

Enter the Cube

by Nicholas and Daniel Dobkin
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Chapter 8: Pipe Dreams

“So this is the Twin’s room?” said Clara. “What a mess!” She was standing just inside the door, next to a small table holding a large globe. The room was decorated with cheerful blue and white striped wallpaper. A bunk bed lay on one side, a desk on the other. A mobile of string and tiny toy planes hung from the ceiling. A toy chest was in the corner, open and nearly empty, its contents strewn all around the room. There were tennis rackets, rubber balls, dolls, wooden trains, cars of various sizes, models, and construction, rocket ships, coloring books, building blocks, boats, dinosaurs, crayons, a pop gun, a doll house, balls of string, lengths of rope, buckets, shovels, marbles, magazines, polished rocks, a miniature tea set, jigsaw puzzles, large pieces of chalk, action figures, drawing books, watercolors, and stuffed bears, beavers, rabbits, macaws, fish, frogs, dolphins, whales, moose, weasels, otters, anteaters, bluebirds, eagles, and a slug (a stuffed one, of course). “What does the map say?” she asked.

Tennyson entered, carrying some rags and a bucket. “Let’s see... here it is. Well, looks like everything is here. He’s even included a diagram of where the toys go in the toy chest. Oh, and here’s a warning note: ‘toys shrink when placed in the chest and expand when removed’. That Neville! For a ghost who doesn’t actually do much of anything he’s really helpful.”

“Where do we start?” said Clara.

“How about this?” said Tennyson. “I’ll start at one corner, you start at the other, and we’ll toss all the toys close to the chest. Then we can just grab things and stow them in the chest in order according to the map. It shouldn’t actually be that hard.”

“Okay,” replied Clara. She took the Poltergust off and laid it down next to the bunk bed; the room was just as represented in Neville’s list, untidy but not actually very dirty. She knelt down at the back of the bed and started to pick up the various small toys collected there, tossing them over her shoulder towards the toy chest. Tennyson was doing the same at the other end of the room; for a minute, all that could be heard was the periodic *thump* as a flying toy landed on the carpet. Clara flung a locomotive backwards and reached under the bed to grab the tender, when *whack!* something hit her in the behind. “Ow!” she said. She looked back and saw the locomotive lying on the carpet. “What did you do that for?”

“I didn’t do anything,” said Tennyson. “What happened?”

“What happened?” said Clara. “You hit me with this train engine!”

“I did not. I was picking up marbles over here, not locomotives.”

“Well who did?”

“Did you hit yourself? Maybe you threw it straight up.”

“I don’t think so.” Clara hesitated, not eager to get into a big argument (and not really believing that Tennyson would throw something at her intentionally). “Well, maybe you’re right.” She turned back to snagging junk from under the bed: golf ball *toss!*, teddy bear *toss!*, Pokemon card pack (stop and look -- “ooh, look, a Clefairy!”) *toss!*, when suddenly *whack!* something else hit her in the butt.

“Okay, that’s it!” Someone giggled. It didn’t sound like Tennyson; it was high-pitched, and Tennyson wasn’t given to giggling anyway.

“Was that you?” said Tennyson.

“Was that me what? I didn’t throw it at myself again!” replied Clara.

“Throw what? I meant was that you laughing at me?” said Tennyson.

“Of course not. Are you throwing stuff at me when I’m not looking?”

“Would I do that? I’d only throw stuff at you when you’re watching. Besides you always catch things.” Tennyson started to walk over to see what had hit Clara and tripped on a pile of marbles -- *thump!* he went down on the carpet. Somebody started laughing uproariously. Tennyson started to complain to Clara when he saw that she was silent.

“Who’s in here?” said Tennyson.

“Nanner, nanner, can’t catch me!” said a high-pitched voice.

“Can so!” said another voice.

“I meant the old folks, not you!” said the first voice.

Clara’s eyes narrowed. She reached back to grab her Poltergust and strapped it on. “All right, come out or I’ll vacuum you out!”

“Aww, aren’t you gonna’ play with us?” From behind a large wooden box next to the toy chest protruded a ghostly translucent blue head topped with neaty combed blonde hair parted

in the middle. The disconcertingly green eyes blinked and the ghost said, “Who are you? I haven’t seen you before. I’m Henry! Want to play?”

“Oh, it’s the twins,” said Clara. “Where’s your brother?”

Another similar ghostly head popped out upside down from the center of the mobile. “I’m not his brother, he’s my brother! He’s just Henry. I’m Orville! I’m the big brother.”

“We’re twins,” replied Henry. “You can’t be the big brother. Besides you were the big brother yesterday!”

“Would you play hide and seek with us?” said Orville, forgetting about the argument.

“Gee, we’re kind of in the middle of cleaning the room up,” said Tennyson.

“Are you our new parents?” said Henry.

“No way!” said Clara. “We’re just staying here for a couple of days, so we’re helping Mr. Luigi tidy up.”

“Oh. Are you our new baby sitters?” said Henry.

“Are you gonna play hide and seek or not?” said Orville.

“Look, we really have to clean up the room, we don’t have time to play hide and seek today. Some other time, OK?” said Clara.

Orville grabbed the locomotive and tender. “Never mind, let’s play trains, Henry!” The two ghosts were soon huddled next to the toy chest just like live kids, grabbing pieces of track and train cars. Clara shrugged her shoulders and said “Well, maybe this will keep them busy while we clean up.” She put down the Poltergust and the two live kids went back to collecting toys.

When Clara turned back to the toy chest, though she thought only a few minutes had passed, the ghosts had assembled a truly impressive wooden trackway. There were several switches, bridges and tunnels, signals and watertowers, and a roundhouse in the center. The set spanned about half the room. Tennyson was reaching up to put some stuffed animals away in the toy chest when Orville said, “Ready?”

“Ready!” replied Henry. “Toot! toot!”

Without any apparent mechanism, the two wooden trains the ghost twins had assembled on the tracks started to move. Each made surprisingly loud sounds appropriate to the startup of a steam-driven locomotive: the whoosh of steam pulsing out of the cylinders and into the smokestack, the scream of the whistles, and the smacking of the couplings as the engine jerked the train into motion. It was pretty cool, if you liked trains. Within moments the two toy trains

were moving at a jaunty pace along the tracks, trailing ghostly smoke that disappeared a few seconds after emission.

“Oh oh!” said Henry. “The signalman is fast asleep!” He knocked over a tiny blockhouse next to a switch, just as one of the speeding trains crossed it.

“Stop the train! stop the train!” said Orville, laughing.

“It’s too late!” said Henry. “Stop your train!”

“My train can’t stop, it’s the express! I’m coming through!”

“No you’re nooootttt!!” screamed Henry. Both ghosts were giggling gleefully; the two trains came round opposite corners of the outer track, heading full tilt at each other, tooting their whistles wrathfully but with little effect.

“There they go!!!” said Orville. *SMASH!!! POW!!!!* The two trains plowed into one another, in a violent collision that sent train cars and parts flying in all directions. It appeared the tender was really full of coal, much of which landed on Clara’s face as the tender burst asunder in the explosion. Tennyson’s jaw had dropped, which was unfortunate as a tank car flew right into his mouth.

“Geiioe br rr nlkn mrrsss,” said Tennyson.

“Take the car out of your mouth,” said Clara.

“Right,” said Tennyson, having done so already. “What a mess. You look silly.”

“You do too. Well, I guess they’re just --- oh my gosh!” As the smoke dissipated, Clara realized that the train collision had scattered not just the track and trains, but many of the toys she and Tennyson had so carefully piled up near the chest. She reached for the vacuum cleaner. The two ghosts, who had been laughing themselves silly floating over the wrecked trains, looked blank for a moment and then pointed at each other and simultaneously said, “HE DID IT!”

Tennyson stepped forward, pushing the Poltergust to one side as he passed. “That’s enough, kids. You’re going to have to play at something else that won’t mess the room up. If you can’t behave, we’ll have to talk to Professor E. Gadd and he’ll put you in a portrait. You know how boring that would be.”

“Awww, we were just having fun,” said Orville.

“Besides, we didn’t know it would make a bit mess like that,” said Henry. “Usually it just makes the tracks go everywhere.” Clara’s wrist tightened on the handle, but Tennyson held her hand back and spoke again:

“I’m not saying you meant to make a bit mess but you did. We’ll clean it up but only if you keep out of the way. We could play hide and seek later if you let us finish.” Tennyson looked around. “Why don’t you play with your airplanes?”

“Wow, airplanes! I’m first!” said Orville.

“I’m first,” said Henry. “I’m the oldest.”

“You are not! I’m the oldest. I go first.”

“You were first yesterday! I’m first.”

“Henry -- Orville -- it doesn’t matter who goes first,” said Tennyson. “The airplanes go in a circle anyway. If you stop arguing you can play together and have more fun.”

“Okay, you’re right, but I’ll go first!” said Henry. He floated up onto the tiny toy airplane that formed one half of the mobile; his brother mounted the other and they started the propellers whirring. Soon they were whizzing around in tight circles screaming “Whee! Whoooo!”

Clara took Tennyson’s hand. “You were really good with them. I was just going to vacuum them right up, I was so mad. You were like my Dad is when I do something stupid. He just tells me what I did wrong and he looks so disappointed, I wish he would just hit me or something but he never does.”

“Thanks, Clara, but I don’t know. I remember that the Twins are really mischievous, and not all that nice sometimes. Well, let’s get back to work.” He took one of the cleaning rags he had in his belt, wet it in the bucket, and began to dab the coal dust off Clara’s face. “Gee, we’re both a mess. We could use a bath and clean clothes tonight. I wonder if there’s some clothes we could borrow so we can wash these up?”

“Thanks, I guess I’m OK for now,” said Clara. The two knelt down and soon were busily at work collecting toys. Everything went smoothly for a while, enabling Clara and Tennyson to get through the tennis rackets, rubber balls, dolls, wooden trains, cars, rocket ships, coloring books, building blocks, boats, and dinosaurs (more or less in that order), when suddenly the Twins lost interest in the airplanes and crowded around Tennyson.

“Let’s play hide and seek now! You promised!” said Henry.

“That’s right, you promised, you promised!” chimed in Orville.

“I want to go first, though,” said Henry.

“Go first at what? We’re both going to hide!” said Orville.

“I want to hide first. You PROMISED!” replied Henry.

Tennyson sighed and finished tucking the blanket in the corner of the lower bunk. “Okay, I guess I did promise. I’ll count to ten and then come looking for you.” He turned to Clara. “I’ll try to keep them from messing anything else up.” Then he pressed his face against the bunk post and started counting. “One ... two ... three ...”

He could hear the Twins giggling in the background. “I wanted to hide there!” “No, I thought of it first.” “I’m the oldest, I get to go!” Tennyson raised his voice to try to warn the silly ghosts: “EIGHT -- NINE -- TEN! Ready or not, here I come!”

As he turned, he could see a toy box wiggle out of the corner of his eye, and a bookshelf shake. He intentionally ignored the clues and wandered randomly, wondering aloud where the clever Twins might be found, freeing Clara to finish up with the crayons, rope, string, and tea set. After what seemed like an appropriate amount of time he wandered over to the box and tapped on it. “I wonder if there’s a ghost in here?”

“There is not!” came a voice from inside. “You cheated! I’m not hiding in here anyway! You should have found Orville first!”

At this another voice came from behind the books: “You are too found and I’m not! My hiding place is better and he doesn’t --” There was a pause. “YOU BETTER NOT BE LISTENING! YOU CAN’T FIND ME NOW, THAT’S NOT FAIR!!”

“I win! I win!” said Henry popping out from under the box.

“You do not!” said Orville. A dart, presumably from a reservoir of lost toys behind the bookshelf, came flying out at Henry, passed through him, and stuck quivering to a wooden building block.

“Neville said not to throw things! I’m going to get you!” said Henry, grabbing the dart.

Tennyson tried to intervene: “Stop! stop! it didn’t hurt you anyway!” but it was too late: Henry flung the dart wildly in the general direction of Orville, completely missing the bookshelf but striking Clara smack on the behind as she was leaning over to pick up a pair of doll pants under the bed.

Fortunately the pin struck the seam of her jeans pocket, preventing it from doing serious damage, but the indignity was quite sufficient. “All right, this time that really is it,” she said quietly. She reached back, pulled the dart out and threw it at the target, where it stuck tip buried completely in the bullseye. Then without a word she grabbed the Poltergust, flinging it onto her shoulders in a single motion and flipping the switch. Tennyson made no effort to check her, though the steel in her eyes showed that it would have taken more than just an effort to change her mind. The Twins laughed and started to run drunkenly away, thinking it another game, but within two seconds ZWOOOP! Henry was sucked up. Orville screamed and tried to flee to the corner of the room, but Clara was much too quick for him: he was caught in the

slipstream and, after a moment of unsuccessful struggle, disappeared into the maw of the Poltergust with a faint whimper.

