

PAUL TOBIN

HOW TO TAME A
HUMAN TORNADO




THE
GENIUS
FACTOR

BLOOMSBURY

HOW TO TAME A HUMAN TORNADO



BLOOMSBURY
CHILDREN'S BOOKS
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY



Chapter 1

I was on high alert.

Ready for anything.

It was the middle of the afternoon and I was in the center of the sidewalk in the heart of downtown Polt. There were people everywhere. Everyone else was walking casually, but I was on tiptoes, looking in all directions, and knowing that it was almost entirely useless.

My phone rang.

It was Nate.

“Do you see him?” Nate asked.

I looked around at all the people. There was a college-age couple walking by. He had huge sideburns and she had pigtails and they were looking at something together on her phone. There was a businessman in a striped suit, balanced on one foot, checking the bottom of his left shoe to see if he'd stepped in something unpleasant. There was a group of three high

school boys kicking a soccer ball. There was a man with a remarkable mustache just ahead of me on the corner, holding a signboard advertisement for a mattress store, bellowing “hello” to everyone and trying to shake their hands. There was a very young girl holding her mother’s hand and *earnestly* explaining the differences between apes and monkeys. There was a woman trying to text with one hand while eating a meatball sandwich. Her blouse was white. She was holding the sandwich away from her, worried about stains.

The meatballs smelled *so good*.

“I don’t see him,” I told Nate, on the phone. “What should we—?”

But it was at that moment I heard the roaring hum. The air began to vibrate. There were crackling noises from everywhere, like tinfoil being crunched. A Corgi began nervously barking. An old woman in a blue hat clutched a tiny dog to her chest, saying, “Hush, Jeremiah. Hush.” Even so, I could tell she was worried. The air didn’t feel right. There was . . . too much of it. Pigeons were suddenly flying away. A crow that was on the awning for the All-Winners Art Museum began cawing, hopping along the awning, head swiveling nervously. The hum was growing louder. The crackling rising in intensity.

It felt like the whole world was starting to shiver.
And then . . .

. . . I saw him.

He was only there for a second.

Moving much too fast to see.

He was a blurred line, a thousand flickering images, racing around everyone, racing past them, the air sizzling around him. A few bits of trash . . . newspapers and fast-food wrappers . . . simply burst into flame.

The couple toppled over in the sudden gust of wind. Their shared phone dropped to the sidewalk, tumbling along, bouncing again and again, caught in the blustering wake. The businessman's shoe was ripped off by the pure force, so that he was hopping on one foot, gazing around, bewildered. The high school boys were frowning at their soccer ball, which had popped from the intense air pressure. The woman with her meatball sandwich was looking at her blouse in horror, because it had been simply *painted* with meatball sauce in the sudden wind that'd lasted for less than a second, but had been faster than any tornado, stronger than any hurricane.

The man with the signboard was frowning at it, clearly puzzled. The edges of his sign were tattered and smoldering. And . . . written on the sign with the

remains of a meatball sandwich . . . it said, “Nate! Delphine! Help me! *Please!*”

I looked down the street to where the blur had disappeared, then picked up my phone from where I’d dropped it in the sudden chaos.

“Nate,” I said. “Chester was just here. We have to save him.”



Chapter 2

Two hours previously I'd been in the Next Page Bookstore on Trillip Avenue and Nate Bannister had been chastising a confused employee because the quantum physics section had fewer books than the one for celebrity diet tips. The clerk's name was Lucy and she was at least thirty years old, meaning almost twenty years older than Nate and me, so you'd think she'd be wiser (my mother *assures* me that wisdom comes with experience), but Nate, as it so happens, is the smartest person on earth. His IQ is immeasurable. His hair is brown and flopping. There's no connection between these two facts, at least I don't *think* there is, though Nate says there's a connection between ALL facts, if you know how to find them.

Anyway, poor Lucy was just staring at Nate and his floppy brown hair, which he kept having to brush out from behind his glasses, because he has a big nose, meaning that it holds his glasses too far out from his

face, meaning his hair can fall behind them. There is a connection between all these facts.

“I was hoping you’d have *Brinkman’s Theory of Transitive Kinetics in Orbital Molecular Vectoring*,” Nate complained.

“Maybe . . . we could order it?” Lucy said. Her blond hair was almost as curly as my red hair. She was tugging on a few strands, looking around in that manner people have when they think they’re being pranked. Her lips (she was wearing green lipstick, which made me jealous) kept squinching up like chewed bubblegum. There was a computer terminal just a few feet away, and she beckoned Nate and me closer to where she typed for a moment before saying, “Oh. Oh, *wow*.”

“What?” Nate said.

“That book is, like, really expensive.”

“It is?” Nate asked, clearly disappointed. “But I’ve seen it listed for cheap. Only around four thousand dollars.”

“Four thousand dollars is *not* cheap,” Lucy said. Her eyes were wide and her lips became chewed bubblegum again.

“Knowledge is worth any price,” Nate said. “I’d like the signed copy, if one’s available. It doesn’t matter if it costs more.” He was taking his gold elephant

credit card out from his wallet. It's the rarest of credit cards, only three of them in the entire world, because Nate is apparently one of the richest people on earth, though he won't tell me *how* rich. As for me, I have a part-time dog-walking job. I make seven dollars an hour. Per dog. Sometimes three or four dogs at a time. I do okay.

"Here," Nate said, holding up his credit card. "Do you know what this is?"

"Uh, a shiny credit card?" Lucy said, clearly not impressed.

But, then . . .

"G-GOLD! G-g-gold ELEPHANT CARD!" the store manager shrieked, bellowing out from three aisles away. He not-very-adeptly leaped over a display of books on Greek mythology, scurried through an aisle of romance books, then skidded to a stop in front of Nate. He trembled. I thought he was going to salute.

It was at that moment, when everybody else was watching the commotion, that I saw Bosper sneak in through the front door.

Bosper is Nate's Scottish terrier.

Bosper is also the smartest mathematician in the world, excepting only Nate, and possibly Jakob Maculte, the leader of the Red Death Tea Society, a cult of super-smart villains who do super-evil things.

Maculte's top priority is to take over the world, and his credo is . . . *Whatever works, as long as it's EVIL.* (I made that last part up, but it's basically true.)

Anyway, we weren't talking about the Red Death Tea Society, even though Maculte had recently escaped from custody and was calling Nate multiple times every day, swearing all sorts of revenge, making an amazing array of threats, and sporadically inviting me over for tea, invitations which I have *politely* and *not-so-politely* declined.

