

"Thanks," said Tom.

"It doesn't surprise me that you failed the test, Tom," said Mr. Davies.

"Surprised me," said Tom. "How about you Norman? Did it surprise you?"

"No," said Norman.

"It astounded me," said Mr. Davies, "that you could score a zero when you *cheated*."

"I didn't cheat."

"I caught you," said Davies. "I notified the Principal. She is moving you out of this class and into a private tutorial. If you don't pass the tutored class you will not graduate from Kenilworth."

"No way," said Tom. "I'm going to high school next year. I'm sick of this school." He flung his test at Norman.

"Leave my classroom now," said Mr. Davies. "It's been arranged for you to spend the remainder of this period in the library."

Tom slouched at his desk.

"OUT," said Mr. Davies.

Tom rose leisurely, "You win, Teach." He walked to the door, cocked his hand like a pistol, aimed at Norman and exited. "You lose, Normy."

"What's all this about, Norman?" said Mr. Davies.

"Why are you so interested now?" said Norman. "You teachers are stupid. Or lazy. Or both."

"I've already expelled one student from my class today."

"You expelled a *punk*," said Norman. He bit his lower lip to keep it from trembling.

The silent classroom waited for the teacher's response: "Norman, what are you saying?"

"Tell me you didn't know I've been forced into doing Tom's homework the past two months. Tell me that. Mr. Forrester knew and he doesn't teach this class."

"I've had suspicions—"

"Did you know he broke into this classroom, tossed me inside, and told me to steal the test we just took? But I wouldn't steal the test. I manufactured a dummy test to give Tom. Then he made me solve the problems so he could make a cheat sheet. That's how Tom cheated and still flunked. Right answers, but the wrong questions."

"Why didn't you come to me?"

"Because you would have said, *I can't do a thing until I catch him in the act*. And he promised to whup on me if I said anything."

"Well, Norman," said Mr. Davies, "because of your inaction there *is* nothing I can do about it now."

"Surprise, surprise," said Norman.

"Over here, nerd," said Tom. He stood by the water faucet near the gym. "I've got to talk to you."

Norman placed his books on a bench and approached. Four students bustled by on their way to class. Norman and Tom were alone.

"Study Buddy," said Tom, "you got me in trouble."

"You're right. It was my idea to start doing your homework. I apologize."

"You gotta smart mouth. For a fricking nerd."

"You're average. For a retarded donkey."

"You stole the test, then gave me the wrong answers."

Norman laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"I didn't steal the test. You're so stupid you didn't even notice that the problems were different. The *numbers* were different, stupid."

Tom slapped Norman's face, "C'mon."

"No."

"Chicken." Tom slapped him again. "Next time, it's my fist. I'm gonna smash your little round geek glasses, Norman. C'mon. Hit me."

"It takes a good man to fight and win—"

"I know."

"—but it takes a better man to walk away."

Expecting Norman to be a fat and easy target, Tom fired a looping right hand. Norman ducked and Tom stumbled, and then fell against the drinking faucet. Norman scurried toward his books and gathered them up. Norman retreated quickly, perhaps blurring the distinction between a good man walking, or running away.

"I'm not done with you, Babbit," yelled Tom. "I'm gonna get you where it really hurts. That's a promise."

Norman skipped P.E. He sat in a corner of the library until his legs stopped trembling. Then he opened a book and tried to concentrate. Finally he removed his glasses, folded his arms, lowered his head and fell asleep. He dreamed he commanded an Army tank that was attacking Kenilworth Junior High. The tank's guns were blazing as it growled up East Street hill. He aimed the cannon at cars in the parking lot. He blew up Carlson's Volvo, destroyed Jock Lopez' truck, and obliterated Mrs. Fletcher's van. Then he saw Mr. Forrester sneaking out the back. Norman turned to the right to cut him off. Norman had the teacher in his sights,

then felt too exhausted to pull the trigger. Sweat poured off his body. Why did he feel so pooped?

Norman looked down and saw why. He was the *engine* for the huge steel vehicle. Like Fred Flintstone, Norman's legs poked out the bottom of the tank. Norman tried to run faster and propel the tank to the crest of the hill. He couldn't and the tank began rolling backwards, down the hill to Mr. McCormick's store. The tank picked up speed. Norman dragged his bare feet on the asphalt but couldn't slow the hurtling tank.

A split second before the tank hit the store, the bell rang and Norman awoke. He stretched then peered under the table to make certain he was wearing shoes. "I hate Kenilworth Junior High," said Norman. He shook his head and walked to science class.

