
ANTY
HERO

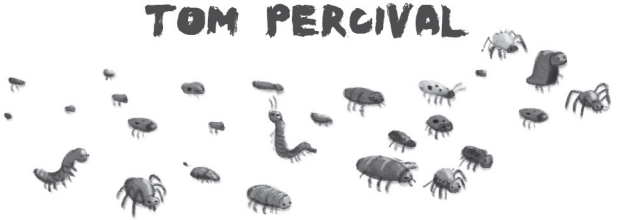
ANTY HERO



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Chapter 1
Eye Surprise

Zac was kneeling on the grass in the school garden. He had a pile of seeds cupped in his hands and the class weirdo squatting beside him.

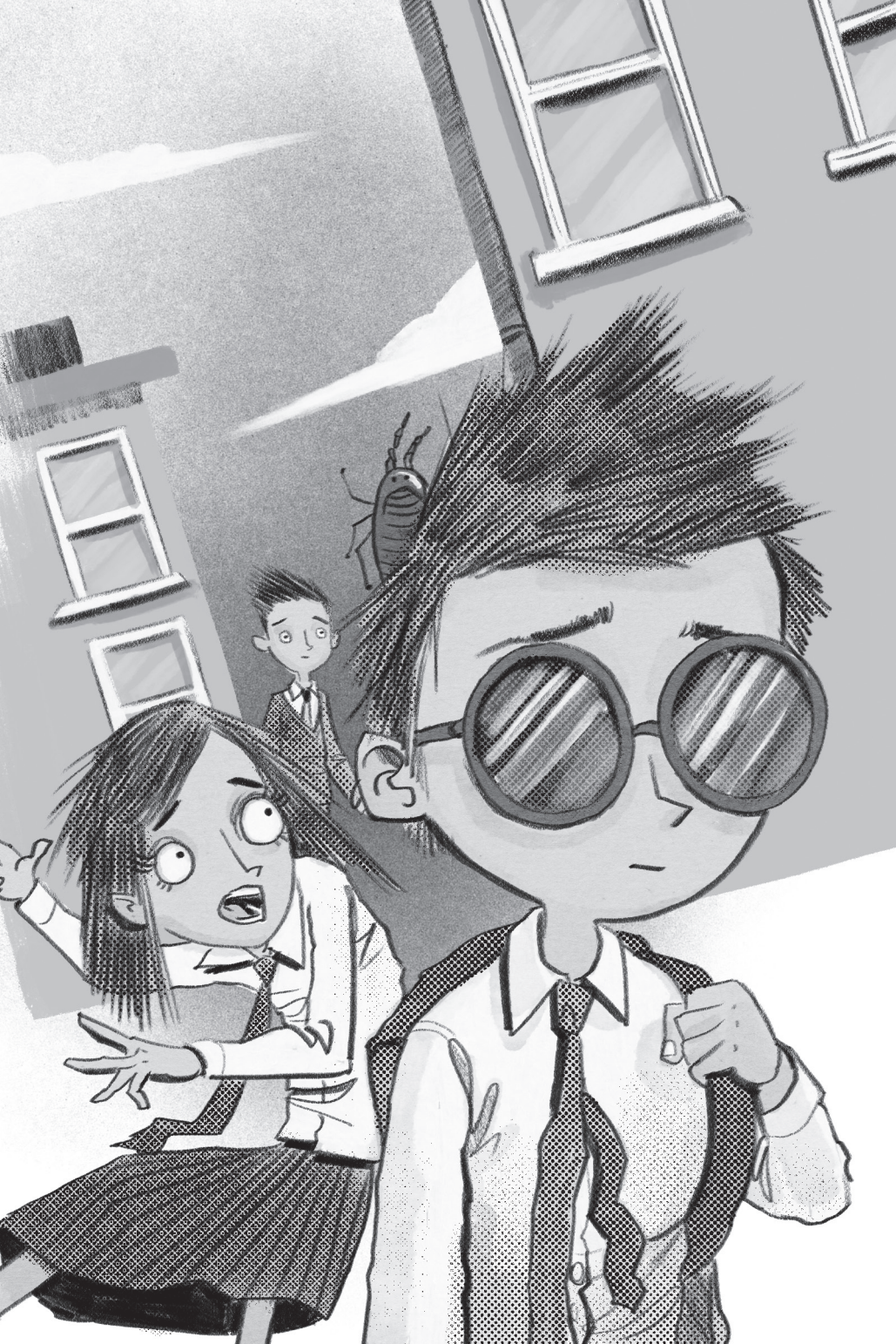
Zac had been the class weirdo for a while, thanks to his love of country and western music, Korean movies and comic books from the 1950s. Back then, he'd had a friend list of zero. But then Ant had started at the school, and Zac was no longer the weirdest kid in the class.

There was something very odd about Ant. A number of odd things, if you looked closely enough.

First of all, his sunglasses with huge round dark-green lenses. Ant said he had to wear them all the time because his eyes were sensitive to light. Most of the other kids in his classes reckoned Ant was just trying to look cool. But if that was true, he was failing badly. Ant didn't look cool at all.

He was the opposite of cool. Ant was short and skinny with a head that was too large for his body. His fingers were long and bony, and he always looked like he needed a wash – with a power hose.