“I don’t think I’d like you to be mad at me,” said Tennyson.

“I don’t think I’d like to be mad at you,” said Clara. Then she laughed. “That was cool. I like winning. Oh well, let’s finish up.”

It didn’t take long for the kids, now undisturbed, to get things more or less properly arranged. However, they were left with several toys (a model of Peach’s castle, a paint set, and a pair of toy goombas) that simply would not fit into the toy chest, despite its amazing trick of shrinking toys as they passed the plane of the top. Clara tried shoving them in with little success, and shaking the whole toy chest with no better result. Tennyson leaned over and looked into the collection of toys. “Hmmm... I think the problem is this -- looks like an airplane -- stuck down here in the corner on the top of this mushroom-- the wings are blocking the other toys. Now even then this paint set won't fit, but if I make some more room we should be able to get everything else in.” He put the paint set aside and reached in between the toys, dragging the airplane out of the chest.

WRRRRRRRZHIEEP! The little hand-sized airplane grew amazingly: within a second it was as big as Tennyson (who dropped it on the floor at that point), and within two seconds it filled half the room. It had a single two-bladed propeller in the front and high wings secured by a pair of metal spars from the bottom of the fuselage, which was white with a blue stripe to the tail. “Cooool!” said Tennyson. “Wow! I wonder what’s inside?” He leaned over to look in the window: there appeared to be a full instrument panel. “This is too cool. Do you think it can fly?”

“Oh, come on, Tennyson, there’s not enough room to fly this in here! And it’s too big to get it out of the house.”

“I just want to see what the cockpit is like.” He pulled on what looked like a handle and the door popped open. There were two seats, each with a control yoke. “Come on, Clara!” Tennyson said as he grabbed the spar and jumped into the front seat.

“No way,” said Clara. “Besides, it doesn’t work, it’s just a toy!”

Tennyson strapped the seat belt on and puzzled over the instrument panel. “Let’s see... airspeed -- altitude -- engines -- throttle. It’s just like my simulator.” He grabbed the yoke and pulled back; looking over his shoulder he could see the elevators rise. A twist confirmed that the ailerons were also fully functional. “OK... magnetos to ‘both’ ... mixture rich ... props to maximum... flaps twenty degrees.” Tennyson remembered the checklist but was accustomed to using his mouse and computer screen; reaching for real knobs and levers was disconcerting.

“What *are* you doing?” said Clara. “You’re not going to fly in this thing.”

“I was just going to see if starts.” Tennyson reached for the key and gave it a twist. Clara, who had been standing almost in front of the plane, jumped out of the way as the propellor spun into motion.

“*Be careful!*” she shouted.

“Sorry. I’m supposed to yell ‘clear!’ out the window. Of course, you don’t have to do that in the computer version,” replied Tennyson over the noise of the motor. He reached for the door handle; as the door slammed shut, he got a funny sliding feeling and noticed that the walls of the room were receding at an alarming rate and Clara was getting oversized.

Of course, from Clara’s point of view the airplane had shrunk to the size of an eagle: perhaps a meter in wingspan, with an appropriately miniaturized Tennyson inside. “Ohmigosh, are you OK?” she cried.

Tennyson opened the vent window and stuck his head out: “I’m fine!” he yelled. Then he realized that she couldn’t hear his tiny voice, so he smiled and waved to her. An experimental shove told him that the throttle really worked: the engine revved and the little plane started to roll along the floor. He pressed the right pedal (this particular part being a lot easier in the real cockpit than it was on the simulator, since feet don’t work very well on a computer keyboard) and sure enough the nose spun right. “This is too cool!” he said to himself, and with a sudden wild abandon shoved the throttle all the way in.

The airplane rapidly picked up speed; Tennyson watched the airspeed dial and pulled back on the yoke as the needle passed “50”. The nose popped up and into the air he went. Flaps up, and a quick and badly coordinated left turn, executed with a frighteningly steep bank as Tennyson tried to get the feel of the controls, got him around the toy chest. He pulled back the throttle and settled into a nice standard-rate left turn, spiraling around the room over the bookshelf and under the top bunk. Clara turned on her heel to keep track of him, uncertain about whether to be furious or concerned but getting dizzy with each orbit. After a few circles Tennyson felt confident enough to try some more ambitious maneuvers, executing a steep turn to the left and then climbing up towards the ceiling. A hard bank right put him in position for a bombing run towards the big globe on the nightstand. “Pilot to bombardier, pilot to bombardier -- she’s all yours!” he recited, and then “Gee, I wish Erin was here, he’s much better at this sort of stuff.” Tennyson noticed that just below the flap lever on the left side was a big red handle, prominently labeled ‘bomb release’. He laughed, shrugged his shoulders, and gave it a tug.

A tiny oblong finned package dropped from the bottom of the plane, expanding almost instantly to a nasty steel cylinder about two feet long as it separated from the model plane. The pointed nose hit the floor and went right through it as if it were paper, leaving a bomb-sized hole behind. There was a loud noise and then a scream from below.

“Ooops,” said Tennyson to himself, and decided he’d better land the plane. That was, of course, the hardest part on the simulator, often resulting in a simulated catastrophe. It suddenly hit home that this time he was inside the plane; a blown landing might be more than

just embarrassing. While he tried to calmly lose airspeed and set up for a landing, crashing sounds and loud yells came from downstairs. In the tumult Tennyson couldn't remember whether the flaps should go to 20 or 40 degrees, put them all the way down, forgot to fix the nose-up pitch that resulted, and stalled as his airspeed bled rapidly away. As Clara watched, horrified, the plane slid into a brief spiral before striking the floor wingtip first.

Fortunately, gravity was the same for the plane as anything else: it had simply fallen a couple of feet, and Tennyson was dizzy but unscathed. After a moment's recovery he unlatched his seat belt and, without thinking, opened the door. The airplane instantly expanded back to full size, still stuck off-kilter on one wheel; the propeller caught Clara's shirt as it grew, lifting her to dangle suspended head-height above the ground.

"Get me down!" said Clara. Meanwhile Tennyson saw Cane's face sticking up through the hole in the floor. "What was that for?! You coulda' killed me! Geez, Clara, what are you doing up there? You look silly. But you still coulda' killed me!"

"That was a ghost bomb!" said Clara. "It doesn't do hardly any harm, it just makes a loud noise."

"Umm -- I knew that. I knew that!" replied Cane.

"And stop staring up my blouse!" said Clara. "Get me down!" the last directed to Tennyson, who had scrambled out of the cockpit and was positioning himself so that Clara could stand on his shoulders.

"Why, what's under your blouse?" said Cane.

"Nothing! I mean -- none of your business!" said Clara.

Tennyson refrained from looking up and kept his mouth shut. He suspected it was fortunate Mr. Saturn wasn't around. He held Clara's ankles while she disentangled herself from the propeller, at which point she was able to leap down to the ground, unharmed but disheveled. "I guess maybe we should just put the toys away and not play with them," said Tennyson.

Meanwhile, one floor below in the Secret Room, Brian was looking around at the treasures both real and imitation scattered to the perimeter of the room by the blast of the ghost bomb. "Well, we *were* almost done," he sighed. All the treasure chests (there were six on the ground and two on the shelves) had been blown open; the contents they had spent the last hour carefully placing in the chests were now strewn everywhere again.

"Told ya we should've put them in our pockets," said Cane. "Now we'll have to put them back again. I'm tired. My nose hurts. I don't like ghost bombs." He had spent much more time trying to get Brian to let him keep some of the jewels they were picking up than actually putting anything away. "You remember Mr. Luigi said we could keep things like jewels or coins if they weren't put away. He said that. I remember."

“That’s the sixth time you’ve reminded me. Where was this one?” Brian was looking at what appeared to be a shield or breastplate, made of a glistening silvery metal like stainless steel but curiously different in color, set with numerous gemstones that flashed and glinted. This was one of the nicer pieces, so he remembered putting it away, but the bomb blast had rather added his reckoning so he couldn’t remember which treasure chest it went in.

“Hey, look!” said Cane. “A whole bunch of coins! These weren’t here before; they must have fallen off of the chandelier when the bomb went off. I’m going to keep these; they definitely were not put away.” Cane picked up the coins and stuffed them in his pockets; there were perhaps two hundred, so soon his pockets were full. He tried dropping them into his underpants but found walking became very uncomfortable. He was reaching into his pants to get the extra coins out when Clara’s face appeared in the hole.

“We’re going on to-- what *are* you doing, Cane? I think you’d better take a bath tonight!”

Cane triumphantly pulled out two glistening gold coins. “There they are!” he said. He handed them up towards Clara: “Look, I found a bunch of coins!”

“Yuck!” gasped Clara. “Where did you get those -- never mind, I don’t want to know. Get them away from me!” Her face disappeared from the hole.

Cane shrugged and looked around for something to put the coins in. Lying under a pile of necklaces was a sort of dark felt bag tied around the top with a pretty golden string. Cane grabbed it and shoved the rest of the coins in, tying the string around his belt to hold the bag in place while he went back to looking for more stuff.

By this time Brian had remembered Neville’s list and was organizing things into piles again in preparation to allocating them to the proper chests: “Okay, golden eggs go here, silver eggs with jewels go here, necklaces and bracelets on the middle pile, jewel-encrusted weapons in the back; jewels are divided into clear diamonds, blue sapphires, green jewels and aquamarines; then there are gold bricks...”

Cane looked up and snorted. “You just did all that and things just got messed up anyway. Why don’t you just shove them into the chests until they’re full? That is, if you’re still set on putting it all away. Tell ya what, I’ll clean up the carpet, maybe I can get a ghost or two while I’m at it.”

Cane had certainly never touched a vacuum cleaner at home, except on pain of loss of two weeks of television privileges after he broke his sister’s hand-blown glass sculpture of a stylized heart. (“I just wanted to know what a broken heart felt like. Turns out it’s really sharp.”) However, the Poltergust was not your ordinary Hoover; besides, he wanted to show that he could handle it after his awkward training session with Neville. With a shrug he had the heavy thing on his back and one arm through. He reached back to try to get the other strap, which of course ran away from his hand as he twisted to reach it; persisting in this direction he turned several spins, rather like a dog chasing its tail, before he finally lost his balance and bumped

into the wall, which acted conveniently to hold the Poltergust in position so he could slide his arm into the strap.

“Okay, what did he say? Let’s see, this one is on for the vacuum...” There was a loud roaring noise and a hissing as the powerful motor revved up. Cane slammed the plush pile adaptor down onto the carpet and found that the suction was so powerful he couldn’t move the vacuum hose. After several futile attempts to simply shove the vacuum head along the carpet, he tried levering the face of the adaptor off the carpet by taking a step forward. This action succeeded in popping the adaptor up, but unfortunately placed his shoe within suction range as he did so: ZOOOP! He tried to free himself, but with one foot stuck in the slot he was even more awkward than usual, and fell forwards onto the carpet. “Turn it off! turn it off!”

Brian looked over from where he had been carefully placing a golden egg into the bottom corner of chest number two. “You’ve got the controls, you turn it off.”

“Oh, yeah, right.” After a struggle to get around the steel tube supporting the adaptor, which was difficult to manipulate given that his foot was stuck at the end of it, he managed to reach around to his waist and press the switch. A momentary flash of terror struck as he did so: he suddenly remembered that there was flame thrower function in the Poltergust. However, by good fortune more than good planning, he hit the correct switch and was able to free his foot.

Cane stopped and reflected. “That didn’t work very well.” He took the Poltergust off and set it on the floor. A brief inspection disclosed that there were several controls in addition to those Neville had covered; in particular, there was a dial with numbering from 0 to 10 marked ‘VACUOUSNESS’. Cane twisted it from ‘9’ down to ‘2’ and turned the switch on again; a merely irritating whining noise resulted, and a test showed that shoes and other body parts could now be inserted into and easily removed from the cleaning slot.