Mr. Lewis briefly congratulated the entire class, even Chris, on their efforts, then began explaining the principles of osmosis. He placed three stalks of celery in a beaker full of blue water and explained how the celery would gradually turn blue as the liquid passed through its membranes, equalizing the concentrations of blue dye on each side of the membrane.

The entire class, including Norman, was less than thrilled with the demonstration. Mike Caldwell read a comic book, Chris stared out the window, Darcy doodled on her book cover. Five minutes before dismissal Mr. Lewis said, "I think you'll like this more than blue dye and celery." He disappeared into the supply closet and emerged with a cake, forks, and paper plates. He walked directly to Norman and said, "Congratulations."

Norman was shocked. The chocolate cake had *WASHINGTON, D.C. OR BUST!* Written in red, white, and blue frosting. A small American flag waved in the upper-left-hand corner and a mouse-like-creature sat beneath it. "Thanks Mr. Lewis," said Norman.

"Thank Darcy," said Mr. Lewis. "She baked it."

"In Home Ec," said Darcy. "This morning. That's why the frosting's a little runny."

Norman was speechless.

"Let's eat," said Chris.

Chris swooped down on the cake like Luigi on a grasshopper. He was followed by more owl-and-hawk-like students and the cake was devoured in minutes.

A layer of crumbs covered Norman's lab table. Norman swept the crumbs onto a paper plate as the bell rung and students fled the room. As Darcy passed he said, "Thanks, Darcy."

"I only got a *C* minus on it," said Darcy. "The frosting."

"Tasted like at least a *B* minus." Norman straightened his glasses. "Darcy, would you like go to the next dance with me?"

Darcy smiled and said, "I promised Stu McCauley I'd go with him."

"Oh."

"But we could dance."

"That would be great," said Norman. "If I knew how to dance."

Darcy laughed, "If you can't dance, why'd you ask me to a *dance*?"

"I don't know. I was feeling confident there for a moment and it confused me," said Norman, "I'm not used to that sensation."

"At the next dance, if you're feeling confident enough, I could teach you a few moves."

"Really?"

"Sure. Bye Norman."

Darcy left the room and Norman wiped his sweaty palms on his pants. "It takes a good man to fight and win, but it takes a better man to ask a girl to a dance."



“What are you making, Norman?” asked Mrs. Babbit.

Norman drifted as he stood at the stove, stirring.

“Norman!”

No response.

“Norman!”

“What?”

“What are you making?”

“Hot chocolate.”

“How was school today, Norman?” asked Mrs. Babbit.

Norman reviewed the day: a chocolate cake to celebrate my science project, a 97 in Algebra, an argument with Mr. Davies, a scuffle with Tom Allen, a crazy dream, and a promised dance from Darcy. “Same old stuff,” said Norman. He poured the too-hot chocolate into a mug and escaped to his room.

“Well, Luigi,” said Norman, lounging at the computer with his mug of chocolate lava, “it doesn’t get any better than this.” He raised his mug in a toast, “We did it. To my mice.” Luigi flew to his cage and began preening. “And to my faithful lab assistant, Luigi.”

## Chapter 25

The peanut butter on Norman’s breakfast toast bubbled perfectly. Norman gobbled it down and left early for school. He wanted to make sure his mice had enough food and water. Norman wanted those rodents in PERFECT shape for their trip to Sacramento. On his bike, Norman had arrived early and knocked on the door of the faculty lounge. Mr. Lewis handed Norman the key to the science lab. “We’re in a meeting,” said Mr. Lewis. “You go ahead, I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Thanks,” said Norman. He ambled down the empty corridor. The squeak of Norman’s Nikes echoed in the hushed hallway. The morning sunshine glinted off the polished floors. Norman felt comfortable and secure, almost cozy, walking alone in the school. He stopped in front of the science lab and inserted the key. He whistled to himself. Norman opened the door and flicked on the light. His three cages were on the far side of the lab. “Good morning, gentlemen,” said Norman as he crisscrossed through lab tables, “I hope you’ve all had a good night’s sleep.”

Norman peered into the cages. Not an exercise wheel was twirling, no mice fought for food, the coveted spot at the water bottle was abandoned.

All ninety mice were dead.

The motionless mice were scattered throughout the cages. Some were piled in corners; others lay on their backs with their feet in the air. The cages that had whirled, buzzed and hummed with activity were silent. Even Ike and Zeke were still.