On Ant's first day at the school, an older girl had spotted a cockroach crawling in his hair and screamed until she was sick. Ant hadn't had much of a chance after that. Some mean kids called him names like "Roach Head" and "Bug Boy". Most of the others just kept out



of Ant's way or whispered about him whenever he entered the room. Apart from Zac. As soon as Ant had arrived, he and Zac bonded over their weirdness, and Zac's friend list grew from zero to one.

Ant squatted beside Zac and prodded seeds into a hole in the soil.

"Nice work," Zac said, and handed Ant another seed. "Oh, I meant to ask," Zac added, "what are you up to after school?"

"I do not know," said Ant as he popped the seed into a hole. "Why do you ask this?"

Ant's accent was another odd thing about him. It was like no accent Zac had ever heard before. Whenever anyone asked Ant where he came from, he just shrugged and told them, "Somewhere south".

"Just thought you might fancy a game of footie," Zac said.

Ant's eyebrows dipped into a frown behind his huge sunglasses. "What is 'footie'?" Ant asked.

"Footie," Zac repeated, as if that word explained everything. Zac soon realised that it hadn't and he carried on. "Football. You know, a kick-about?"

Ant still looked confused. Zac laughed and said, "Wait, you've never heard of *football*?"

Ant shook his head and turned back to the seeds. Zac was about to ask Ant if he was being serious, but the teacher's voice butted in.

"Remember, each seed must be at least eight centimetres apart if we want a successful crop," Mr Dawkin told them. He mopped his shiny forehead and glanced up at the hot sun. "And don't forget to water them," Mr Dawkin added.

Ant looked up at Zac, making the light glint off the dark-green lenses of his glasses. "What is 'eight centimetres'?" Ant asked.

Zac wasn't great with measurements. He held his two index fingers apart, guessing eight centimetres. "About that," he said.

"Miles off," a voice from behind them said. It was Tulisa, the third member of their team on the "Seed to Supper" science project. She had grabbed the only watering can before anyone else could get their hands on it, then come over to join Zac and Ant. Tulisa nodded down at Zac's fingers and said, "Closer."

Zac moved his fingers together until they almost touched. Tulisa sighed. "Not *that* close."

She set the watering can down on the ground and used her own fingers to show how big eight centimetres was. It was almost exactly how far apart Ant and Zac had been sowing the seeds anyway.

While Tulisa's back was turned, someone from the nearest group grabbed the watering can. The boy yanked it away before Tulisa could stop him.

"Give it back, Ray," Tulisa said. "We're using that."

"No, you weren't," Ray replied. He was the biggest kid in their class and liked to boss the others around. Most of the time he got away with it because he was Mr Dawkin's son.

Zac stood up beside Tulisa. He wasn't sure whether Ant hadn't seen what was going on or that Ant didn't care. He had a sort of dreamy half-smile on his face as he wriggled his fingers around in the soil.

"We need the watering can, Ray," Zac said. "We were just about to use it."

"For what?" asked Ray. "To give Bug Boy a shower? You should – he stinks!"

"What's going on here?" Mr Dawkin demanded as he trudged across the garden.

"Ray took our watering can," Zac said.

Mr Dawkin raised one of his grey eyebrows. "*Your* watering can?" he said. "I'm sorry, Zac, did you pay for it? Did you bring it from home?"

"Well, no," Zac admitted. "But we got it first, and—"

"No," Mr Dawkin said, cutting Zac off. "Then Ray is free to use it, isn't he?"

"Yes, sir. Suppose," Zac mumbled.

"Oh, toughen up, boy," Mr Dawkin spat. "It's not like it's the end of the world."

"Sorry, sir," Zac said.

Tulisa glared at Mr Dawkin for a moment, then leaned past him and stared at Ray. "We're next with it," Tulisa said. "Don't be long."

Ray grinned, which showed off his yellow teeth. "Yeah, right," Ray said.

A high-pitched scream of terror came from across the garden. Everyone – even Ant – looked round to see Molly dancing on the spot, swatting at herself and squealing.

"Ew, ew, ew!" Molly yelled. "Bugs. There are bugs on everything!"

"It's just greenfly," Mr Dawkin said. He flicked one of the tiny green insects off Molly's arm and added, "They're harmless, and really quite fascinating in their own way."

"Kill them, Dad!" Ray cackled. "Use your spray."

"Yes. Yes, good idea," Mr Dawkin said. "Don't want them spoiling the crops."

He unclipped a spray bottle from his belt and sprayed bright-blue liquid at a row of plants near Molly's feet.

Ant sprang up as if he'd been electrocuted. "Wait, stop!" Ant cried. He stumbled into Zac, and they both tumbled to the ground.

"Watch it!" Zac yelled, but he was already flat on his back. He rolled out from under Ant, and that was when he saw it.

The weirdest thing about Ant. Maybe the weirdest thing he'd ever seen.

Ant's sunglasses had been knocked off as he'd fallen, and it was the first time Zac had seen his eyes. They were big, wide and made up of hundreds of lenses. As Zac looked into them, hundreds of identical versions of his own

face were reflected back at him. Ant's eyes weren't human. They were bug eyes!

"Whoa," Zac whispered.

And that was when the screaming started.