Inspired by success, he continued his perusal of the controls. He discovered a flip-up panel concealing an additional set of buttons under the label ‘DEEP CLEAN’: they were labeled *soap*, *rinse*, *steam* and *dry*. Struck by an impulse, he pushed the adaptor against the top of his head (an awkward process given the long steel tube attached to the other end, and a poor fit anyway), and pressed the *soap* button. A stream of sudsy water was expelled, spilling into his eyes and dripping back down onto his shirt. A bit of wiggling distributed the suds more or less evenly across his now-bulbous white head. A second poke turned the *rinse* function on, spraying a water mist which Cane found quite pleasant to direct at his nose. He decided to skip the *steam* function and go directly to *dry*; warm air blasted out of the outer rim of the adaptor and was sucked back through the middle. Several swipes later his hair consisted of irregular stripes of soapy suds between regions of wild protruding strands. “This is great! Wow! I wish I could wash my hair like that at home.”

Brian carefully laid a necklace of alternating yellow gems and aquamarine plates around a silver egg. “Well, now that your head is clean maybe you can push it along the floor. I thought you were going to clean the carpet?”

“I’m getting there. Lemme see what else is on this thing...”

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SPOOT -- TACK! RUMBLE RUMBLE POOF. The 8-ball fell into the side pocket and the cue ball rolled up against the 12. Inky reached back for the chalk. The chalk was shaped like a sphere with a crescent slice taken out – a PacMan. Inky shoved his cue stick into the recess in the chalk and ground it much harder than was necessary. The ghost floated to the other side of the table, leaned over, and carefully aligned his stick over the 12: a difficult long shot. “Five in the corner pocket,” he rasped, then: *SPOOT – TACK! POOM TICK.* The 5 ball glanced off the felt edge and bounced off, missing the pocket and stopping against the 2 ball. “Damn! Stinking crappy stick. Your shot.”

The other ghost picked up his cue and leaned over the table to size up his shot. His name was Slim Bankshot. He wasn’t one of the ghosts Luigi meant to have around, but he was too clever to be easily vacuumed up. Slim didn’t like Inky much, but Inky liked to play pool and was a lot less skilled than he believed himself to be. Slim did like to win.

“Three-ball in the corner,” said Slim. *SPOOT – TACK TACK – RUMBLE.* The 3 dropped quietly in; the cue ball drifted to a stop opposite the 11, setting up an easy side pocket shot.

Inky impatiently pulled a hammer and a small box with a hinged lid and a crank out of the cabinet. A just-visible label in gold letters under the crank declared **Pac in the Box**. He turned the crank and tinny music came out -- *Around and round the dynamite pile the Inky chased the PacMan the PacMan thought that he had it won when POP! goes the PacMan.* At the appropriate moment the lid popped open and out jumped a small white sphere with a crescent mouth, on the end of a spring. Inky flailed wildly with the hammer, smashing the sphere into a crumbling mess, this all just as Slim attempted his next shot. *SPOOT -- TACK – TACK;* the 11 rolled off the pocket edge. "Do you mind?" complained Slim mildly. Inky ignored him and knocked the PacMan dust off onto the already large pile on the floor.

"You can't play pool ain't no problem of mine. Shaddap. Where's dat old guy when you need him? Whatsis name, oh yeah Shivers. I wanna drink." Inky chalked his cue again.

"You're a ghost, you can't drink," said Slim.

"Shaddap, who dya think you are anyway? We usedta have parties right down in Cleopactra's tomb -- I tell ya I'd get so pounded I died again! All da booze ya can drink. All da PacMen you can smash. We used ta have contests to see who could chomp a hundred PacMen first. And then they brought out dem Ms. PacMen and we--"

"I don't think I want to know," said Slim. "Are you going to shoot pool or just shoot your mouth off?"

"Yeah, wadda you know? Bank, five in the corner pocket." Inky turned on the radio with the back end of his cue stick.

*There are PacMen I'll dismember
smash, desintegrate,
and burn to dust
From their stupid grinning faces
to their balding heads
concealed in rust
All these PacMen had their moments
before they met me
and met their end
Some are dead and some are waiting
for my deadly blades
to tear and rend...*

The cue stick glanced off the edge of the ball, causing it to spin sideways wide of the five and stop up against the curiously metallic 8 ball. Inky whacked the stick against the side of the pool table, cracking it and nicking the edge of the table. Slim watched impassively. "You want an excuse, you gotta break the cue stick *before* the shot. For a bad pool player, you're a real jerk. Or maybe you're just a jerk. Get out of the way, it's my shot."

Brian and Cane were walking down the hallway towards the pool room. Cane had the Poltergust strapped to his back and was fiddling with the controls, trying to vacuum up ghosts in the portraits on the walls. Brian was trying to review the task list for the pool room while straightening up after Cane. "Let's see ... this sounds like a real mess." He started reading down the list. "On floor: open suitcase, partly eaten golden cherry, Inky's diary (torn), rotting partially eaten golden apple, broken stopwatch, Ghosts Rule poster (torn), broken PacMan ash tray, used TNT box, 'Mesmeralda -- The Unauthorized Autobiography', and 'Fear and Loathing of PacManity'. Cleaning tools needed: bucket, brush, towels, First Aid kit, wall repair kit, urgent care services, escape vehicle. Hmmm. This sounds difficult. I wonder what's been going on in there?"

"Aw, c'mon," said Cane, still fiddling with the controls. "I'll just wash everything into the corner here with the water blast setting and we can flush it all down the toilet or something like that, you don't really want to pick up all that stuff, do you?" After considerable thought he pressed the red button and twisted the bumpy knob simultaneously, and was rewarded with a powerful stream of water exiting from the carpet cleaning attachment, which within seconds soaked the windowpanes, three portraits, and a newspaper perched on an elegant velvet-covered chair.

"Watch it!" said Brian. Cane turned to face Brian, carrying the water-spewing vacuum adaptor with him. Brian ducked to avoid a premature shower and, giving up on persuasion, reached out to turn the water off himself.

"Oh. Sorry," said Cane. "Here, lemme check this place out while you clean up the wet stuff in the hall." He barged into the pool room door. A high screaming sound greeted him. He saw a large ghost pulling on a long lever, at the opposite end of which a plunger crushed a

smiling white ball into a billiard-sized sphere. It was Inky taking out his frustrations on a captured PacMan with the PacMan Punch.

"Whadda you want?" said Inky. He picked up his hammer and took a whack at the little ball that remained of the PacMan, knocking a chip off the side.

"We're, uh, here to clean up the place!" said Cane cheerily. "Don't mind us, we'll just -- uh -- put things away -- sorta -- wow, this place is a mess, isn't it?"

"Away where?" asked Inky, throwing what remained of the PacMan at Cane and narrowly missing his head. The chipped plug bounced off the wall and came to rest in a pile of half-burnt PacMan candles. "Get outta here, we're trying to play pool. No kids allowed. I hate kids."

Cane wasn't quite sure how to respond. Brian entered and started checking junk on the floor off against his list. "Wow, that Neville sure is thorough," he said to himself.

"Yep, Neville comes in every morning and maps all the junk," said Slim, chalking his stick. "Don't do much about it, though."

"Well, that's why we're here," said Brian. "We won't bother you, but we're going to put all this stuff away where it belongs. That's what Mr. Luigi told us to do."

"Shut up and shoot, Slim," said Inky. "That's enough, get outta here before I crunch you like Pacpoop."

Brian tried again. "I guess I wasn't clear. We're just here to clean up, we won't disturb you. If we don't get our job done we won't get any coins and we can't get home."

"What, you givin' me a sob story as if I should care? I clean up your head after I squash it." Inky was not impressed.

Brian frowned. Then he turned to Cane: "Well, he's probably just in a bad mood. Let's get to work -- quietly -- and they'll probably forget about us." Brian picked up his bucket and cleaning rags and started to walk towards the biggest dust pile.

Inky picked up a billiard ball and tossed it at Brian, hitting him in the small of the back. "Are you stupid or deaf or both? I told you to get out, you ignoramus."

"I am *not* ignorant! I know about you and Mesmerelda and Blinky and -- well, I know a lot more about you than you do about me!"

"Ask me if I care." Inky tossed the billiard rack at Brian's head; Brian ducked. "All right, you're not ignorant, you're just stupid, too stupid to bother us while we're trying to play pool."

Brian turned to Cane. "Well? Vacuum him up. Go ahead. That's what the Poltergust is for."

Cane looked dubious but pressed the *vacuum* switch (and got it right this time). The motor roared to life. Slim made himself scarce up by the chandelier, but Inky paid no attention to the device. "Whaddya doin? get back down here and take your shot, you jerk."

Cane switched from the carpet cleaning attachment to the ghost buster brush (carelessly throwing the carpet cleaner on the floor, from whence Brian picked it up and stowed it temporarily in his pocket). He somewhat reluctantly approached Inky, who swung the pool cue at him. Cane ducked under it and thrust the vacuum hose forward -- but nothing much happened. Brian took a flashlight out of his pocket and tried to frighten Inky, with no more effect. Brian threw the flashlight at Inky in frustration, but it passed harmlessly through the ghost. Inky floated to the back of the room, mumbling to himself. He pulled a bunch of assorted tiles, cue sticks, books, posters, and other junk and tossed it behind him, exposing a bizarre apparatus about two meters high that looked like a huge head with a steel skirt and a steel-enclosed mouth. He opened a window and slithered inside. The steel pieces -- blades -- started to whirl and spin as the dome-like object lifted into the air. The blades sliced through the edge of the pool table as if it were cheese.

"It's the Blade-o-matic!" said Brian, as the machine headed their way. "Let's get out of here!"

"Wait a minute, I can deal with this," said Cane. He reached back and flipped the vacuum off, and twisted another switch, meaning to turn on the flame thrower. However, in his haste he hit the water spray instead. The stream of water scattered off the whirring blades, sending water everywhere and making the Blade-o-Matic even more frightening if possible. Cane turned to run and slipped on the wet floor; fortunately, the thrust of the water stream propelled him out the door. Brian slammed it shut and they ran down the hall as the blades zipped right through the door and sliced two feet into the neighboring wall before retreating back into the pool room.

"Wow, that guy really doesn't like being neat," said Cane. "I guess we'll do some other room, eh?"

"We're gonna do *this* room," said Brian. He stared at Cane with an intensity usually reserved for standardized testing week. "Didn't you see it?"

"See what? See him almost slice my head off?"

"The steel ball. The steel ball! It was right there on the table."

"So what. What are you going to do, throw billiard balls at that danged machine? A lot of good that will do."

"It's a steel ball. If one of us gets it he'll be invincible -- for thirty seconds, anyway. He can trash the Blade-o-matic for sure."

"Does that get rid of Inky?"

"No. No, but I know how to do that, too. I need to talk to Neville. And Mr. Saturn."

"Mr. Saturn? What good is he?"

"Don't worry about it. You just stick here for a minute while I arrange some stuff. You're gonna' need to distract him so I can sneak in and get the steel ball."

"Distract him? How'm I gonna' do that when I ain't getting within thirty yards of him?! I'm not going in there again, no way, you're crazy!"

"What's the matter, Cane? You aren't going to let a ghost frighten you, are you? I'm the one that's afraid of them. Right?"

"Yeah, right. I thought you *were* afraid of ghosts."

"You know, I was. I was scared. But now I'm mad at him. I am *not* ignorant. He's ignorant. I'm going to get him and you're going to help."

"No way. I am *not* going back in that room."

Brian paused for a moment, with a devious look Cane had never seen before, at least on him. "What was it you liked so much about Alice Finsbacher?"

Cane smiled and replied "She has such nice eyes, she --" Then he went white. "How did you know about that? You aren't going to tell anybody, are you? You aren't going to tell Clara?"

Brian smiled. "It's good to know how to read. But let's just worry about getting rid of Inky, shall we? You get the Poltergust cleaned up and I'll be back in a few minutes."

"You need to distract him for about thirty seconds, that's all. As soon as I get the steel ball you can run out of the room if that's the way you feel about it." Brian and Mr. Saturn stood by the passage that led to the Projection Room, which was behind the Pool Room. Mr. Saturn was balancing a book on his head. Neville was floating nervously back and forth in the background, often half-concealed inside a wall in his anxiety.

"I'm supposed to go back in there and get sliced into pieces so you can read?" said Cane.

"You'd do it for Alice, wouldn't you?" said Brian.

"I'll get you for this, Brian Chang. Just wait 'till I find out your secrets. You'll regret this."

"I'm sure I will, but not as much as you will if you don't get in there and occupy Inky. You need to wait--" Brian looked at the passageway and thought for a moment: "two minutes after I leave, then go in. Okay, Mr. Saturn, let's go."