No. We were talking about dogs.

Nate's dog, in particular.

Bosper can talk.

And he was *not* supposed to be in the store.

Because he forgets he's not supposed to talk when he's in public.

I had to do something.

"Be right back," I told Nate.

"Oh, okay, Delphine," he said. The bookstore manager was stupidly grinning at Nate and babbling about how it was an honor to have him in the store, meaning it was an honor to have a *gold elephant card* in the store. Some people are *way* into money. It's kind of sad, really. They're so focused on money, they miss the bigger questions in life, like . . . is there anything better than climbing a tree to watch a sunset with a

friend? Or, why do some people think *pie* is better than *cake*? Or, of course . . . why was a talking dog sneaking into a bookstore?

And Bosper *was* sneaking. No doubt about it. He was darting between bookcases, peering around them, acting like a spy. Like an especially *incompetent* spy. You know that thing in horror movies when people are scared of the monsters, so they tiptoe into rooms or along darkened corridors, but they never look *up*? That's what Bosper was doing. Forgetting to look *up*. Which isn't very smart if you happen to be a Scottish terrier and therefore only about a foot tall.

I secretly started following him.

It wasn't very hard to do.

All I had to do was stay behind the bookcases, one aisle over, because he was in the children's picture-book section where the shelves were only about three feet high. I could easily peer over them at Bosper.

He was whispering, "The dog is quiet. No barking for Bosper! I am a sneaker." I should've mentioned that while Bosper can do math and can also talk, he's much better at math than he is at talking.

I followed after him, keeping out of sight, listening to what he had to say.

"No time for farting," he said. "Because Bosper is

a sneaky dog.” He stopped at the end of the aisle and looked left, and right, and then he farted.

“This has happened and the dog has regrets,” he said. His tail slunk low. But, then he regained his composure and scurried forward as fast as he could, dodging a group of children looking through picture books, then skidding out on a tile walkway at the edge of the carpeted children’s area and thudding into a bookcase, knocking over a display of Robinson Crusoe books and a cardboard pirate ship.

“The dog has tumbled,” Bosper said. “But no one has noticed.” This was decidedly untrue. Several first graders had been listening to a bookstore employee (Ms. Chrissy) reading from the *Polka Dots vs. Angry Spots* picture book, but had turned around to stare at the Scottish terrier. Those who were close enough had even heard Bosper speak. They were staring at one another in amazement, but it wasn’t very *deep* amazement, because first graders still believe that everything is possible and therefore aren’t too surprised when they hear a dog talk. I still remember being that age. It was fun. It was only later that I began to understand how the world works, and that dogs do not talk, which is why it was such a shock the first time I heard Bosper speaking on the day

that I met Nate and discovered that everything *was*, in fact, possible.

Bosper was again trotting through the bookstore. Now and then he would look back to make sure he wasn't being followed, but he would always murmur, "Bosper is checking for spies," before turning around, giving me ample time to hold a book in front of my legs so that Bosper wouldn't recognize me. I wasn't holding the books in front of my face, because Bosper still wasn't looking up.

We moved through all the math books, just an aisle away from where Nate was talking with the store manager. Bosper pawed at some of the books, whispering about "inter-universal Teichmüller theory," but then moved on.

I followed him through the romance section.

And the section for westerns.

And into world history.

I was only a few feet behind him when he turned into an aisle, let out a happy yelp, and said, "The dog discovers you! His tail goes wagging!"

I couldn't see who he was talking to.

I edged closer.

I was in a shelving area for bookstore merchandise. There were various coffee cups and water bottles

and shirts emblazoned with the store logo, as well as other items like action figures of famous authors and an assortment of calendars, including a display calendar turned to the proper date.

Saturday the fourteenth.

Wait.

What?

Uh-oh.

I'd lost track of time again, and since it was Saturday the fourteenth that meant that Nate had done three dumb things yesterday. That's what he does. Dumb things. Every Friday the thirteenth. He's explained to me that since he's so intelligent, things rarely come as a surprise to him. He's figured out all of life's equations, all of the various probabilities, and so on. It's exciting for him to solve problems, to make incredibly accurate predictions, but at the same time it bores him, because everything moves steadily along a path that his amazing brain has already predetermined. Because of this, he plays with the equations. What I mean is that he messes them up.

He does three dumb things.

Every Friday the thirteenth.

The first time I met him he'd transformed his mother's cat into a dangerous giant. At other times he's taught the orangutans at the zoo how to build

skateboards, taught a mouse how to sword-fight, and accidentally unleashed a swarm of robot bees.

I heard a small noise at my feet.

A tiny thump.

Looking down, I saw one of Nate's notes, the ones he leaves in places where he predicts I'll be. I had to make a decision: either sneak around the corner to see who Bosper was talking with, or read the note. Normally, this wouldn't have been a major decision, because I was shivering with anticipation about discovering Bosper's secret, but this was no ordinary day. This was one day *after* Nate had, without doubt, done three incredibly dumb things.

I leaned over and picked up the note . . .

. . . just as Bosper peered around the corner.

Meaning that our faces were at equal levels, and the terrier didn't need to look up in order to recognize me anymore.

"Delphine?" Bosper said.

That's my name. Delphine. Delphine Cooper.

"Bosper," I said. "Why are you here?"

"Bosper is not here," he said in a solemn voice. His eyes keenly searched mine, hoping I would believe him. Whatever he saw in my eyes wasn't belief (it was much closer to *disbelief*, and also dizziness, because I'd been bending over for far too long),

and so he abandoned that tactic and enacted one of the most commonplace plans in all of history for when things are going wrong.

He ran.

I looked around the corner to see who he'd been talking with, but there was no one, and Bosper was already gone and the note was just *burning* in my fingers, so I shrugged and opened the note, which was folded in an intricate pattern so that when I unfolded it there was a pop-up swan with my name on it, followed by, "Don't be mad."

"*Uh-oh*," I said.

I unfolded the note a little more.

It read,

"You forgot that yesterday was Friday the thirteenth, but by now you'll have remembered, and you'll be wondering what I've done. So I thought I'd tell you. If you promise not to be mad."

I unfolded the note some more.

But there was nothing. No more words.

I looked around for more notes.

Nothing.

I stared at the note, reading it again. The last sentence was underlined. I glared at it. It said,

"If you promise not to be mad."

"*Piffle*," I said. "I *won't* promise not to be mad."

As soon as I spoke, the line wavered, and the underlining faded away.

A folded note fell on my head, bouncing off my hair onto a shelf in front of me. It said,

“Delphine.”