Norman opened the CONTROL cage and removed two mice. He placed them on the nearest lab table. They were cold and stiff. Their pink tails, always so elastic and active were rigid as car antennae. Norman smelled the mice, they reeked of medicine or alcohol. He returned the mice to their cage and searched for a clue. The food and water levels were about the same as when Norman had fed the mice after school yesterday. He scraped through the cedar chips covering the cage’s floor. He found what was left of a ball of RODENT GONE; a

strychnine poison that he'd seen Mr. McCormick use in the storeroom. Norman raked his fingers through the cedar chips of the other cages, knowing he'd find leftover RODENT GONE. He was sifting through the cedar when Mr. Lewis placed his hand on Norman's shoulder: "Norman?"

"They're dead, Mr. Lewis. Every one."

"How?"

"Poisoned."

"Who would poison ninety mice?"

"I have a pretty good idea," said Norman.

"Why?"

"It's a long story," said Norman. "A long, stupid story." Norman shrugged the science teacher's hand from his shoulder and shuffled from the lab.

"Norman, what can I do?"

Norman disappeared down the corridor. Mr. Lewis stood silent for a moment, clenching and unclenching his fists. He picked up the ball of RODENT GONE and hurled it across the room. It hit a beaker that toppled to the floor with a crash.

The first law of thermodynamics: *The energy going into a system, minus the energy coming out of a system, equals the energy stored in the system.*

## Chapter 26

Tom Allen flung his locker open.

Norman lurked around the corner, waiting for Tom between Homeroom and first period. He noticed that Tom's locker wasn't padlocked. Norman walked up behind Tom and said, "It's funny how the only kid who doesn't have to lock his locker is the biggest punk in the school."

"What's that noise?" said Tom without turning around. "A mouse? I thought all the mice were dead."

"I know you killed my mice," Norman said to Tom's back. "I'm going to get you, Tom. I don't know how, but you can't do things like this."

Tom turned: "Norman! I thought that since I'd been kicked out of Algebra I wouldn't be able to socialize with my little nerd buddy, but here you are."

"You killed my mice."

"I did kill your mice. Know what else? Your boss sold me that RODENT-GONE. And I kept the poison right here in my unlocked locker." Tom laughed. "I was planning on stealing the poison, but old McCormick nailed up the chute into the back room. I'm just guessing here, but I'd say you're the one who rigged it with stink powder?"

"You stink."

"I did after I crawled down that chute. That was real smart, Norman, fixing the stink bomb so it wouldn't disperse until after I crawled in, so I'd have to crawl back through it to get out. Very smart."

"I'm gonna get you, Tom."

"No you're not," said Tom. "You know why?" Tom grabbed Norman's shirt with his left hand and slapped Norman's face with his right. Norman tried to duck and squirm away, but

Tom slapped him again. Norman's glasses skittered across the hall. Students, changing classes, glanced at Norman and Tom; several stopped. "I'll tell you why. Because you are a loser. You were born a loser and you'll die a loser." Tom slapped Norman harder. "I killed your mice. I admit it. What are you going to do about it?"

Norman started to speak, then spit in Tom's face.

Tom punched him, splitting Norman's lip.

"I'll get you," said Norman.

Tom pounded Norman and threw him to the floor. "Loser. Nerd."

"That's enough, Tom," said a voice from the growing crowd.

Norman stood and said, "I'm going to get you, Tom."

Tom punched Norman in the stomach. "That's for the stink powder. You ruined my jacket." He threw Norman to the floor again.

Tom closed his locker. Norman rose and said, "Hit me again, big man. You enjoy poisoning helpless mice and beating on skinny kids so much. Hit me."

Tom stared at Norman.

"Hit me," said Norman.

"Yeah," said a member of the crowd of eighth graders who had gathered. "Are you gonna punch the little guy again, Tommy?"

"Big Bad Tommy," said another.

"Knock me down again," said Norman.

The crowd taunted Tom: "Afraid of the little man, Tom? Hit him again. Need some help, Tom?"

Tom turned to walk away. Norman stood in front of Tom, hands by his side. Tom said to the crowd, "I could beat him up easy."

"But you can't beat us all up," said a voice.

"That's right," said another.

"Hit me, Tom," said Norman.

Tom, baffled by a response from Norman other than fear, backed off down the hall. When the crowd of eighth graders started laughing and smacking Norman on the back, Tom turned and ran.

"You got him kid," said a student, who didn't know Norman's name. "Right where it hurts."

"Notice," said Norman, "the way I cleverly stopped all his punches with my stomach and face?"

"Don't worry," said another, "he'll never bother you again. Here's your glasses, kid."

"Thanks." Norman took the glasses and exchanged several high-fives.

"What's going on here?" said Mr. Forrester, who appeared out of nowhere.

"Nothin'. Nothin'," murmured the group.

"Then get to class, all of you," said Forrester.