"Do be careful, Master Brian!" said Neville. "Inky is quite unscrupulous, you know. As well as dressing so tastelessly! You can never trust a ghost without a cravat."

"Thanks, Neville. With your help we'll get him out of here. Go ahead and talk to Mr. Luggs, okay?"

"Yes, quite so." Neville drifted off into the wall, then popped his head out momentarily to say, "Good luck, Master Cane!" and disappeared again.

"Okay, let's roll," said Brian. They ducked down the corridor.

Cane started counting; when he reached 120, he drew a deep breath and strode towards the door. Then he stopped and mumbled to himself: "I could get killed. This is crazy. What do I care if Clara finds out that I like Alice. Who cares if she knows? Who cares if she tells people? Who cares if Tennyson knows? Who cares if -- ohmigosh, what if she tells Alice?" He gulped and charged through the door into the room.

There being not much left of the pool table, Slim had deserted Inky, who was now passing the time blowing up little stuffed PacMan dolls by shoving firecrackers into them. PSSSSSSSTTTT --- POW! He chuckled. "Go ahead, grab that TNT. See what good it'll do you, you spherical scum." He lit another fuse.

The door banged open. "Allright," said Cane with more bluster than was strictly necessary. "You puddle of excess ectoplasm. I'm here to take you down." He waved the vacuum hose wildly, forgetting that he had the deep pile attachment with the rotating brushes on. The brushes got caught in the strips that remained of the felt from the top of the pool table, dragging the vacuum hose down onto the broken table where it sat, stuck, with motor whining. Cane tugged in a futile effort to free the vacuum. "You're-- uh -- in trouble as soon as -- uh -- I get this thing free!" He pulled harder.

Inky broke into raucous laughter. "Slim, come back, you've got to see this! It's a rampaging idiot! This is funnier than a flattened PacMan Pancake." Just then the firecracker inside the PacMan doll went off: POW!!

"Geez, what was that?" said Cane; the start given him by the sound finally pulled him free of the felt, so that he ended up flat on his back. Since the vacuum cleaner was strapped thereto, he had some difficulty getting up: he looked like an insect that had been flipped over hopelessly waving its legs around. Had Inky been human he would have been having trouble

breathing from laughing so hard; as it was, slicing Cane into pieces was the farthest thing from his mind.

"Hey, shut up!" said Cane. "Stop laughing at me. It's not funny!" This admonition had the opposite of the intended effect, of course. Cane managed to twist onto his side and get up. Brian had just quietly entered the room through the back door, reminding Cane of his assigned task. "You stupid ghost, if I didn't get to leave after thirty seconds you'd be in trouble!"

Brian realized he'd better not waste any time. He glided catlike over to the remains of the table and began to rummage around in the pile: three-ball, seven, cue ball -- but no steel ball. Where was it? He lifted a piece of the table leg to see what was in the other side of the ball tray, but in the process a billiard ball slid off the leg, making a tiny CLICK as it struck the cue ball.

Inky spun around. "What the he--" he started to say.

Brian jumped in: "You can't use words like that! This is an E-rated game! Kids could be playing!"

Inky was mean but he wasn't that bright; he had to think this remark through to decide if it was an insult or not. Meanwhile Brian frantically searched the room -- *there it was!* A tiny metallic glint underneath the ruined bookshelf betrayed the steel ball. It was three steps across the room -- no way he could make it if Inky was alert to his intention. *Cane!!!*

Cane didn't read his thought but managed to help anyway: "Twenty-nine -- thirty! That's it, thirty seconds is up, you're hosed and I'm outta here!" He turned to head out the door. This at least was something Inky could understand. He grabbed his broken pool cue and hurled it at Cane's head, fortunately missing and striking the vacuum instead, making a loud noise and causing Cane to lose his footing. Cane slid on his stomach into the remains of the coffee table, causing a precariously-balanced pile of smashed Pac-in-the-boxes to fall on his head. While Inky relished Cane's discomfiture, Brian zipped over to the bookshelf and grabbed the steel ball. "Okay, get out! I've got it!"

Inky spun back around but by that time it was too late: Brian was a kid-sized hunk of fluidized stainless steel. Cane was too curious to see what would happen to remember he was scared. Inky swirled himself into the Blade-o-Matic and spun up while Brian awkwardly explored movement in his new metal body. Fortunately for Brian, Inky was foolish enough to attack him. Cane's jaw dropped as the whirring steel blades plowed into Brian's gut -- and then he was frantically ducking under the coffee table pieces to avoid the flying fragments of steel as the knife edges shattered on Brian's metallic surface. Brian grabbed the base of the Blade-o-Matic with both hands and squeezed. The stylized face was slowly distorted into a huge O of surprise, and then the metallic shell gave way and the infernal machine popped at the seams and shattered, glass eyeballs flying across the room. Inky extruded his ghostly self out of the broken cockpit and moaned: "What a crock! You scum! You ruined my beautiful machine!" He seemed to have acquired the merest tinge of aquamarine.

The timing of this denouement was indeed fortunate, for just as the fuselage gave way, Brian shimmered, made a popping sound, and turned back into a kid. He jumped backwards, suffering a couple of nasty cuts on the sharp edges as the crumpled ghostcraft fell to the floor. Then to Cane's complete befuddlement, he got up and walked towards Inky.

"Hey, ghost! Sorry about your blade thing, but you know what? Mr. Saturn ran across a story that you might like. Come on, it'll -- um -- cheer you up. Right over here; you can just go through the wall, I bet, ghosts are good at that." Even Cane had the feeling this was not an entirely sincere offer, but Inky was somewhat disconcerted by his unforeseen defeat and allowed himself to be led to the neighboring room.

Cane's curiosity was piqued; he snuck over to the door and peered in. The room held a large flat-screen display, darkened. Mr. Saturn stood -- sat? -- in a corner with a book before him. Inky drifted through the wall. Mr. Saturn smiled and started to read:

"Chapter one: Marley's Ghost."

Inky, who had begun to take on a tinge of mauve, suddenly turned pinkish-white again. "A story about ghosts! I love stories about ghosts. I wonder if he kicks any PacMan butt. Not that PacMen have one. A butt, that is. Maybe they are a butt. Maybe--" Mr. Saturn cleared his throat loudly. Inky stopped and then said "Sorry. Go ahead. Don't mind me."

Mr. Saturn continued: "Marley was dead. There is no doubt whatever about that."

"All right!" interrupted Inky again. "I love it already. Dead! Dead! Dead as a doornail!"

"Yes, I was getting to that," said Mr. Saturn. He continued reading. "The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it. And Scrooge's name was good upon 'Change, for anything he chose to put his hand to. Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail."

"See! I told ya' so! I knew it!" Mr. Saturn glared at Inky. "Sorry. Go on. Keep reading."

Mr. Saturn turned back to the book. "Mind! I don't mean to say that I know, of my own knowledge, what there is particularly dead about a door-nail."

"Oooh, I love stories about dead stuff. Sorry. I'm shutting up. Go on."

Mr. Saturn returned to reading. Inky grew impatient as the story turned to things that held no interest for him: generosity, Christmas, nephews, fog -- well, fog was cool. He was just about to ask what the heck was going on when things heated up again: "It was not angry or ferocious, but looked at Scrooge as Marley used to look: with ghostly spectacles turned up upon its ghostly forehead."

"Oooh, a ghost with glasses. What a jerk! How can you be dead and you still can't see I don't know."

Mr. Saturn ignored him and continued. Soon he was deep into the ghostly parts: "The bells ceased as they had begun, together. They were succeeded by a clanking noise, deep down below; as if some person were dragging a heavy chain over the casks in the wine-merchant's cellar. Scrooge then remembered to have heard that ghosts in haunted houses were described as dragging chains."

In the corner, Brian and Neville watched intently. "Not too good so far," whispered Brian. "The only blue I see is the book cover."

"Be patient, Master Brian! The story has only begun. Any ghost would be enjoying himself at this point. Be steadfast!"

The story grew darker: "I know him! Marley's Ghost!", recited Mr. Saturn, with a wonderful dramatic twist. Inky was hooked. His eyes were blank with anticipation as he waited to see how the spirit would trash this disgusting human. He floated back and forth across the room impatiently as Mr. Saturn's words wove the tale of the Ghosts of Christmas Past and Present. Inky was silent save for occasional bursts of enthusiasm: "That's the spirit, Spirit! Make him squirm! Make him suffer!"

"This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased." Mr. Saturn paused for a breath.

"Is that it?", said Inky. "I want to know more about Ignorance."

"I thought you had that covered," replied Mr. Saturn. Brian drew his finger silently across his throat; Mr. Saturn said, "Sorry, back to the story. Let's see... 'The Last of the Spirits.'" Fortunately Inky was still enthralled by the power and mystery of the ghosts. He glowed faintly pink in the dark room as the climax of the chapter came and went. Then suddenly the Spirits were gone: "I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a school-boy. I am as giddy as a drunken man. A merry Christmas to every-body! A happy New Year to all the world! Hallo here! Whoop! Hallo!"

Inky looked puzzled and distraught. "Where's the ghost? I thought this guy was toast! That third spirit was the most. I thought I was bad but next to him I couldn't even boast. That human should be a roast!"

Mr. Saturn determinedly ignored him. Inky grew more distressed as Scrooge's ghost-free happiness grew more emphatic. Brian whispered to Neville: "He is distinctly blue. Now?"

"Oh, come, Master Brian, I should hardly call that more than a faint mauve. Be patient!"

Mr. Saturn ended with a flourish: "He had no further intercourse with Spirits, but lived upon the Total Abstinence Principle, ever afterwards; and it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God Bless Us, Every One!"

Inky was beside himself with grief. "Where did the ghosts go? What the heck is Abstinence anyway, some horrible anti-ghost weapon? This is terrible." If ghosts could cry he would have wet the room. He glowed the deep blue of the open ocean tossed by a distant storm.

Neville turned to Brian and said, "Now!"

Brian slithered from the room, returning barely a moment later with a huge lumbering ghost four times his size. Under a head of lacquer-flat hair and rapacious mouth was a round napkin tied to his neck. Brian pointed at Inky. Mr. Luggs smiled and zipped rather than floated to his prey. In the blink of an eye Inky's tail and midsection were stuffed into Mr. Luggs' capacious maw. Suddenly Inky screamed incoherently, but it was too late. SCRUMPPH -- SLURRRRP -- GULP.

Mr. Luggs wiped his mouth with his napkin. "Mmmmm. Tastes like chicken." BURRRRRRRPPPP!! "Scuse me."

Brian took his fingers out of his ears carefully, making sure Mr. Luggs was done belching. Then he sighed heartily and walked up to the corpulent ghost. "Thanks, Mr. Luggs! You were great. Couldn't have done it without you."

"Oh, any time, Baron! I love someone who knows how to provide dinner. Or was this supper? Or maybe early tea? Well, no matter. Call me again if you need something eaten." Mr. Luggs looked inquiringly at Neville. "Hey, Ryan. What about him?"

"Naaw, he isn't even a bit blue," said Brian. "You can go back to your snack table. Thanks again!"

Mr. Luggs floated away over Cane's head. Cane seemed to awaken from a dream. "Hey, that was a cool story. But what happened to Inky?"

"Haven't you ever played PacMan?" said Brian. "What do you have to do to eat a ghost?"

"Uhh -- turn it blue?"

"Of course. We had to turn Inky blue. Mr. Saturn was the one who figured out how."

"But what was he upset about? It's a happy ending. Scrooge changed. That's what the ghosts wanted."

"Gee, Cane. I don't usually think of you this way but -- well -- you're smarter than Inky, I guess. He couldn't figure that out. I guess Neville knew him well enough -- he was sure the scheme would work. I was worried." Brian reached behind him and turned the lights up in the projection room. Cane suddenly noticed what was inside the room.

"Hey! A TV! Wow! Great!"

"Cane, I don't think it's a television set -- just a disk player. You can watch movies, I guess, if it's OK with Mr. Luigi."

"Movies are great. What do they have?" There were several racks of packaged video disks next to the display. Cane discovered that most of them were part of what looked like an instructional series: each one bore a logo at the top left that looked like a big suction cup on a stick, with the text *The Plumber's Helper* in bright red letters. He read a few of the titles: "A Pain in the Drain...That Sinking Feeling...Toilet Bowling...A Cluttered Gutter Flutters...Shower Power, Bath Wrath...Skewer that Sewer... Gee, I don't know. Isn't there anything that's not about plumbing?"