Unfolding it, I read,

“You probably noticed how the underlining on that previous note disappeared. That’s because you said the words ‘promise not to be mad,’ which means I’m safe, because you promised.”

“How did you know I said that?” I whispered, not mentioning how I’d only almost-but-not-quite said that. Then, with a thought, I added, “Wait. How did a *note* know that I said that?”

Another note fell on my head. I looked up this time before grabbing the note. I didn’t see any more notes lurking above me. Still, I moved a step to the right.

The new note said,

“The previous note was on a type of touch paper that I’ve invented. It’s like a touch pad, except it’s paper, and it was able to measure the wind currents caused by the pronunciation of certain words, like ‘promise,’ and ‘not’ and ‘mad.’ So when you said them, the note knew to trigger the next stage. You should look at the original note now.”

I picked up the original note, where there was now more writing. It was a thankfully short list of the dumb things Nate had done the previous day.

“ONE: I made some mini-ostriches.

TWO: I invented an infallible truth-telling serum.

THREE: I took all the science vials out of my book bag and hid them around town.”

“You hid *what?*” I hissed, looking at the last entry. “Nate, those things are dangerous!” Nate’s “science vials” are almost like magic potions, or pills that have incredible side effects, such as invisibility, or chameleon powers, or having lightning breath, the last one of which sounds so dangerous that I’ve always been too afraid to even *ask*.

“Oh, Nate,” I whispered. “You just *can’t* have scattered these around Polt. This could be catastrophic!”

Another note fell on my head.

It said,

“I know. Really dumb, right? I feel pretty good about it, too! Also, nearly ninety percent of people step to the right in order to avoid perceived danger, so it made it easy to predict that you would step to the right to avoid any more notes.”

I swiveled in place and stomped off in the opposite direction, entirely ignoring how three notes fell

to the floor behind me, and how another one dropped in front of my face.

“Nate!” I almost-nearly-shouted as I stomped closer to him. “Did you *really* leave your science potions all over town?”

“Yes,” he said. “I did.” The bookstore manager was grinning at us. I’ve noticed that whenever Nate has his gold elephant card in view, certain people turn all mushy-brained. We could’ve been talking about blowing up the moon, and the manager would’ve happily nodded and tried to sell Nate an umbrella for when all the moon-chunks started falling from the sky.

“But that’s insane!” I told Nate. “Think of the chaos! *Anything* could happen! This could go *horribly* wrong!”

“I know,” he said, beaming with pride. “I’ve really outdone myself this time!”



“This thing about the science vials,” I said. “Tell me what you’ve done, and you’d *better* tell the truth.” Nate and I were standing outside the bookstore and he was twitching, probably because of the way my Nate-punching fist was in Nate-punching position, right next to his shoulder.

“Oh, I’ll definitely tell the truth,” he said. “No choice, there.” Usually he sounds confident and talks very quickly, but this time it was as if the words were being pulled from him, like a boot from mud.

I asked, “Nate, how many of your science vials did you hide around Polt?”

“Fifteen.”

“Fifteen,” I said, thinking of how that was more than enough to destroy the world sixteen times over. “Which ones?”

“Oh, there were ‘Toad Finder’ pills. And ‘Lightning Breath’ pills. And a ‘Crayon Summoning’ potion, and ‘Handsome Day’ pills. And ‘Speed Runner’ pills. And ‘Chameleon’ pills. And a ‘Make Any Animal a Zebra’ potion. And a ‘Speed Reading’ potion. And—”

“**Piffle!**” I said. Every time he named one of his inventions it hurt my head to think of all the trouble they could cause. The only one that sounded harmless was “Toad Finder.” Well, “Crayon Summoning” didn’t sound too horrible, either. What could go wrong with that? I like crayons.

I said, “Nate, we need to find these magic pills and potions of yours.”

“That would probably be for the best,” he said. “But I have to tell you the truth. They’re not magic.

They're scientifically blended chemicals stabilized with micro-emulsions and mixed together at precise temperatures in a centrifuge."

"Fascinating," I said. "But what do you mean you have to tell me the truth?" Had we finally reached the stage of trust where Nate would tell me *everything*?

Nate said, "Remember how I said I invented an infallible truth-telling serum?"

"Yes. Although, honestly, that doesn't sound very dumb. You've invented *far* more questionable things in the past."

"Well . . . I drank it."

"Okay, *what*?" I hissed. "Nate, honestly, that *does* sound very dumb." Nate, with all he has in his head, is not a person who should be telling the truth.

He said, "It seemed reckless, and like something I would terribly regret, so obviously it was something I needed to do."

"We have different theories on the word 'obviously,'" I said. But . . . then, "Wait a minute. You *have* to tell me the truth? About *anything*? No matter *what* I ask you?"

"That's true. Although, now I'm nervous about that look in your eyes, so I almost wish I wouldn't have told you. But, you asked, so I had to answer as truthfully as I—"

“OH, THE POWER THAT I HOLD!” I yelled, startling everyone within hearing, meaning the entire block in this case, including people, birds, dogs, insects, cats, and in fact the only person or creature of any type that I didn’t frighten was . . . Nate.

“I expected you to yell that loud,” he said. “There was almost a hundred percent chance.”

“Of course I yelled loud,” I said. “You’re the smartest person in existence, maybe the smartest person who’s *ever* existed, and now you have to tell me the truth about *everything*. I can ask you the most important questions of all time, and *you have to answer honestly*.”

“That’s true,” he said. “But I should point out that—”

“Which do you like more? Cake or pie?”

“Neither,” Nate said. “And, that’s the most important question you can think of? Never mind. I should have calculated that. Anyway, I have to point out that—”

“How can you like pie and cake *equally*? That’s mathematically impossible.”

“No it’s not. Fifty percent of my preference goes to pie, and fifty percent goes to cake. There are variables involved, such as how I prefer apple pie over Bundt cake by a margin of eighty-two percent, and I like chocolate cake more than peach pie by a factor of

three, but when the entirety of all known pies is matched against the vast wealth of cakes, I find that I'm exactly even."

"But that's not fair," I said.

"Math doesn't have to be fair."

"It never has been," I agreed, thinking of certain math tests that I'd not particularly enjoyed.

"Anyway, Delphine, there's something I should tell you before you continue yelling at me."

"It's true that I'm not done yelling at you," I admitted. "How could you do something so idiotic as to put your science vials all over—"

"Oh. My phone's ringing," he said.

"Nate," I all but growled as he started to answer his phone. "I'm talking to you. This is important."