Without cleaning up, Norman walked straight into his first period English class. His split lip had hardened into a puffy scab, and a dried trickle of blood stained his chin. His cheeks were bright red and his wire-rimmed glasses were bent out of shape.

And he was smiling.

Norman took his seat. All around him buzzed: "What happened to Norman? Have you seen Norman?"

Mr. Carlson finally glanced up and said, "Norman? What happened to your face?"

"I crashed my bike on the way to school."

"You look terrible," said Mr. Carlson.

"You should see the truck I hit," said Norman. "They had to have it towed."

No laughter.

Norman expected at least a chuckle from Chris, who sat straight-backed and serious. *I must look terrible*, thought Norman.

"Norman," said Mr. Carlson. "Get to the nurse's. Now."

Marcus arrived in the van at lunchtime to pick up Norman.

I could have ridden my bike home," said Norman. Band-aids covered his wounds. "You didn't have to skip lunch."

"The nurse phoned mom. At work. She said you *crashed* your bike," said Marcus. He pointed to the Raleigh, locked in the bike rack. "But your bike looks fine. What happened, Sport?"

"I lied."

Marcus inserted the key in the ignition, but didn't start the van. "How'd you get all cut up?"

"Would you believe a freak accident during study hall?"

"No."

Norman inhaled: "Tom Allen beat me up."

"What?"

"I was disappointed I didn't do better against him, after all the practicing I'd done with Chris. But boxing is based on the assumption that the other guy fights fair. No kicking, slapping, biting. Things like that."

Marcus sat, fuming.

"I think I kind of won the fight, Marcus."

"You either *win* or *lose* fights, Sport. *Kind of* doesn't cut it."

"Marcus?"

"When is a fight over?"

"When one fighter can't continue."

Norman said, "Then I definitely won. I let Tom beat on me until he couldn't continue. I *won* Marcus. And Marcus?"

"What?"

"Stop calling me *Sport*."

"And if I don't, you gonna let me beat on you until I can't continue?"

"You have to stick with what works."

Marcus started the van, "I'll see if I can't straighten those glasses before mom gets home. *Norman.*"

"Thanks. Please stop at Mr. McCormick's?"

"Hey Mac," said Norman, "how's business?"

"Right as rain," said Mr. McCormick, staring at Norman's lip.

"It's nothing," said Norman. "I crashed my bike."

"I've seen worse. I've been meaning to ask: How'd you manage with that science project of yours?"

“Actually,” said Norman, “I won.”  
 “Well then, have your pick of the candy rack, there.”  
 “Thanks, Mac, but my brother’s waiting in the van.”  
 “Nonsense.” Mr. McCormick grabbed a fistful of candy, bagged it, and thrust it at Norman.  
 “You know what I would really like?”  
 “Name it.”  
 Norman walked down aisle three, and removed a bottle of Aqua Velva from the shelf. He returned and showed the bottle to Mr. McCormick. “Is this okay?”  
 “I noticed you were getting a little furry.” Mr. McCormick rubbed Norman’s chin. “An odd choice, but it’s fine with me. Congratulations.”  
 “Thanks.” Norman dropped the Aqua Velva into the candy sack. “Mac, you don’t have to worry about kids breaking in the back.”  
 “I thank you for that.”  
 “No sweat. Bye Mac.”  
 “Bye, Norman,” said Mr. McCormick. “Hey, what do you call an Irishman with two wooden legs?”  
 Norman halted in the doorway, “What?”  
 “Patty O’Furniture. Get it? *Patio furniture*?”  
 “You still got it, Mac. See ya.”  
 After Norman left Mr. McCormick grabbed a broom. “First prize. I knew he’d do it. Norman Babbit, Scientist. Has a solid, natural ring to it.”

## Chapter 27

Until Chris arrived after school Norman had spent the day reading, sleeping, and fighting back tears. His mice were dead.  
 Murdered.  
 Norman knew something was up when Mrs. Babbit ordered a Round Table deep dish veggie pizza and let Chris stay for dinner. Norman and Chris finished dinner and played games on Norman’s computer until after 8:00 P.M. Chris had just finished the entire bag of candy Mac had given Norman. With chocolate slivers from a Butterfinger ringing his mouth, Chris said, “How long have they been in there?”  
 “Since about seven,” said Norman. “Yeah, that’s right; seven. Mom came home, saw my face and had a pill for her migraine. Her and Marcus have been in her room since after dinner. Talking.”  
 “Will Marcus say that you crashed your bike?”  
 “Yeah. But I shouldn’t have asked him to lie.”  
 “Mr. Lewis talked to me after school today.”  
 “About your science project?”  
 “I wish,” said Chris.  
 “Let me guess,” said Norman. “Dead mice?”  
 “Yep.”  
 “Algebra homework?”