Brian ignored him and returned to the seriously disheveled pool room, stepping over pieces of the Blade-o-Matic and furniture remnants. Neville was floating in the middle of the room, chatting gaily with two ghosts Brian didn't recognize. Slim had reappeared and was sorting through the mess to see if any of the billiard gear had survived intact. He waved to Brian and seemed unconcerned over the destruction of the pool table.

As Brian watched, another ghost floated in, looking cheerful as she greeted Neville. They saw Brian and immediately drifted towards him.

"Oh, Neville's told us how clever you were!" said the female ghost. She was dressed in a flowing blue-streaked pink gown, so low-cut in the front that Brian felt uncomfortable staring at her. "Inky destroyed, and so easily!" she gushed. "What a clever boy! Thank you, thank you, thank you!" She tried to wrap her arms around him and kiss him on the cheek, but of course her lips passed through his skin, with only a slightly chilly sensation.

Brian shivered and tried to dissuade her from further intimacy. "Uh, thank you, Miss--uh--"

"Lydia, call me Lydia, darling."

"Thank you, Lydia, but we've really got to get back to cleaning up. We only dealt with Inky because he was in the way."

"Oh, he certainly was!" said Neville, sliding between Lydia and Brian and winking slyly at him. "Now -- let me see -- oh, here we are. Here is the updated cleanup list; as you'll see, I've enumerated every fragment of furniture, each regrettably tasteless item of anti-PacMan memorabilia, and all the carpet remnants as well." He handed what looked like a fairly small slip of paper to Brian, who found that it was actually a very large sheet tightly rolled.

Brian's shoulders sagged as he began to read the new, improved cleanup list for the Pool room. Neville had indeed captured every misplaced fragment and clump of dirt: it was a very long list. "Neville -- do you think any of you ghosts could, uh, give us a hand with this?"

Just then the hallway door swung open. Erin poked his head in and looked around at the still-smoking motor fragments under tents of broken billiard cues. He smiled at Brian and Cane and made a thumbs-up gesture. "Lookin' good! Spectacular! Yeah! Love to help but, you know, we've got our own list. Keep it up, guys!" He ducked back into the corridor, leaving the door swinging back and forth for a moment.

Erin and Nicholas were making their way to the Astral Hall / Observatory, the next room on their list. They had finished the courtyard -- well, to be honest, Nicholas had finished raking up the leaves and trimming the bushes while Erin fancied himself an updated version of Gregor Mendel: "If I cross this juniper bush with that telephone pole, and then breed the double recessive progeny together for three generations, I should obtain -- an electrified giant carnivorous Venusian ManTrap with built-in cable TV! All for the benefit of human kind, of course."

So far Nicholas was doing pretty well about not resorting to violence, although he had considered trimming several of Erin's body parts by accident while pruning the rose bush. He was reviewing the cleaning tools required for the observatory when they came to the third door on the right, which should lead to the Astral Hall. Through a crack in the door the kids could see a strangely colored, ever-changing glow. An intermittent rumbling noise terminated in some sort of muffled curse or shout; faint music could be heard in the background. It was sort of eerie and a bit frightening.

"Geeze, Erin -- what do you think that is?" said Nicholas, coming to a halt before the door.

"It must be -- the Evil Emperor Zurg! His deadly Mind-Consuming Multilight Beam will surely turn us all into Undead Zombies subject to his infernal will! Or make us enjoy broccoli and cauliflower. Or something like that. I'll go first!" Erin took two steps back and then ran full tilt through the door, knocking Nicholas aside on the way. Nicholas fell backwards onto the cleaning bucket, completely missing whatever was revealed as the door swung back closed. There was a crash, a loud BOOM!, and a sudden cry that sounded somewhat like Erin's voice.

Nicholas' first thought was that Erin was messing around as usual -- but then he considered the possibility that Erin was really in trouble. He didn't really want to go through the door, but what would the others say if Erin was hurt and Nicholas walked away? He set his jaw, held the scrub brush in front of him like a sword, and charged through the door.

It took a moment for his eyes to adapt to the dim, multicolored lighting. Erin was sitting opposite the door, rubbing his ears, and pulling a bowling pin out from underneath his butt. Several other pins were strewn around. They were at the end of a long corridor, with three

glowing discotheque mirrored balls mounted at intervals on the ceiling rotating to reflect colored lights throughout the room. At the other end they could see some figures, and large round objects on a rack. Music was coming from somewhere at the other end of the hallway. Images of planets and spaceships slid across the walls and ceiling. A large rack descended from above them, sweeping the pins away and narrowly missing Erin.

"Oh," said Nicholas. "Cosmic bowling."

"Merely a cover for Zurg's evil ambitions!" said Erin.

"Zut alors! It is ze children! Are you blessé, injured, mes amis?" It was Bonapa T. He was coming down the corridor-cum-alley, looking concerned.

"No, we're fine, or at least I am," said Nicholas. "You never can tell with Erin. I didn't know Mr. Luigi had a bowling alley inside his mansion!"

"But of course, it is ze fashion here! Ze dinner she is in ze oven, the afternoon it is time for ze nap, and a bit of ze recreation. You must join us, it is wonderful. On fait, excuse me, one uses ze bowling bombs, they explode so nicely, it is very difficult not to make a strike!"

"Gee, doesn't that take some of the challenge out of the game?" asked Nicholas, as he and Erin followed Bonapa T. down the hall towards the rack of balls.

"Pourquoi? You do not like ze strike? Ca ne fait rien, you must have something to eat, it is ze how you say ze tea-time, here is ze table of hors d'oeuvres." He indicated a table set off into a short side-hall, covered with a cornucopia of snacks: pretzel-like things with cheeses and spices, small sausages garnished with shrooms, red and yellow frosted cakes, something that looked like thick potato chips and smelled of garlic.

Nicholas reached out to grab a pretzel. Erin stopped suddenly and knocked the pretzel out of his hand. "Don't go near it! That food is undoubtedly one of Zurg's nefarious schemes!" He sniffed a sugar-dusted crepe suspiciously. "Yep. Drugged to the gills," he said as he stuffed the tasty morsel in his mouth. "No question (gulp) about it." A sausage and a plate of shrooms followed the crepe. "Eat this (munch) and you'll become a mindless (mmm) slave in the (gulp) crevonium factories. Wow, that's good. Could you pass the salt? Who needs a mind anyway?"

"Yeah, I guess yours is always wandering off," said Nicholas.

"Bon, my friend, you gonna' finish your frame? Ellie's waitin', I'm in trouble as it is." Nicholas turned to see a tall, remarkably ordinary-looking older man, wearing a green cap and a red scarf around his neck over soiled coveralls. He was holding a bowling ball (bomb?) in one hand and a glass of wine in the other.

"Oh, excusez-moi, I did not introduce you to my good friend Jacques, he is a wonderful cook with ze vegetables, oh la la! quelle bouillabaisse!"

"Ahh g'wan -- just ordinary Jack is good enough," said Jack, but he looked pleased.

"Mais you are correct, we must finish ze game. Oh, mes amis, you must enjoy! Have a glass of wine, it is La Montagne de la Lune, ze Moon Mountain 1985, a wonderful year, magnifique! Il faut que -- eh, I must roll, I have Jacques to defeat!" Nicholas politely accepted a lovely glass filled with an unpleasant-smelling dark purple liquid and discreetly dumped it into the trash as Bonapa T. turned to set up his shot.

"Pleased to meet you," said Nicholas, meaning Jack. "And thanks again, Bonapa T. I guess we'll see you at dinner. Good luck with your game!"

"I am a servant of Zurg," said Erin in a mechanical voice, as he walked away from the food table leaving a trail of crumbs and wrappings. "I live only to obey." He bumped into the corridor wall, knocking a portrait of Bogmeer the ghost askew. The ghost complained but Nicholas couldn't hear him and Erin didn't care.

Nicholas grabbed Erin by the back of his shirt and said, "Great, I am the Voice of Zurg - go that way!" directing him through the door that should lead to the Astral Hall. Nicholas just managed to sneak in and close the door behind him to muffle the RUMBLE RUMBLE RUMBLE -- BOOOOM!! of Bonapa T.'s next roll.

Both boys stopped in a sort of awe: it was a very striking room. The floor, walls, and ceiling were covered with a checkerboard pattern. In the center of the room a gorgeous ornate chandelier, covered in what looked like feathers made of fine glass, hung over a brilliant yellow five-pointed star embedded in the floor, each point terminated in a candelabra as high as Nicholas was tall, each candelabra holding three candles thick as his arm. Against the wall were two elaborate dressers, decorated with the five-pointed-star motif in gold leaf. There were two doors, the one they had come in through and another identical door at the opposite end of the room.

Nicholas took out his list and began to review the tasks assigned for the room: "Hmmm... dust chandelier... dust armoires... trim candle wicks, remove excess wax, replace used-up candles-- where do I find more?"

Meanwhile, Erin strode across the room and through the exit door. Or so it seemed, for a moment later he reappeared in the entrance and repeated the exercise. Nicholas, absorbed in evaluating the necessary tasks and tools and having little hope of useful assistance from Erin, paid little attention at first. However, after several minutes of constant unidirectional passages, Nicholas became conscious of the curious nature of the activity. "How are you doing that?" he wondered aloud, as there seemed to be no delay between Erin exiting the room through one door and re-entering through the other.

Erin seemed not to hear the inquiry, as he was intent on narrating his new adventure: "I immediately realized that we had been deceived: instead of a quiet stroll to the treasure room, we were trapped in the famous E. Quilibrium World of Folded Space! The only way to escape

would be to pass through every one of the (slam! creak! slam!) six thousand magical mirrors, precisely on count as everyone knows that one passage too many will cause you to be split into six thousand pieces, each decorating the walls of a (slam! creak! slam!) different identical room. Five thousand nine hundred fifty seven... (slam! creak! slam!) five thousand nine hundred fifty six... (slam! creak! slam!) five thousand nine hundred fifty five..."

Nicholas rolled his eyes and returned to the task list. His work was greatly simplified by the labor-saving Turbo 3600 features, including feather duster emulation, autowax removal with integral focused-flame evaporation, and the WickFlick explosive trimmer attachment. A short search revealed a store of extra candles in the lower desk drawer. After a nearly catastrophic attempt to light the first candle using the flame thrower function, Nicholas decided that the Poltergust was not the best solution to every cleaning problem, and extracting a pack of matches from the cabinet, he lit the remaining candles in a more conventional fashion.

As the last candle sputtered to life, a cry came from behind him. Erin had charged through the exit door again -- and instead of returning to the entrance, found himself in the Observatory. "What did you do that for? I only had five thousand nine hundred and twenty-seven more levels to cross!"

Nicholas was unsympathetic. "You know, we can just leave you behind to stay here so you can do the other five thousand times the conventional way. I'm trying to get our job done."

"Five thousand nine hundred twenty-seven. Oh, never mind."

Nicholas shoved Erin none too gently into the Observatory. The room was dimly lit and the stained wooden paneling made it darker still. There were huge windows on the left side of the room, showing the night sky even though it wasn't yet evening. Against the wall beneath the windows were racks of thick books and a what looked like a model of a solar system, but not the normal 9-planet variety. At the rear of the room the floor narrowed to a bridge of some sort which led into a very dark, very large chamber. Nicholas could dimly see an outline of girders and rods -- a telescope?

On the right side a narrow stairway led down into the gloom. The stairway was of a different style from the paneling on walls and ceiling, and appeared to be a recent addition. There was a sign next to it: "Astrobiology Collections".

Nicholas found it necessary to stand directly beneath one of the very dim ceiling lights to read Neville's list:

Replace star charts in cubbyholes by index numbers
Organize volumes of Proceedings of the Royal Astronomical Society of the Mushroom Kingdom in chronological order
Set orrery to correct sidereal time...

"Erin, what the heck is an orrery?" asked Nicholas.

Erin was poring over a huge book that had been open under the side table under a dim red desk lamp. He responded without looking up: "A model of the solar system. You know, the kind where you push the Earth around the Sun and the Earth turns and the moon orbits, stuff like that. Whatever. But hey, this is really cool, listen: 'Paragoomba: two hours fourteen minutes declination, eleven hours seven minutes right ascension. The red giant BowserWowser, the brightest star in the local neighborhood at only 11 light years distant, forms its glowing left eye. In legend Paragoomba flew to the rescue of Princess Orange, but lost his way when he flew into a fog bank searching for his missing goggles, and died from the bite of a Home Run Bat. Thus he is found head northwards in the Autumn sky, searching for the Princess whose stars are hidden from him to the south."