"This is, too," he said, holding up his phone. "Not answering your phone is like pretending you're not available, and that would be dishonest." He moved the phone to his ear and said, "Hello?"

There was nothing I could do but wait. Well, I could also be irritated. And I could poke him in his arm several times while saying "*piffle*," rolling my eyes at him as he listened to whoever was on the phone.

"Who are you talking with?" I finally asked. Nate hadn't been saying anything except a few statements of "yes" and "no" and "I'm with Delphine."

“Maculte,” Nate answered. “The leader of the Red Death Tea Society.”

My skin went cold. My face flushed. I could feel my stomach tighten and my fingers begin to twitch.

“Wh-what?” I said. “You’re not serious!” He had to be joking.

“I’m telling the truth,” he said. “Have to.” Then, into his phone, he said, “The first pills I hid were taped below Mrs. Isaacson’s desk in her classroom at Polt Middle School.”

“Why are you *telling* him that?”

“I have to,” Nate said. “It’s the truth.” Then, into the phone, he said, “It’s a small silver packet containing ‘Speed Runner’ pills.” Nate listened for a bit, wincing, because I was hitting him in the shoulder at half strength while glaring at him with full power. After a moment, he told Maculte, “Okay. I understand. But Delphine and I are going to try to beat you there and get the pills *first*, and, to tell you the truth, I hope you lose.”

He disconnected the call and slid his phone into his front shirt pocket. Most people don’t like to carry their phones there, because they slip out when you lean over. But, most don’t have a pocket made of intelligent fabric that will grab the phone if it starts to fall out, squeezing shut like a hand. So, Nate was

well ahead of the game in that area, but then again most people don't tell their archenemies where to find dangerous technologies. So Nate was both the smartest boy on the whole planet and also, without a doubt, completely and utterly brainless.

"Why did you do that?" I said. "Nate, you just told the world's most maniacal criminal where you hid one of your inventions."

"That's what I was trying to tell you before," he said. "It's not just you that I'll be forced to tell the truth to, it's everyone."

"**Piffle**, Nate. Completely **piffle**." I couldn't even express how mad I was. I felt like there was steam coming out of my ears.

"This is the stupidest thing you've ever done!" I said.

"Yes. It is," Nate answered, telling the truth.



Before we even made it to the car, we saw Kip Luppert, one of our classmates. Kip was carrying four gallons of red paint to his parents' car, struggling with the weight, because Kip is about as muscular as Nate, which is not a compliment.

"How are you today?" Kip asked, sweating with his efforts.

“Not good,” Nate answered. “I’ve done a really dumb thing, and also I think I drank too much cinnamon-radish lemonade, which is a drink I’m experimenting with, and in addition to that I bumped my head on a particle accelerator that I constructed out of soup cans and the remains of a robot I built in third grade.”

“Huh?” Kip said.

“Nate’s just kidding,” I said, grabbing Nate by his arm and dragging his truth-telling butt away from our classmate.

“No I’m not!” Nate yelled back to Kip.



“Any money you can spare?” a panhandler asked us. He was no more than twenty years old, wearing hipster glasses and boots that were obviously so expensive that he had no need to be asking strangers for money. He had short hair, a girl’s name (Celia) tattooed on his neck, and a mustache that twirled into complete circles at the tips.

“I *do* have rather a lot of money I don’t need,” Nate told him, reaching into his pockets and taking out what seemed to be hundreds of dollars, giving it all to the panhandler, who gasped in surprise as I quickly

moved on, tugging the world's most honest boy along with me.



We'd only taken about five steps when Melville, my pet bee, came in for a landing on my shoulder.

"Bzzz?" she asked.

"We're going to the school," I answered, glaring at Nate. "Nate did something . . . not so very smart."

"Bzzz," Melville said.

"So true," I told her. "It's *not* like the first time ever."

Together, my bee and I frowned at Nate.



Bosper was at our car, staring at the door, wanting inside.

"Bosper is here by the car but not being inside," he said. "Why does the girl smell like bad adventure?"

"I smell like bad adventure? What do you mean?"

"The dog has a nose that says things," Bosper said.

"Okay," I said. He'd explained . . . nothing. No wonder he's Nate's dog.

"Girl smells like yelling?" Bosper said, trying again.

“That would make sense,” I said. “I’ve been doing some yelling. I probably reek of it.”

Nate said, “Bosper’s nose is talented enough that he can smell moods and feelings, like that day when I put on my mechanical dog’s nose.” The first time I’d ever met Nate he’d strapped on an invention of his, a technological wonder of a nose, and he was able to actually *smell* that he and I were going to be friends. I wondered if I smelled very friendly just then. I probably did. Just because your friends do idiotic things doesn’t mean they’re not your friends. They’re just your idiotic friends now.

I said, “I thought Bosper could only smell peanut butter.” I knew he could smell a lot more than peanut butter, but I was making a joke about the impressively single-minded focus that Bosper sometimes has about peanut butter.

“Peanut butter,” Bosper said in a voice as if he’d just fallen in love, which was farcical, because he had *long* since fallen in love with peanut butter.

“Oh,” Nate said, suddenly acting very uneasy. And he was trying to avoid eye contact with Bosper.

“Something wrong with peanut butter?” I asked. I was speaking to Nate, but Bosper was the one who answered, because terriers always barge into conversations about peanut butter. It’s genetics.

“Peanut butter is bad for dogs,” Bosper said. His voice was full of sorrow and woe, and many other words that mean much the same thing.

“It is?” I said. I hadn’t thought it was. I’ve heard chocolate is bad for dogs, and of course that’s an unspeakable tragedy in their lives, but as far as I knew they were good with peanut butter. In fact, I’d once watched Bosper eat a glob of peanut butter bigger than he was.

“No,” Nate said. “Peanut butter isn’t bad for dogs.”

Bosper went suddenly still. Terriers normally keep moving, as if they’re constantly hearing music in their heads and can’t help but shake their little rumps, but now, Bosper was like a statue.

Except for two . . .

. . . slow . . .

. . . blinks.

“The dog was told peanut butter was bad for him,” Bosper said. He was definitely holding back a growl.

“Ahhh, yes,” Nate said. “That.” He adjusted his glasses.

“*Is* the peanut butter bad for dogs?” Bosper said. There was that lurking growl again.

“No,” Nate said. “Not really. It’s just . . . I told you that because you kept eating all the peanut butter.”

“That is what the peanut butter is for!” Bosper said. “The peanut butter is for the peanut eating!”