"Yep."

"Tom Allen?"

"Big time yep."

"What'd you tell him?" asked Norman.

"Everything, Normy. It was weird. When he asked it wasn't like a teacher asking, you know?"

"No."

Chris thought a moment, "It's like when my dad talks to you."

Norman nodded.

"I think he's gonna help you straighten out this mess."

"Except for that poisoned-mice-science-project mess."

"I told my mom about that," said Chris. "She started crying."

"She's not the only one who cried. It's weird. All I wanted to do was win and qualify for the Nationals. But, I just miss those mice. They were like my family." Doris entered, as usual, without knocking. "Maybe *closer* than family."

"Mom wants you downstairs," said Doris. Then she whispered, "Marcus needs to talk to you first." She looked at Chris, "Alone. Marcus is sitting on the top step."

"Thanks, Doris." Norman touched his lucky nickel. Twice.

"I've never asked you why that nickel's lucky," said Chris.

"No reason," said Norman. "I just decided it was."

"Very scientific, Normy."

"Everyone can always use a little luck," said Norman. He exited, leaving the door open.

Doris spotted the heap of empty candy wrappers: "Any more candy left, Chris?"

Norman sat down next to Marcus, "Well?"

"I had to tell her about the fight," said Marcus.

"I know."

"She called the school. She's been on the phone for over an hour. She's calling teachers. At their homes."

"What about?"

"I don't know," said Marcus. "She had me out back doing chores the last half hour."

"Chores at night? What chores?"

Marcus waved the question away. "Ready Norman?"

"Let's go."

They started down the stairs. Chris and Doris, who had heard every word of the brothers' conversation, trailed behind. Mrs. Babbit sat at the kitchen table, drinking tea. Norman sat one chair away from his mother. Mrs. Babbit patted the chair next to hers. "Sit here." Norman scooted over. Marcus, Chris and Doris stood around the table.

"So what's new?" said Norman.

"Please Norman, for once, no jokes." She sipped her tea and stared at Norman for almost a full minute. "I can't begin to tell you, Norman, how sorry, and disappointed, and absolutely ashamed I feel."

*Here we go again*, thought Norman.

Mrs. Babbit continued: "I can't understand what would possess anyone to poison your mice."

"What?" said Norman.

"I just got off the phone with Mr. Lewis. He told me what a difficult time you've been having with that student they expelled today."

"They did it," said Chris.

"And he also told me, Chris, what a good friend you've been to Norman, despite your generally buffoonish behavior."

Chris said, "*Buffoonish?*"

"I'll explain later," said Marcus.

"Norman," said Mrs. Babbit, "my discussion with Marcus was also enlightening. He convinced me to treat you more like an adult. A responsible adult. I agreed. And to prove my resolve on this matter." She motioned at the curtains.

Marcus walked to the curtains and yanked the drawstring. Standing in the center of the patio, all white-steel, glass, and chrome, was Roger Babbit's huge achromatic refracting telescope. Norman stood, knocking over his chair. He hugged his mom, "Thanks, I'll take perfect care of it. I will."

"Marcus assured me you would."

Norman slid open the patio door: "You knew, didn't you, Marcus."

"Setting one of those up at night is quite a *chore*. Go for it."

Norman removed both lens caps. The telescope had knobs to adjust the scope's lateral and up-and-down movements. Norman quickly sighted the moon through the small, piggyback finder scope and glimpsed the nearly full moon through the large aperture scope. "C'mom, c'mon. This is great. C'mon, Marcus. Lift Doris up and let her see first. Chris and Mom, get over here."

Chris and the Babbit family congregated around Norman and his gorgeous, hand-me-down telescope. Everyone had a long look before Norman hunched over the eyepiece. For the first time in his life he saw and identified features on the moon he'd only seen in books: Regiomontanus, Hipparchus, Autoclus, Fra Mauro. "Hey Marcus?" asked Norman.

"What?"

"If I could borrow your camera I could do time-lapsed photo studies of the seasonal changes on the moon and see how it relates to our weather patterns on earth."

"Sure," said Marcus.

"If I start *tonight* I'll have almost a year's worth of data for next year's science project."

"Norman," said Mrs. Babbit, "I think it's a little late—"

"Mom?" said Marcus.

"For, um, Doris to be out here. Come on in, honey."

"Who wants to be with *boys* anyway," said Doris.

"Don't be too late, Norman," said Mrs. Babbit.

"I won't be," said Norman. "Probably just another couple of hours."

THE END

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