"What are you talking about?" said Nicholas with only passing interest, as he was busy rolling up the charts laid in some disarray on the map table, and popping them back into the storage rack.

"This book!" replied Erin, flipping back to the frontispiece. "*The Amateur Astronomer's Guide to the Night Sky*. It's really cool. It lists all the constellations here, and the planets and their orbits, and when to see meteor storms."

"Isn't that meteor *showers*?" said Nicholas, as he laid out thick journal volumes on the table in order. "March goes there and May goes *there*." The journals were labeled with almost unreadably small volume numbers and publication dates.

"Apparently here they are STORMS -- you'd better get indoors when one hits! Preferably underground. Let's see -- comets and comets, surviving supernovae in your neighborhood, celestial navigation..."

Nicholas ignored him and continued down the list, reading to himself: "Astrobiology area: locate missing specimen bottles: *microphytolysis pikmanii*, *phagocytomagnic exploveris*, *ursus taurumicropii*... Geeze, how the heck am I going to figure out where these go? I can't even read the names."

"Those are pikmin creatures," said Erin, not looking up. "You can tell. Like ursus is bear, taurus is bull, so that's a bulbear. Easy."

"Yeah, you know so much, you read it!" said Nicholas.

"OK." Erin got up and took the list from Nicholas' hands. Nicholas was mildly shocked: Erin helping? Erin read down the list and thought for a moment. "The first set are Pikmin, like I said. The next group is probably Metroid creatures. Now, why do you suppose someone would steal astrobiology specimens? Could it be -- no, that's absurd -- but wait, maybe not. It's just barely conceivable that these apparently dead, apparently harmless creatures are being revived by a monstrous conspiracy that means to employ LEGIONS OF UNKILLABLE ALIEN ZOMBIES TO CONQUER THE WORLD?!"

Nicholas sighed. Nope, Erin hadn't changed. "OK, fine," said Nicholas. "Let's see if we can discover what the conspirator monsters--"

"Monstrous conspirators!" Erin interjected. "It's different."

"Right. Monstrous conspirators have done with the specimens. I guess the best place to start is in the astrobiology section."

"Brilliant! No one would expect us to look there! Why, Watson," Erin said in an unconvincing British accent, "perhaps I underestimated you."

"Uh -- right. Brilliant is fine. Let's go down the stairs and take a look, OK?"

Nicholas led the way down the stairway. There was no railing and the room was so dark that it was impossible to see where the floor was or indeed whether there was one. It was disconcerting at the least; Nicholas tried not to wonder what would happen if he stepped off the edge. Erin trailed behind, whispering not-very-encouraging speculations to Nicholas: "We must take into account the possibility that the conspirators have discovered means to render themselves invisible, and are at this very moment preparing to hurl us off this narrow rickety staircase into the abyss below. Rest assured that if you are dispatched in this fashion I'll be ready to flee instantly to seek help, or at least consolation."

"Erin, stop whispering! Neville said the whole observatory is deserted except in the winter. There's no one down here-- *what was that??*" Nicholas stopped suddenly and Erin bumped into him, nearly playing the role of an invisible conspirator. The curious glassy tinkling sound came again. Then there was a sort of liquidy swishing followed by a thump. It was definitely not the sort of sound that one expects in a deserted observatory. Nicholas reached back for the Poltergust hose and whispered to Erin: "Get your flashlight ready. It's probably nothing but if there's anyone to be surprised I want it to be them not us."

Both kids now advanced as silently as they could manage down the creaky stairway. Nicholas took a deep breath, pressing himself against the wall, reached out and carefully pushed the door open with the flame thrower / sofa cleaner. Inside the room was a set of tall shelves with row after row of cylindrical jars, each filled with some sort of specimen, though the details were not visible from a distance. Near the center of the room the jars were in disarray, some empty, some tipped on their sides. As the door twisted the last few degrees they saw the cause of the mess: a ghost. The ghost was a sort of semi-transparent pink, tall and slim. Across his shoulders and around what one might call his waist were leathery straps holding glistening cylinders that looked somewhat like bullets. He was hunched over one of the shelves doing something with the jars to the accompaniment of those mysterious tinkling and swishing noises. Nicholas remembered something like those straps from an old movie his Dad had watched -- did that mean the ghost had some sort of gun? Maybe this was a little bit too dangerous to be worth a few coins.

Nicholas started to turn back when Erin rushed by him into the room, with the flashlight shining in his right hand and his left holding the constellation book in front of his chest like a

shield. "Aha!" he cried. "Jarvis! Of course. Working for Moriarty, no doubt. Well, your wicked scheme is exposed now; you might as well come clean."

The ghost turned around, dropping two jars he had been holding. They shattered on the floor, dripping some sort of foul-smelling preservative. The ghost had wide sad eyes behind bizarre pinkish spectacles that seemed to be made from jars. "Oh, I dropped my jars. Oh, dear. Who is Moriarty?"

"Just ignore him," said Nicholas, stepping past Erin to confront the ghost. Up close, he could see that the objects the ghost carried in his bandoliers were not bullets but just a multitude of jars, of various sizes, shapes, and colors. "You're Jarvis the jar collector, right? What are you doing in here?"

"Well, I -- uh -- there were just so many jars, so many beautiful jars. And they were just sitting here with -- with -- things in them, and no one came to admire them, those beautiful jars just gathering dust, so I thought -- I thought I'd, um, borrow them."

"Just a moment!" interrupted Erin. "If you're the real Jarvis -- why are you wearing those glasses?!"

"Oh, Dr. Mario just gave them to me a couple of months ago. He said I had some sort of problem with my vision -- something ism, I don't remember exactly."

"You mean astigmatism?" said Nicholas, who had been tested for it the previous month.

"No, that wasn't it," replied Jarvis. "Oh, yes, I remember: he said I needed to wear these rose-colored glasses to correct my pessimism."

"Well, anyway, Neville's list says that some specimens are missing from the collection," interrupted Nicholas. He pulled out the list and held it up for Jarvis to see. "Do you know where they are?"

"Well, uh, oh those," said Jarvis evasively. "I, uh, I didn't really steal -- um -- take the specimen things, they were yucky anyway -- I just wanted the jars. I like jars."

"Yeah, I noticed," said Nicholas. Then, thinking aloud, "Well, I guess if we could find some extra jars we could just put the specimens away anyway."

"More jars?" said Jarvis eagerly. "More jars? That would be good."

"What unholy purpose have you already put those stolen jars to?" accused Erin.

"Unholy? Unholy? I just like jars. Of course, maybe I should have sold them. The specimens. The smugglers told me I could sell them the specimens. They promised me coins, lots of coins. But then -- then I would lose the jars. I would lose the beautiful jars. Should I sell them the specimens or get more lovely, lovely jars? I don't know. I don't know what to do."

"Smugglers! Aha! So that was Moriarty's plan. Who was your contact? Of course, how would you know who it really was? Moriarty could look like a goomba or even Bowser himself, and how could you tell? Just another mark of his evil genius at work!"

"Erin, give it a rest!" said Nicholas. "We just want to get the specimens put back on the shelf in order so we can go on to the next room."

"Oh, yes, uh -- put back," said Jarvis, avoiding Nicholas' gaze. "Oh yes, I -- uh -- remember where I put them. Come, come, I'll show you. Neville doesn't, uh, know I'm here, does he?" He started to shepherd the kids towards another door at the back of the room.

"Not yet, but we'll certainly tell him! We can't possibly keep the lab clean and neat if you're going to be messing everything up. Where are we going?"

"Oh, uh, well you see I was going to, uh, pour those ugly fishhead things down the, uh, the drain, but then that would be polluting, wouldn't it? Come, come, through this door. Right here," said Jarvis. The light was dim, making it difficult to read the sign over the door: *Astrobiology Environmental Simulation Chamber*, and below it a hand-lettered placard: *AquaStar*. "I put those -- uh -- tauromicroscopes in here, go ahead, I'm sure we can find them."

The room was rather dark, and exuded a damp and somewhat unpleasant smell. Nicholas hesitated at the threshold, causing Erin (who was reading the sign) to bump into him. The ensuing awkward moment gave Jarvis the opportunity to give the kids one small push and:

"Accckkk!--" followed by SPLASH! SPLASH!

Nicholas found himself in water that reached almost up to his nose unless he stood on tiptoes. The water was pleasantly warm but salty. Nicholas spat and turned around in time to see the door slide closed, leaving the room pitch dark. A faint *click -snack!* told him that they were locked in. "Jarvis!! Open the door (bleah! cough cough!) and let us out!!!" Behind him Erin popped up out of the water, coughing and spitting.

Suddenly a glowing pinkish blob extruded itself through the wall -- Jarvis, glowing more brightly red than usual, though whether his appearance reflected his emotional state or just the contrast with the dark background was hard to tell. "Oh, I'm, uh, really sorry about this," he said. "I would really like to let you out, but, well, you might tell Neville. All those beautiful jars. Holding silly monstrosities when they could be mine. Oh, I really can't let that happen. Sorry." He disappeared.

"Jarvis, you get back here! (choke)," screamed Nicholas. "We're going to drown! I'll get you lots of jars if you GET US OUT OF HERE!!!"

Erin chimed in behind him. "I should have known it was you, Moriarty -- how could I have been taken in by that pathetic ghost disguise?"

Jarvis popped back through the wall. "Oh, dear. I still don't understand this thing about Moriarty. Does he have jars? Well, I must be going. I'd love to help you, but, uh, well -- you'll get out somehow. Yes, that's it. You'll get out somehow. Goodbye. It's been wonderful to meet you." He started to disappear through the wall and then came back once more. "Did you -- I forgot to ask, you see -- did you by any chance have any jars?"

Nicholas coughed and, standing on his toes, yelled at the top of his voice: "NO!!!"

Jarvis sighed. "Oh, dear. Well, good day." And he disappeared, leaving the room dark again.

Erin tapped Nicholas on the shoulder. "Maybe you should have lied."

"Great. Now you tell me. Well, he's gone. What do we do now?" Nicholas didn't know how to swim and was afraid of deep water, though he didn't want to admit this to Erin; he was already growing tired of standing on his toes in order to keep his mouth clear of the water to breathe. Erin was at home in a pool, but he was accustomed to being able to see where he was going before heading there. He alternated standing and dog paddling while waiting for his eyes to adapt to the murk. Like the observatory itself, it was very hard to tell how big the simulation chamber was. That they were in a confined space was apparent from the echoes of their voices, but some sort of machine, perhaps a pump to circulate the water, was chugging away in the background making it difficult to clearly identify the size of the room from the sounds.

"Well, this is the AquaStar simulator, or so the placard said," replied Erin after a while. "What's on AquaStar? Let's see... I remember ignii -- those are big rocks that tend to fall out of the sky at inconvenient times...cannies are crabs with nasty claws...then there's Acro the killer whale, I suppose he wouldn't fit in an indoor aquarium -- or at least I hope not."

"I hope there's something that floats," said Nicholas under his breath. His calves were starting to ache. He fancied he could just begin to make out some sort of lighter patch in the gloom when suddenly there was an electric-motor hum, followed by a splashing sound. A light -- intolerably bright to their dark-adjusted eyes, though probably feeble in the sunlit day -- appeared to the left. They had to wait a moment before they could look at the source of the brightness. What they saw was as curious as the sounds it made: a stubby round fellow with huge black eyes and a bright red head, using his short arms to navigate a red wooden rowboat shaped more like a crate than a boat, at the prow of which was hung a curious lantern of the form of a large crystal of glowing quartz. Stenciled on the prow in yellow letters was *Waddle Dinghy*. The lamp illuminated their surroundings enough to reveal that the simulator was remarkably large: a round body of water with a domed ceiling, the whole of a diameter perhaps half as long as a football field. The light was bright enough to reveal that the walls near them were nearly featureless shiny metal, except for the outline of the door from which they had entered, which had no knob or other opening mechanism that they could see.

Nicholas jumped up and waved his arms. "Hey, give us a hand, ok?" he cried. The creature waved cheerily and plied the oars, bringing his boat up to the boys in a few strokes.

Nicholas thankfully grabbed onto the stern and pulled himself partly out of the water. "Hi, thanks! Can you help us get out of here?"

The creature -- Waddle Dee, Nicholas remembered -- looked puzzled and waved its arms.

Erin paddled up to the side of the boat. "What Watson means, is, can you help us to get out of this room and back to the observatory?" He was still using his bad Sherlock Holmes accent. It didn't help.