“Enough of all this,” I said. “We’re in a race.” I started to explain that we were racing Maculte to Polt Middle School, to where Nate had hidden the packet of “Speed Runner” pills, but apparently you should never mention a race to a talking terrier, because they *love* it. They just *love* racing.

“Race!” Bosper yelled, and he spun around in a tight circle, and then dashed off down the sidewalk at top speed, yelling, “The dog can be winning the race!”

“Should we get him back?” I asked Nate.

“No need. He might even beat us there.”

“Did you really lie to him about peanut butter?” I asked, getting into the car, grinning, because I also love racing.

“I did,” Nate said. He was getting behind the steering wheel, whispering. I wondered why he was whispering. Maybe because Melville, my bee, had curled up in the backseat and was sleeping?

“Okay,” I said. “First of all, now that I know you’ve lied to Bosper, have you ever lied to *me*?” It was a merciless question, but he’d been foolish enough to drink his honesty invention, and I felt duty bound to discover certain truths, like if Nate had ever lied to me, or if he thought I’d looked awesome the time I was riding

a hippopotamus like a horse. I highly suspected I knew the answer to that last one, because *of course* I did.

I said, “And, another question, why are you whispering?” When I’d spoken my first question Nate had grimaced, and when I asked my second question he slumped over and thumped his head on the steering wheel, like you do when you feel overwhelmed. I’ve literally seen Nate wearing a nuclear bomb and the pressure has never been too high for him before.

“I’ve lied to you twenty-seven times,” Nate said. His eyes were closed and he was still slumped forward against the steering wheel, so it was not a fair time to punch him in the arm.

“**Piffle!**” I said, unfairly punching Nate in the arm. “Twenty-seven times! We’re supposed to be friends!”

“Sometimes it’s friendlier to lie,” Nate said. “And sometimes it would be too embarrassing not to lie.” I thought about that, and I supposed it was true. I wondered how many times I’d lied to Nate. It was more than twenty-seven, I’d bet.

I said, “We’ll talk about this later, when we’re not in a race. I’m guessing you regret ever drinking your honesty-potion-thingy, don’t you?”

“I do,” Nate said. “I don’t think I’ve ever regretted one of my Friday the thirteenth dumb things more than this.” We were driving down Alabaster Street,

past a row of food carts, like Polly's Pastry Palace, and Thai High, and Burrito Angels, which is run by three Spanish women who dress like angels and serve what I honestly do believe to be heavenly burritos.

I said, "You didn't answer my question about why you were whispering." Nate groaned and his head slumped even farther forward against the steering wheel. Despite how we were zooming down the street, I wasn't worried, because we don't actually *drive* when we're in the car. This is because Nate's car is actually intelligent. Her name is Betsy and she's pretty great, although she has a bit of a crush on Nate and . . .

"Oh," I said, realizing what was going on.

I told Nate, "I'm sorry," and put an apologetic hand on his shoulder, right at the spot where he's usually deserving to be punched.

Nate, forced to be honest when he answered my question, said, "I was whispering because I didn't want Betsy to know I'm now scientifically programmed to tell the truth."

"You are?" Betsy said. Yeah. She can talk.

"I'm *so* sorry," I told Nate again, finally understanding why he'd been whispering. Betsy is great and I completely love her, but . . . she can be difficult.

"How do you feel about me?" she asked. There. See? It was a difficult question.

“Uhh,” Nate said.

“Saying ‘uhh’ does *not* count as telling the truth,” Betsy said. Her voice comes from the glove box. It was rattling the entire car. “I spend my days driving you everywhere, utterly devoted, and I think it’s only fair that you answer my question. So, Nathan . . . how do you feel about me?”

“Oooh,” Nate said. He sounded like a duck with a raging stomachache.

Luckily, it was at that moment that we were attacked. Yes, I do know that “being attacked” is not generally noted as being wonderful, but if you’d seen Nate’s face in those moments . . . tottering as he was on the edge of being scientifically forced to answer Betsy’s question . . . you’d understand why, when the laser beams began to shoot out from the buildings all around us, it really *was* for the best.

“Oooch,” Betsy said as the lasers focused on her. Other laser beams, barely missing us, were cutting swaths through the street, gouging holes in the sidewalks, cutting a fire hydrant in half, and slicing off the top of a mailbox, even chopping over a streetlight that crashed among a group of pedestrians, sending them scrambling for safety.

“Oh boy!” Nate said. “We’re being attacked!”
See? It *was* for the best.

But I did worry about Betsy, because I'd seen what those lasers could do, and if they could slice through a streetlight and mailboxes, then where did that leave *Betsy*? Also, where did that leave Nate and me, since if the lasers cut through Betsy, they would also cut through . . .

"Uhh, Nate?" I said. It no longer seemed quite so wonderful that we were being attacked. In fact, I was fully prepared to vote against it.

"We'll be fine," Nate said. "Betsy's variable atomic structure is designed to absorb light, even that from lasers. You see, the photonic wavelength will—"

"Hey, Betsy?" I said.

"Yes?"

"You okay?"

"It tickles, but I'm fine."

"Good," I told her. "Nate was starting to go on about science, and I really didn't understand what he was talking about."

"He's difficult to talk to sometimes."

"Yeah."

"But he has a nice smile," Betsy said. "It makes my tires squeal."

"Yeah," I said again, mostly because I had no idea what else I could have possibly said.

"We *are* being attacked here," Nate mentioned,

truthfully. The lasers had ceased firing from all around us, but men and women were now rushing out from various doorways and crashing out from windows, all of them wearing the distinctively colored suits of the Red Death Tea Society.

There were possibly as many as twenty of these men and women, each of them with a laser-shooter-thingy that looked like a chubby spear, except the ends had fiercely glowing blue lights instead of being sharp and pointy. The assassins were also all carrying tea-cups, sipping from them during the attack. This made the attack seem slightly more casual, although not any less lethal.

“*Hmm*,” Nate said. “We can’t let them delay us. They’re just trying to slow us down so that Maculte can reach the school first. That’s *not* going to happen.”

He stopped, and his eyes narrowed, like the way a gunfighter’s eyes do in the western movies.

“Betsy,” he said. “I am authorizing *Rocket One Mode*.” His voice was grim.

“Rocket One Mode?” she said. The glove box vibrated. Her voice was breathy.

“Rocket One Mode?” I asked. My voice was confused. What was Rocket One Mode? Were we going to fire rockets at the assassins from the Red Death Tea

Society? I wasn't sure if that was the smartest thing to do, because there were other people around and—

CLICK.