"I already said that!" said Nicholas. He tried gesturing towards the door but that elicited no useful reaction from the creature. He tried speaking very slowly: "We -- want -- to -- go -- out. Can -- you -- get -- us -- out?" The creature's forehead remained furrowed with well-intentioned puzzlement.

Erin tried: "Können Sie mann ausgang, bitte?"

"What was that?" asked Nicholas.

"Well, I think it's German. I took that with my cartooning class in summer school last year."

"That didn't help," said Nicholas. Waddle Dee held up the end of his mooring rope and wiggled it in some fashion that was supposed to be meaningful, mystifying Nicholas as well. "Try another language."

"Geeze, I can't think of another language, I need to go to the bathroom!" relied Erin.

"Well, just go in the water," said Nicholas.

"That's disgusting!" said Erin. "Good idea."

However, in the interim the stubby creature waved his arms wildly and then sat down and started rowing as if he knew where he were going. Nicholas gathered that he was offering to row them someplace. "Well just hang on!" he said to Erin.

"Gee, do I have to? There's an awful lot of water, it wouldn't hurt anything."

"Not that! I mean hang on to the boat!"

"Oh. OK."

After getting bonked a couple of times with the oar, Erin slid hand over hand to shift his position to the stern of the little craft. "Geeze, this is going to take forever," complained Nicholas. "This thing isn't very fast, is it?"

"I think that's about to be fixed," said Erin, looking up. In the dim light they could see a huge mechanical fixture of some sort on a track, carrying a very large rock to a point just about directly over head. "Looks like an Ignus to me. If it doesn't hit us we'll get a nice push from the wake."

"Great. What if it *does* hit us?"

"Oh, I find that it's best to always look on the bright side. What's the point of worrying about being crushed, dismembered, and then drowned if it doesn't happen? Besides I think it would probably be worse to be perforated by a blowfish than annihilated by an ignus." Just then the steel claw opened and the stone plummeted towards them. It came so close Nicholas could feel the breeze on the back of his head. The huge splash first sucked them backwards and then sent them surfing down a sizable wave that immersed the kids up to their noses but gave the boat a nice shove towards the other side of the room. Through it all, Waddle Dee just kept on patiently rowing towards a goal only he could see. Once Nicholas managed to cough out the water in his mouth and throat, he turned to Erin and said, "OK, I guess you were right."

Just as the far wall rose out of the gloom, Nicholas felt his toes touch down. The bottom here felt like it was covered with rocks or coral: very rough and uneven. Something crawled over his foot, making him jump and shout. Erin, misinterpreting his gesture, pointed to the wall: "There's a door all right, only I'm not sure I see how to get up there." Nicholas followed his gaze. The door was visible only as a black emptiness in the dimly shining wall. There was no ledge or ladder, and the bottom of the door was a good bit above the water level, perhaps farther than either of them could reach.

"Say, Waddle Dee, what do we do now?" asked Nicholas.

The little guy waddled over to the stern and pointed at Nicholas. "What? Why me?" said Nicholas, puzzled. Waddle Dee leaned over the side and tapped the Poltergust. Nicholas, still confused, managed to maneuver the vacuum cleaner packet around to his side so he could look at the control panel. In the dim light he could barely see the various placards and warning notices. He pushed the unit over past the edge of the boat where it was directly illuminated by the crystal and looked again. At the very end of the bottom row of controls was a toggle switch he hadn't noticed before: it just said *Kirby*, with the two possible positions being marked *FLOAT* and *DESCEND*.

"I get it!" said Nicholas. "Hey, Erin, take the hose and -- um -- oh yeah, put it in your mouth."

"What? I need to go to the bathroom, I don't need to puke," said Erin.

"Just do it. Here." Nicholas removed the adaptor and poked the metal tube at Erin's mouth. Erin freed one hand and rather dubiously tasted the end.

"Yecch!" exclaimed Erin. "That tastes terrible! I'm not putting that in my mouth. You do it!"

"Erin, I can't put the hose in my mouth and press the button -- my arm doesn't reach. Come on. Waddle Dee is waiting."

Erin reluctantly complied. Nicholas pushed the toggle switch up; with a sudden *whoosh* Erin was pumped up just like a kid-sized balloon, with the water squeezed out of his clothes like a sponge. He floated up a couple of feet off the water and Nicholas gave him a shove with the end of the vacuum actuator to push him into the dark opening. None too soon: with a giant *buuuuurrpp!* Erin deflated to his normal self and fell soggily to the floor.

Nicholas let go of the *Waddle Dinghy* and sloshed towards the wall. "Hey, Erin, give me a hand up!" he said.

Erin opened his eyes and moaned. "I feel terrible. What'd you do that for? Ohhhh. We could've just climbed up." He closed his eyes again and laid his head on the floor.

"Don't be ridiculous, what would you climb -- on. Oh." Having actually reached the wall, Nicholas could see the footholds carved into the hard rock wall of the pool that had been invisible from a distance in the dim light. It was awkward to climb with the Poltergust on his back but since the worst that would happen if he fell was another dunking, he managed to scramble up to the door and climb over Erin's still motionless form into the dark room. He turned around and waved to Waddle Dee: "Thanks for your help!" but the little guy was already paddling away on some private errand.

As the *Dinghy* receded into the distance things got really dark again. "Geez, did you bring the flashlight?" Nicholas said to Erin. Erin just groaned in reply. Nicholas started to feel his way into the mysterious room; in the process, his hand must have tripped a switch somewhere, causing a door to slide across the entrance and light fixtures in the ceiling to switch on. The boys were blinded by the sudden brilliance and for a moment could only blink in pain.

When Nicholas was able to see again, he saw that Waddle Dee had been more attentive to their conversation than he had thought: they were in a restroom. Before him were a sink and several glass shelves, upon which were perched a bottle of what looked like lotion soap and some shaving gear, as well as a number of plastic bottles labeled *Pure Aqua* in bright gold letters and below that *the only bottled water imported from Aqua Star*, all before a large mirror mounted on the wall. Little blue hand towels with an elegant "L" embroidered in the middle in gold-colored thread were hung on hooks on the right. To his left a sliding door gave entrance into the bathroom proper, containing a tub, bath towels on racks, and a toilet. A very modern-looking telephone handset was mounted on the wall near the sliding door, next to what looked like a computer keyboard and display. Next to the toilet was a small stand on which rested a copy of the *Toadtown Times*. He kicked Erin and said, "Hey, you can go now."

Erin must have been recovering: he turned onto his side and took a look. "Oh, well, thanks, but I -- uh -- well I already, oh, you know."

"Fine, never mind," replied Nicholas. "Hey, look at that!" He pointed at the newspaper. "It's about us!" He indicated a small article tucked in the bottom corner of the front page: *Children Missing: Foul Play Feared*. Nicholas read aloud: "Six human children, recently guests of Princess Peach herself, are feared lost from a Fourside hotel. Sources report that the children were trapped during an attack by the Starmen. Fuss T, Minister of Castle Affairs, told this reporter, 'It is a terrible tragedy, and of course we all feel just awful as we assisted them to find their way to Fourside. How were we to know?' Tacey T., Head Chef, said 'They were all charming and courageous, and very thoughtful and courteous for their age, except of course for Cane who was primarily hungry.' Anyone with information as to their whereabouts is requested to contact Hedley Medley T. at 1-433-896-5577 extension 3141."

"Wow. Maybe we should call to let them know where we are." Nicholas reached over to the phone, but it rang loudly before his hand could touch it.

"I'll get it!" said Erin, grabbing the handset. "Hello."

The voice on the other side sounded like what a banana slug feels like. "Is this -- Waddle Dee? No? Well, could you take a message for him?"

"Uh -- sure, ok. What?"

"Just say that this is King Dedede, reminding him that he is supposed to be guarding my castle not gallivanting around studying the mating habits of pedo bugs. Tell him that people are breaking into my castle and stealing things because of his absence. Tell him to GET HIS ROUND WADDLING BEHIND BACK HERE BEFORE I LOSE MY TEMPER AND DO SOMETHING HE'LL REGRET. Did you get all that?"

"Dedede mating with bugs, stolen temper, regrets. Got it." *CLICK*.

"*Who was that?*" asked Nicholas.

"It was for Waddle Dee. I guess we could leave a message if we had anything to write with. Let me look." Erin started to open the drawers under the counter top. In the first drawer he found a stopwatch that didn't work, a coin case, some keys, a little compact containing a tiny mirror and some shiny powder with a soft pad, a cylinder labeled *Konker's Foaming Fur Gel*, two pill bottles taped to prescriptions signed by Dr. Mario, a small scissors, a PokeBall, some cloth bandages, and a pair of eyeglasses with one lens broken. "Gee, I wonder what's in the Pokeball? What would happen if we released a Dragonite in here? This is cool." Erin popped the Pokeball in his pocket and opened the next drawer, finding seven or eight of the little plastic cups that store contact lenses (all opened, one with a very dry lens in it), two dirty coffee mugs, and a number of tubes of toothpaste, all partly used: mint chip, bay leaf, cumin, ketchup, cilantro and cheese, and cream of shroom. "Still no pencil," he muttered. He opened the pair of cabinet doors beneath the sink, revealing a bottle of *Professor Ein's Exploding Drain Cleaner* ('just add water and run' and below that 'NOT for blocked toilets' and below that 'use at your own risk'), several rolls of toilet paper (hopefully non-explosive), and a number of broken shells of various unfamiliar sea creatures, but no writing implements.

"Geez, Erin, we're supposed to be cleaning u -- *what is that?*" Nicholas was looking at what he had thought was the mirror -- but instead of seeing himself reflected, he could swear he was looking at the foyer. As he stared at the image, it changed almost imperceptibly until he suddenly noticed that now the ballroom was depicted, as viewed from the back wall. "This is really weird."

"What's weird?" said Erin, putting down the Bowser Brainy Bowl Brush with Insulting Sound Track. "I want to see! I want to see!"

"That," said Nicholas, indicating the mirror that wasn't.

Erin stared at the wall for a few moments. The image had now shifted to reveal the study: the kids could see that Neville was parked in his favorite chair, reading **The Hound of the Baskervilles**. Suddenly Erin's bad Sherlock accent was back: "The more outre and grotesque an incident is the more carefully it deserves to be examined, Watson!"

Nicholas noticed that there was writing etched into the mirror surface near the top edge, faintly visible in the bright light. He started to read: "Og toer isedu -- what the heck does that mean?"

"Watson, you must use your brain as well as your eyes," chided Erin. He picked up an empty bottle of *King Boo Koopashell Wax* and employed the curved bottom as a magnifier. "This mirror shows us where we can go."

"What? How do you figure that? I don't get it."

"Elementary, Watson! Are you not familiar with the children's novels starring the famous Harry Potter? Og toer isedu oy ereh wtaht tube calp ru oyton woh si. 'I show not your place but that where you desire to go.' Backwards writing. The most primitive of ciphers, I should say."

"Oh," said Nicholas, still a bit puzzled. "What does that do for us?"

"Why, Watson, like any mirror in Luigi's mansion, one must merely scan the image to be transported. Just as I thought! See, at the bottom it says 'Em Nacs'. Scan me. We just need a GameBoy Horror."

"OK," replied Nicholas. "Where are we going to get one of those?"

"Perhaps we can find a substitute." Erin grabbed Nicholas and turned him around rather abruptly. "We've already discovered that this Poltergust of yours has divers hidden talents; it seems only plausible that -- yes! A scan function. Simple deduction."

By this time Nicholas was becoming a bit irritated -- Erin was maddening enough in normal circumstances, but to have him also be right several times in a row was really too much.

"Look, I can handle this, Erin. You just stand next to me so we'll both get transferred. I'll get us back to the observatory so we can capture that worthless Jarvis. This time I'll be ready with the vacuum! Let's see what the sequence is..." Nicholas put his hand on the scan button and watched as the images slowly faded into each other: "Gallery -- dining room -- cellar --billiard room, oh boy! what a mess! -- safari room..."

Meanwhile, Erin was trying to read the smaller print etched into the edge of the mirror. "Curious. Very obscure. Perhaps if I rubbed some soap into the ridges to improve the visibility of the characters..." An apparently normal bar of soap sat in a shallow bowl next to the hot water knob. Erin reached over to grab it, but it slipped out of his hand. He looked more closely and saw that the soap also had a label imprinted on the side: *Cranky Kong Brand Slippery Soap*. "I shall not be so easily deterred. Grasp the nettle firmly and it shall become a stick with which to beat thine enemy, Watson. Let us apply that homily." He put his hand around the bar of soap and squeezed firmly.