It was a loud noise, and it was also *more* than a noise, because some weird seat belts sprang out from my seat and wrapped around me before I could blink. The seat belts were like tubes, with some sort of liquid inside them.

“What is—?” I asked, but that was as far as I got before . . .

CLICK.

And then . . .

GLURGLE GLURGLE.

My seat suddenly came to life, gone soft and liquid, with the whole seat wrapping around me as if I'd fallen into a big tub of warm jelly.

And then . . . **RUMBLE.**

“Rumble?” I said. My voice was still quite confused.

“Rumble,” Betsy said, and then I was slammed back into my tub of jelly (meaning, my seat) because we were suddenly *blasting* forward at speeds that made the buildings around us blur.

“Rocket Three!” Betsy said, the most excited I've ever heard her.

“T-t-take th-this p-pill,” Nate told me. He was

holding out a blue-colored pill, stuttering because the acceleration was making it difficult to talk, difficult to do *anything*. It felt as if a giant hand was pushing at me, and also like there was a giant gas bubble being squeezed out of me.

“BURP!” I told Nate. That was the “gas bubble” thing.

“Wh-what?” he said.

“I m-meant o-*okay!*” I was fighting to raise my hand and take the pill, but it felt like there was an anchor tied to my arm. It was lucky I’d been doing my adventure exercises, having built an obstacle course in my backyard so that I can work out every day and get into “adventure” shape. My obstacle course has a row of hurdles (which I can totally jump over, even backward) and a series of ropes that I either swing from or climb up, and there’s a punching bag on which I’ve painted the faces of Jakob Maculte and Luria Pevermore, the two leaders of the Red Death Tea Society. All in all, I *rule* that obstacle course, so my arms were powerful enough to lift that blue pill of Nate’s despite the way gravity was hugely increased (and immensely annoyed) by the speeds Nate and I were traveling. It was an effort, though, so I hoped that things wouldn’t get any worse, because—

“Rocket Two!” Betsy yelled.

“guh,” I gurgled.

We were moving even faster now, zooming through Polt at speeds that made the blocks go by in heartbeats.

I swallowed the blue pill. It was difficult. The sheer force of our speed was increasing the pull of gravity, and gravity gets irritable when you make it work that hard. It fights back.

But, I instantly began to feel better. The pressure eased off, and I even began to feel comfortable. The bubble seat was quite cushy.

“What was that pill?” I asked Nate.

“‘Gravity Adjuster.’ It works by enveloping each of our molecules in a protective bath of neutrino barriers, the force of which pulsates with billions of micro-explosions that counteract the pull of gravity by—”

“Got it, Nate,” I said, which was a lie, but I’ve never been personally troubled by any need to tell the truth, as my parents have so often noted.

“So, we’re good, then?” I asked.

“We are,” Nate said. “But I can’t make the micro-explosions too powerful without endangering molecular bonds, so while we’re safe at Rocket Three, and even Rocket Two, it’s going to get uncomfortable again when Betsy goes to—”

“Rocket One!” Betsy yelled. Everything turned into light. Just . . . whooshing lights. Streams of color. Nothing made any sense. I had that tingling sensation of when you’ve been sitting in one place for too long, and you get up quickly and take a few steps and then your blood goes all whooshy and your body says, “Hey, *whoa!* I wasn’t ready for *that!*”

I was slammed literally into my seat, enveloped by the liquid, and I have to say that I no longer felt like I was floating in a tub of jelly; I felt like a doughnut being dipped into scalding hot coffee.

“**gahh**,” I told Nate.

“The pressure *is* rather intense,” he agreed. “Luckily, it won’t last long. Now that we’ve left the Red Death Tea Society behind and can travel uninterrupted, we should be at the school in seven seconds. Make that *six* seconds now. Five. Four. Thr—”

And then we were attacked.

There was a look of surprise on Nate’s face, which is something I don’t see very often. He once told me he’s only truly surprised five times a year, on average, although he added that this calculation doesn’t account for what he calls the “Delphine Factor,” because my actions apparently don’t fit into mathematical formulas and I’m too difficult to predict. It’s one of the reasons he likes me.

“**gahh!**” Nate said as our car suddenly veered sideways. There’d been an impact.

A big one.

“**Piffle!**” I said. A crack appeared in my window. Then a face was there, emerging from the brightly streaming colors. It was only there for a moment, like a ghost. Then it was gone and Betsy started shaking and shuddering.

“Guh gug guh,” I said, trying to form words, but the car was shaking too violently and more faces were appearing outside the windows. They were evil, leering faces. With eager, malevolent smiles.

There was a distinct smell of tea.

The windshield began to break.



One thing I admire about Nate is that he remains calm during stressful situations. He doesn’t panic. We’ve gotten together to watch scary movies, like *Hotel of a Hundred Zombies*, and *Motel of a Hundred Zombies*, and *Tree Fort of a Hundred Zombies*, but I have to say that I don’t think I’ll be inviting him over to watch the recently released *Tennis Court of a Hundred Zombies*. I’ll most likely invite Liz, and Stine, and Ventura, because *they* know how to watch zombie movies. Whenever the zombies attack, Liz

will shriek and throw marshmallows at the television, and Stine starts trembling and hugs her pillows, and of course Ventura gets up and runs around like there's a zombie in the room and she needs to escape. What I mean is, they act *properly*. Nate, on the other hand, begins to . . . analyze.

"Their best chance of survival is to flee," he'll say when the people open their hotel room to find a zombie waiting behind the door. Then he'll show me some equations he's scribbled on his pants, or on his hand, or that he's doodled with his finger in our pizza sauce, despite how I've told him that pizza is sacred and that he could literally go to prison for life.

Or, other times he'll say, "Since a zombie's decaying flesh will emit a distinct odor, why aren't these people constructing any mechanical sensory apparatus that could detect this scent, and therefore the zombies, from a safe distance? Failing that, why not just befriend a dog? Because a dog could sense the zombies from as far as five miles away, and even provide protection."

Nate said this, incidentally, when Bosper was shivering beneath a blanket, meaning he would've been useless in any attack that didn't *specifically* involve a zombie's favorite blanket.

The point is, Nate doesn't ever panic. It's just not who he is.



“Gahh!” Nate said, totally panicking. It was up to me to take charge.

“Gahh!” I said, totally panicking.

Sometimes panic is like a virus. It can spread from person to person and suddenly there's an epidemic, except instead of sneezing and coughing and wondering what to do with your tissues, you're shrieking like a terrier hiding beneath a checkerboard blanket.

“This shouldn't be possible!” Nate said. *“Nobody can catch up with Betsy during Rocket One!”* Despite Nate's words, there was ample evidence to the contrary, meaning there was a man standing on the hood of our car, even though we were moving so fast that everything else was just a stream of frankly nauseating colors. The man was seven feet tall with a big muscle-bursting chest and cruel eyes. He had a sneering mouth and long black hair that was whipping around in the wind created by our speed. His arms were covered with horrible scars and intricate tattoos of teacups and tea packets. He was carrying a weird mechanical device about the size of a small microwave and . . . with his muscles straining against the pull of

gravity . . . he twisted a dial on the side of it and then slammed it down onto Betsy's hood so forcefully that it left a huge dent. It stuck there on her hood, despite how the roaring winds should've torn it away.

"What's *that*?" I yelled. "Some sort of magnet?" To be entirely honest, I'd caught the panic virus in a bad way. I wanted to hug pillows and toss marshmallows and I wanted to run around in fright, but that's very difficult to do when you're strapped into a car seat.

"Oh," Nate said. "Hmm. A magnet." He'd calmed down. Entirely. He looked thoughtful and even . . . happy. Unfortunately, I myself did not catch the Happy Virus. I was still caught in the grip of the Panic Flu.

"You're right," Nate said. "They have to be doing this with magnets. You're so smart!" He looked over to me with eyes that made me blush. I didn't feel smart, right then. I felt foolish. But I also felt a flood of relief and I wasn't panicked anymore, at least.

"I was right?" I said.

"Yes. You see, Betsy achieves Rocket One speed by oscillating back and forth between S-Pole and N-Pole, playing them off against each other to accelerate."

"That's very nice of her," I said. I'm often at a loss to respond when Nate starts talking about science.

“What I mean is, it’s like magnets. Betsy is manipulating magnetic fields, or at least manipulating her place in them, fluctuating her atomic structure so that the earth’s magnetic field is acting as a slipstream accelerant.”

“Ooo!” I said. “I almost understood that one.” Being friends with Nate, listening to what he has to say, is like running the obstacle course in my backyard. The more I do it, the better I’m getting.

“But the Red Death Tea Society is using it against us,” Nate said. “They’re linking magnetic waves, coupling them, so that they’re stuck to us like glue.”

“So we can’t outrace them?” I asked. This was *not* good news. The cracks in Betsy’s windows were spreading outward. The faces appearing through the blur of the colors were staying longer, peering in through the windows. The man on our car hood was assembling another device.

“No,” Nate said. “We can’t outrace them.” His voice was grim, but almost even before he’d spoken, Betsy started laughing.

“Ha ha ha ha ha,” she said.

“Why’s she laughing?” I asked Nate.

“I’m not sure,” he said. “Neat! This day is full of surprises!” It was at that moment that our neat day, full of surprises, became even neater and more

surprising. My eyes went wide. Nate's eyes went even wider. The eyes of the assassins from the Red Death Tea Society went widest of all.

"Rocket Zero," Betsy said.

"Rocket *Zero*?" Nate said. "There *is* no Rocket Zero!"

But there was. Betsy, already going faster than I could possibly conceive, began accelerating. In fact, she was accelerating at an accelerated rate.

"Ha ha ha ha ha!" Betsy yelled. "Rocket Zero!" The man on the hood started flapping like a flag in a tornado, his feet anchored to the hood by the power of magnets. It did not look comfortable. He was thumping back and forth on his face and his butt. Meanwhile, the magnet-machine was sliding toward the edge of Betsy's hood. The faces in the windows were becoming distorted.

"This is amazing!" Nate said. "Betsy is learning on her own! I hadn't predicted this!"

"I do have a few secrets, Nate," Betsy said. "Even from you." She made it sound like a challenge.

"Are you using a photonic drive? A magnetic monopole to catalyze proton decay into a positron and a pi meson, harnessing the energy release and transforming it into acceleration?"

"Maaaaybe," Betsy said.

“I’m impressed,” Nate said. Our whole car turned red and shivered. The faces in the windows were beginning to fall away, one by one, sucked away into the winds. The giant man on our hood was whisked off into the colorful void. Our speeds were inconceivable. We were whooshing through clouds. We were whooshing over treetops. My stomach was whooshy. I saw Polt Middle School, but we whooshed right past it. And then, there it was *again*, even though I’m pretty sure we hadn’t turned around. I tried not to think about how fast we must be going.

“Please prepare for impact,” Betsy said, which is never a line I favor hearing, though it’s becoming surprisingly commonplace in my life.

And then . . . *impact*.

We landed in the parking lot. *Hard*. Just before we hit, I could see that Betsy’s sides were smoking, like we were a comet, or a meteor. Betsy’s wheels touched concrete, caught for a second, and then the rear of the car came up over the front and we began to roll and bounce and crash and do a bunch of other things that I found to be disagreeable.

“I was clearly not prepared for impact!” I mentioned. Betsy kept bouncing. Tumbling. Rolling. Nate and I were being flung all over, and everything in the car was whooshing around us. Nate’s messenger bag,

the one where he carries his science vials, now mostly empty, kept thumping off my face. And there were five bottles of mustard being flung around, and a pair of shoes, and several books, and some socks that smelled like they either should be in an emergency laundry basket or, even better, an incinerator.

“*Piffle!*” I yelled, on the third, fifth, and twenty-seventh bounces. I was shouting loud enough to be heard over the car crash, because I wanted my opinion to be known. There was a constant barrage of shuddering impacts. My body felt like it was buzzing. Like I was full of electricity. Like I was surrounded by fireflies. Like . . . *hmm*. I actually *was* surrounded by fireflies. Tiny metal fireflies.

“What’s this?” I said, pointing to one of the fireflies during the thirty-first and thirty-second bounces.

“Barrier gnats,” Nate said. “Robots. Protecting us from impact.”

“And, how are they doing that?” I asked. I was bouncing all over the car as Betsy rolled and tumbled, but I definitely *had* noted that I wasn’t being hurt. It was like an amusement park ride, where everything seems to be chaos, but you’re safe for the most part, except your stomach is questioning why you ate so much cotton candy.

“They’re like little catchers’ mitts,” Nate said.

“Every time we almost smack into something, they catch us, and push us the other way.”

“Tiny helpers,” I said. “Got it.”

“Would you like to know how they work?” he asked.

“Gosh no,” I said, then, “C’mon, Nate!” because the car had finally rolled to a stop and the race was on to beat Maculte and the Red Death Tea Society to that hidden vial. I checked on Melville (my bee woke up when I shook her, looked around, and then went back to sleep), and then Nate and I crawled out of Betsy.