It was really very slippery soap. The bar flew out of Erin's hand, bounced off the light fixture on the ceiling, flushed the toilet, knocked the phone off hook, splatted from the mirror surface and whacked Nicholas on the elbow, causing his hand to engage the SCAN button.

"ERIN!!" shouted Nicholas, but it was too late. Before Erin could invent a Holmesian remark appropriate to the situation, the image in the mirror began to spin in the most nauseating fashion, while purple-blue dots pocked the room around the kids, merging into stripes as the room itself began to whirl erratically. Nicholas suddenly felt a certain sympathy for portraificationized Cane as his stomach attempted to extrude itself through his nose. He closed his eyes and tried to breathe.

His head was still spinning when he opened his eyes again, but the room had settled down. It was much darker than the bathroom had been, and smelled of mildew and worse things. The floor was made of stone with a sort of lichen growing in many of the corners, and the ceiling was perforated by numerous large cast-iron pipes dropping to a maze of valves and joints. It took Nicholas a few minutes to recover his senses and realize where they were. "Erin! This is the pipe room! We're all the way at the bottom of the mansion. We're never going to catch Jarvis now. In fact, I don't even remember how to get out of here."

Erin seemed a bit nonplussed by the disorienting method of travel. In his left hand he held the bar of slippery soap. After a moment he sighed and tried to pick up his spirits: "Well, at least we're dry here." He clapped his hands together for emphasis. This was a mistake. The slippery soap flew out of his grasp, banging off a blue pipe, a red pipe, a striped small pipe, and a large drain sump line, in each case by amazingly bad luck striking a relief valve or drain stopcock: in seconds four vigorous sprays of water were cascading all around the kids.

"Great," complained Nicholas. "Erin, stay where you are and whatever you do, *don't pick up that soap!*"

Just then a familiar semi-transparent head and shoulders slid out of the brick wall at Nicholas' left. "Master Nicholas, I'm so chagrined! I didn't realize you'd proceed with such

alacrity; I expected you in the pipe room tomorrow afternoon at the earliest. Here you are, the updated list including the four valve closures and water damage." The ghost handed Nicholas another ream of manila-colored paper; the ink began to run almost immediately in the misty spray filling the air. Before the kids could react, Neville disappeared back into the bricks.

"Neville! Neville! Get back here and get us out!" called Nicholas, but it was too late.

Nicholas took a deep breath to calm down and then looked around the room. His eyes locked onto a dull greenish object that looked just like his dad's toolchest at home, resting on a short workbench in the back corner of the room away from the fountains. "Come on, all we need to do is find a pipe wrench!" The water was already about ankle-deep and they splashed as they slogged over.

The tool chest was made of sheet metal and had a keyhole, in which fortunately a key was resting, and a small nameplate just above the key. In the dim light Nicholas had to lean close to read the plate: MARIO AND LUIGI. LUIGI was partly scratched out as if by a screwdriver or other dull tool. Nicholas gave the key a twist and pushed the cover up: it creaked from long disuse. In the upper compartment rested a hammer, a curious sling-shot-like object, and a lightbulb. The hammer glistened even in the dim light: from the heft as Nicholas lifted the hammer out of the box, it was apparent that the tool was fabricated of solid gold. There was a note attached with a string: *Good weight but too soft, itsa no good the claw, this hammer she's junk. M.* "Yow, this is a Golden Hammer, Erin! Anybody from Harvest Moon would just about kill to get one of these." Remembering Jack, he stuck the hammer in his belt, hoping the weight wouldn't pull his pants down.

By this time Erin had joined Nicholas. Resting on the bench next to the toolchest was a metal disk about twice the diameter of a dinner plate. Erin lifted it into such light as there was: on the burnished purple surface were three circles and a triangle. "This is the Medallion of Shadow! I wonder what Mario was doing with this. Oh, wait, there's a note: 'Ugly but never know when you gonna' need a manhole cover, save. M.' These are really powerful! I wonder how I can carry it." The medallion was amazingly light for its size but awkward to hold. Nicholas was busy opening the tool drawers, still looking for a pipe wrench, so Erin took advantage of his distraction and hooked the medallion onto the back of the Poltergust. This turned out to be a bad idea as just at that moment Nicholas leaned down to look into the bottom drawer, causing the bottom edge of the medallion to deliver a nasty blow to Erin's chin, knocking him backwards into the now shin-deep water.

Nicholas pulled a wooden box shaped like a truncated pyramid from the lower drawer. The note on this item said *What kinda clock ainta got no face no hands ain't no good. -M.* "Look at this, Erin!" said Nicholas. Erin, flat on his back in the water, didn't respond. "I think it's a Metronome." The box had a flat metal shaft protruding from a slot near the base, with a weight that could slide up and down on the shaft. Nicholas tapped the shaft and it started to swing rhythmically left to right: *CLICK! CLACK! CLICK! CLACK!* With each timestamp sound a different equally hazardous event resulted: first a blast of cold air shot out, momentarily freezing the spray from the blue pipe outlet; then a small curved leaf flew out of a slot, banging off the drain pipe and clanging on the sump before plinking into the water, and finally a small

round object shot straight up and exploded loudly. This last caused the large gray supply pipe in the center of the room to open up, spewing far more water than the other pipes put together. "Oops," said Nicholas, stopping the little arm before they could find out what the next click would do.

Things were getting serious: the water was up to Nicholas' knees and rising rapidly. The left hand middle row drawer had a pair of pipe wrenches in it. Nicholas threw one to Erin and waded into the mess. Nicholas had spent a week playing with a fluid experiment kit he received for his eighth birthday (it had since fallen into disuse and ended up in the bottom of the Lego box) so the idea of shutoff valves was not unfamiliar. Fortunately the pipes were clearly labeled with arrows showing the direction of water flow and indicators for the supply shutoff. Unfortunately, by now three of the relief valves were already under water. Nicholas took a deep breath and plunged in; the water was cold but clear. It was awkward adjusting the wrench under water; precious seconds were wasted before he had the blue pipe (which turned out to be marked 'Second Floor East Wing Supply') shut off. By the time three of the pipes were closed the water flow had slowed noticeably, making it easier to deal with the last two. The valve on the big gray supply line was beyond Nicholas' unaided strength, as well as directly in the line of the water spray. Erin's reluctance to help was finally overcome by a promise to play Watson to Erin's Holmes for the whole of **The Sign of Four** (Nicholas was confident Erin would forget about the promise before he actually had to come through), and together the kids got the last line closed. By this time the water was waist deep and distressingly cold.

"What do we do now?" asked Erin. Being freezing cold and completely soaked appeared to render him rather more attentive than usual.

"Well, I doubt if the pipe room is water-tight," replied Nicholas. "If we just wait a bit the water should drain out and then we'll be able to move around and find an exit."

Erin, exploiting expertise gained in his science fair project from last year ('Does Water Drain Faster Than Maple Syrup' with free samples of the test liquids provided to booth visitors) stood straight up and placed his index finger at the surface of the water, just above his navel, and counted aloud to 100. The fluid still bisected his fingertip. "According to my research, your doubts are doubtful. Next idea?"

"Well, let's look around. Maybe there's a drain somewhere we can unblock." The kids started sloshing with difficulty through the now-still water, grabbing pipes to help their progress. Erin started singing *I've been workin' in the pipe room all the live long day! I've been workin' in the pipe room since Luigi is away!* until Nicholas threatened to shove the Golden Hammer down his throat. At the back of the room they found their passage blocked by a door whose edge was sealed with a rubber strip, with inset windows allowing them to see that the hallway beyond was quite dry. In the middle of the hall a curious reddish square object about a foot on a side lying on the floor. Nicholas noticed that, in addition to an uncharacteristically spartan light fixture, and a shaft of some sort leading upwards, there were several unusual objects on the ceiling: a shoe, a broom, and a number of multicolored marbles. "What was that you were saying before, Erin?" he asked. "Like -- the stranger something is the more you should understand it?"

"What are you talking about?" replied Erin. "Let's just open the door, see, there's a drain at the end of the corridor, and the door opens out so all we have to do is turn the knob."

"Wait a minute, what about that stuff on the ceiling?"

"A good scientist has to focus on the fundamentals! Water flows down hill, don't worry about it." Erin sloshed to the door knob and gave it a turn.

Just then Nicholas realized: "Downhill--it's a bounce pad!! A gravity reverser!! Close the door!!" Unfortunately the great pressure of the water made this impossible. The door flew open, and the sudden outrush of water carried Erin and Nicholas with it. As the water struck the red block it flew upwards, making a bizarre vertical fountain onto the ceiling. The inverted flow pooled onto the surface until it found the shaft, through which it plunged upwards. Nicholas had just enough time to absorb what was happening before he saw Erin fly upwards with the rushing stream; he followed moments afterwards. Nicholas tried to grab the edge of the shaft and escape the stream, but the water flow was too powerful and he was carried along. He could see there was a light at the end of the tunnel, perhaps a sky light opening to the roof, temporarily stopping the flow. The shaft rapidly filled, forming a surface which Nicholas struck soon after Erin. They floated in the torrent for just long enough that Nicholas began to hope the shaft would fill, allowing them to escape along the ceiling, but then a loud POP could be heard through the shaft as the skylight gave way under the huge hydraulic pressure. Once again Erin and Nicholas were dragged on a wild downward upward ride through the shaft, ending as they and the water flew through the skylight and were carried high into the air before the effect wore off and they went plummeting back down onto the tile roof.

In the gallery, Tennyson and Clara were helping Vincent van Ghore organize his canvasses. Clara, hearing an unusual splashing sound, glanced up at the sky light. "Look at that, Tennyson. There's a bunch of water on the roof. I wonder what that's from."

Tennyson looked up from a starscape showing a shuttle approaching the Arc spacestation. "Hey, that's Erin! Hi, Erin!" Erin tried to arrest his downward progress but the plunging stream carried him bumping along. He saw Clara through the plastic window and waved as he slid out of view. Nicholas followed a moment later. "I wonder what they're doing up there," said Tennyson. "Looks fun. I thought they were supposed to be working."

Meanwhile on the roof the gushing water had found its way to the edge of the building, mostly plunging right past the gutter and downwards. Erin managed to grab onto the gutter, and found himself hanging with his feet dangling inside the resulting waterfall. Realizing that Nicholas would be in the same spot shortly, he slid hand-to-hand to the left out of the water and screamed "Grab on!"

Nicholas, warned, managed to latch himself in place as well. Within a minute the two kids found themselves dangling from the edge of the roof, watching the water stream plummet three stories to the lawn below.

"So what you meant was that Sherlock Holmes quote, right?" asked Erin. It was difficult to talk with his shoulders hunched up. "I guess I should have figured that out right away. Sorry."

"Well, never mind," said Nicholas, feeling unexpectedly calm in the face of impending catastrophe. "I don't know about you but I can't hold myself up here for much longer. Any ideas?"

"Yeah, there's a window right here by my foot. I think I can push it open and then we could both swing in."

"Can you see what's inside?"

"Not really, but it's probably better than what's down below."

"Yep. Sounds good to me, let's give it a try."

Erin managed to find the edge of the window with his foot and pushed to the right. Fortunately, there was no window screen in the way. The pane slid easily. "Okay, now you should be able to push the rest of the way," said Erin. Nicholas grunted and kicked around until he found the rim. A couple of shoves, each dangerously stretching the strength of his fingers, and the way was clear.

"Right, now we swing back and forth and then let go heading into the window," said Nicholas. His fingers were not feeling up to swinging but he ignored their complaints. "One ... two ... three!!"

The two boys let go as their momentum carried them towards the open window. The room inside was shadowed and dark to their sun-blinded eyes: Nicholas flew through the air wondering what was below when he landed with a PLOP.

As his eyes cleared, Nicholas found himself in a huge vat of viscous liquid. Their landing had splashed the stuff all over the kids and the surroundings. Nicholas opened his mouth to ask if Erin was all right and some dripped in: it was delicious! "What the heck is this?" he exclaimed.

"Blackberry, I think," replied Erin. "Hmmm. My favorite." He picked up a handful of the liquid and sipped.

The door swung open. Bonapa T. stood frozen with shock as he absorbed the bizarre scene. "O la la! What have you done with my pie filling tank, you crazy kids? C'est une catastrophe!"

"Hi, Bonapa, this is great!" said Erin, slurping up another mouthful.

Clara came running down the corridor behind the Toad. "Are you guys ok?" She stopped short. "Ohmigosh. You are a mess! I guess you really need to take a bath now."

"Why?" asked Erin. "We just took one."