She was still laughing.

“That was fun!” she told me, even though she could clearly see that my hair was a mess and that I’d squished an entire bottle of mustard against my leg. Nate, in the past week, had been running an experiment on mustards, and there were several squeezey bottles in the back of the car. Apparently, the whole of his experiment was, “Which mustard tastes better?” That sounds like a rational bit of research, but I was relatively certain the experiment would turn weird. That’s just Nate.

“Are you okay?” I asked Betsy. The cracks in her windshield were already fixing themselves, and the dents were popping back out into proper shape. That’s

one of the benefits of being a talking car made of unstable molecules.

“I’m fine,” Betsy said. “But you have mustard on your leg.”

“I do.” There was no denying it.

“Mustard?” Nate asked. “Is that my mustard?”

“I rarely carry my own bottles of mustard, Nate, so, yes . . . I’d say it was probably your mustard.”

“This could be a problem,” he said.

I told him, “There are these wonderful devices called ‘washing machines,’ Nate. I bet they could solve this ‘mustard stains on my pants’ dilemma.” I was already running toward the school. Luckily, it wasn’t in session right then, so we were unlikely to be disturbed, except for a few of the janitors.

“I know about washing machines,” Nate said, jogging along with me. “They’re primitive. Ion bombardments are far more effective at cleansing materials, but the particular problem that I was talking about is—”

“Dog smells mustard?” Bosper said. The terrier was on the front steps. How he’d made it there before us, I have no idea, but I’ve learned not to ask Bosper how he does things, because he’s worse than Nate at explanations. He gets too excited talking about math, the shifting planes of reality, and quantum alignment, and—

“Rarr rarr rarr!” Bosper said. Or, actually . . . he *barked* it.

“**Hmmm**,” Nate said.

“Unfortunate,” Betsy said.

“What?” I asked. But it was at that moment that Bosper, snarling mad, came running for me.

“Bosper?” I said. It almost looked like he was going to attack me.

“Attack!” Bosper yelled, so that settled that. The terrier was racing after me, snapping at my leg. At my *mustard leg* in particular.

“Why is he attacking me?” I shrieked. “This is entirely **piffle!**”

“He’s allergic to mustard!” Nate said. “It makes him crazy! And it interferes with his acceleration!”

“It does *not* interfere with his acceleration!” I said. “He’s too fast!” I was trying to get away from the terrier, but Bosper was far too quick, thanks to that unfair advantage that four-legged creatures have over us lesser-legged beings. Four legs are faster than two.

“I meant it interferes with the way I accelerated his brain!” Nate said. “With the method I used to make him smarter. And . . . oh! You shouldn’t let him bite you!”

“Why not?” I shouted, trying to keep Betsy between Bosper and me.

“Because it would hurt,” Nate said.

“Oh, *duh*. I thought you meant something *extra*. Like, you’d given him anti-matter teeth or something.” I was crawling on top of Betsy, where Bosper couldn’t reach me.

“He can totally reach you up there,” Betsy said, as if she could read my thoughts, although I might point out that she didn’t read my mind in time to stop me from crawling onto her hood, where Bosper easily jumped up and started biting at me. Luckily, he just sank his teeth into my pants leg.

“Nate,” I said. “If it isn’t too much trouble, could you do some *genius* thing? Your dog is attacking me, and while I don’t mean to cast any blame, this is *entirely your fault*.”

Nate began fiddling with an odd device that he took out of his messenger bag. It looked like a transparent can of tennis balls, except the balls were bright red and spinning around. Plus, there was a small keyboard on the side. Quickly tapping on the keys, Nate said, “No problem! I can solve this! I’ll project a hologram of a cat, and that should distract Bosper long enough that we can get into the school, where he can’t follow.”

Tap tap tap. This was the noise of Nate’s fingers on the keys.

“Quack?” This was the sound of a perplexed duck that had suddenly appeared in the parking lot.

“That’s a duck!” This was the noise of *me*, an outraged seventh grade girl named Delphine Cooper as she was being attacked by a dog.

“Ooo.” This was the sound of Nate, a boy I often-times consider to be a genius, and oftentimes do not.

Nate said, “My holo-projector must have been damaged in the accident. It’s showing the wrong images. Here, I’ll try again.”

Tap tap tappity-tap. That was the sound of Nate’s fingers on the keyboard, again.

“That is not a cat!” This was me, again, deciding that Nate was definitely not a genius, because while the duck *had* disappeared, there was now a huge crowd of bears all over the parking lot.

“**Piffle!**” I said, leaping off from the car, with Bosper hanging from my pants leg and growling at me.

“Give me that!” I told Nate, grabbing the device from his hands. I spelled out “cat,” on the keyboard, then looked up. There was a giant watermelon. Useless. So I spelled out “feline” on the keyboard, then looked up. There was a giant picture of Susan Heller, the girl Nate has a crush on. She was blinking her eyes in an alluring manner.

“*Really, Nate?*” I said, glaring at him. He had the

decency to blush, and I would've gone over to him and delivered a well-earned punch on his shoulder, but his dog was chewing on my pants, and if I didn't deal with it soon, then Bosper was going to start chewing on my leg.

So I spelled out "peanut butter" on the keyboard.

"Hmmm," I said when I looked up. There were three jars of peanut butter on the parking lot. Two of them were of the chunky variety, and the third was creamy. The hologram was so complete that I could even smell the rich aroma. Nate's inventions truly are amazing. It was almost as if there really *were* three actual jars of peanut butter on the parking lot.

Although they did have spider legs.

"Ick," I said. What else do you say about spider legs?

"Hmm," Nate said, which is not what you say about three jars of peanut butter scurrying away on spider legs.

"Oh, ick," Betsy said. Properly.

"Is butter of peanuts?" Bosper growled out. His voice wasn't anything near normal. He sounded like his throat was full of potato chips. He let go of my pants leg and stared at the peanut butter jars racing away on their icky disgusting spider legs.

Then hurried off in pursuit.

“Hooray!” Nate said. “It worked!”

“Ugg,” I said. “I will never again eat peanut butter without thinking of spider legs.”

“A certain number of arachnids fall into the peanut butter vats during peanut butter production, anyway,” Nate said. “So, *whenever* you eat peanut butter, there’s a small chance you’re actually eating spider legs.”

I stared at him.

I *so* stared at him.

Betsy rolled back away from us, giving me punching room.

“**Piffle**,” I said. Low in my throat. Like a growl.

*To Colleen Coover, and to every child
with questions*

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