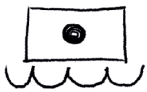


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TWO SNAKES AND THE SCHOOL SOUP

'HECTOOOOOOOOORRRRRRRGGGGGH! STOP RIGHT THERE!'

I froze with my hand hovering above the large vat of bright red tomato soup. It would have been a perfectly ordinary pot of soup, if it hadn't been for the long, bright green rubber snake that was now floating around right in the middle of it.

'HECTOOOOORRR! I'M WARNING YOU!'

I slowly turned to look over my shoulder. I could see all the dinner ladies in their bright blue uniforms staring at me with their mouths wide open, like doors someone had forgot to shut. Everyone in the dinner hall had frozen. Except for Mr Lancaster. His mouth was open wide too, and getting wider like a big black hole.

I could tell he was getting ready to explode because his face had gone as pink as a baboon's bottom, and his nose was starting to twitch.

'Don't you dare,' he hissed, glaring at the second rubber snake I was holding in my hand.

I looked down at the second snake. This one was bright red. Almost as bright red as the boring soup Mrs Baxter had made.

I knew I had two options. The first one was to *not* drop the second snake in. I would still get punished for the green snake, but maybe it wouldn't be quite as bad.

The second option was to drop the snake in. That would make Mr Lancaster even madder than he already was and make Mrs Baxter *really* mad. But it would serve her right for being the worst dinner lady we'd ever had – always narrowing her eyes and giving us the smallest spoonfuls of the things we wanted, and plonking giant spoonfuls of the things we hated on to our plates. It was about time someone got her back. Plus it would make Will and Katie, my two best friends, laugh.

'WELL? *WELL*?' said Mr Lancaster.

Looking back at Mr Lancaster, I grinned and let go of the snake. A gasp echoed around the dinner hall as

the second rubber snake joined the first with a splash. Blobs of tomato soup flew out everywhere. A splodge landed with a *SPLAT* on Mrs Baxter's head. A second lump hit with a *SCHLOP* on another dinner lady's cheek. A third struck with a *GLOOP* on Mr Lancaster's twitchy nose, and oozed down to the floor with a *drip*, *drip*, *drip*.

'RIGHT, YOUNG MAN! YOU'VE DONE IT NOW! COME WITH ME!'

That's a thing people call me when they get really angry – 'young man'. It's as if they're so mad they can't remember my name. In fact, no one ever says my name normally anymore. It's either 'young man' or 'HECTOOOOOOOORRRR' shouted in a voice which tells me right away that the person is angry with me. Even Will and Katie just call me 'H'. But I don't care. I used to, but I don't anymore. Most people are so stupid that it doesn't matter what they think of me. They're like those tiny annoying flies that buzz around you when you're trying to have an ice cream. The worst part is, the stupidest, most annoying bugs in the country all seem to be at my school.

I imagined what it might be like to swat people with

a giant fly swatter, as Mr Lancaster started to march me out of the dinner hall. I gave Will and Katie a wink on my way out – after all, I had won our bet! But they were laughing so hard I don't think they even saw me.

'SIT RIGHT THERE AND DON'T YOU DARE SAY A WORD!' snapped Mr Lancaster, pointing at the detention sofa.

Mr Lancaster is the head teacher and sometimes I wonder if the certificates on his wall are really secret awards given to him for being the stupidest and most annoying head teacher in the country. The funny thing is, he *thinks* he's clever. He's always watching me, and waiting to catch me out, just so that he can cry 'HECTOOOOORRRRR!' in front of the whole school. When he does that, the veins in his neck go from being two-dimensional to three-dimensional. He's always giving me weird warnings too. Last week it was: 'ONE more time and you'll be out on your ears so quick, your head will be spinning like the solar system!'

Today it's: 'You're THIS close to getting your legs chopped right off from under you, young man! And then what will you be? Legless! That's what!'

If Mr Lancaster really wants to get rid of me or my

legs, he'll have to do a better job of catching me. He got lucky today 'cos I guess he must have been spying on me extra hard. But he doesn't know the half of what I get up to, because I can see his stupid traps from miles away. Like the time he installed tiny cameras that looked like shiny black beetles outside the boys' toilets; he was hoping to catch me taking payment from those who *didn't* want their hair washed in the toilets at lunchtime. But of course, I saw the cameras right away. Now I wave to them every day as I walk past, before taking all my payments in the far corner of the playground. It works out well for everyone. No one gets a toilet dunking and I get a steady supply of other people's pocket money and sweets.

Then there was the time last year when Mr Lancaster made all the school prefects into lunch monitors and gave them huge shiny badges. Their job was to try and stop me from tripping people up when they were carrying their lunch trays to their tables. But I just tripped the lunch monitors up instead, and they all quit the very next day.

'HECTOOORRR! ARE YOU LISTENING?!' Mr Lancaster's angry voice interrupted my happy

memory of tripping up Katie Lang and watching her tumble head over heels across the dinner hall while her bowl of chilli splattered half of Year Two. 'YOU HAD BETTER NOT EVEN *THINK* ABOUT MISSING DETENTION TODAY!'

Before Mr Lancaster could continue, the school bell began to ring as if it had also had enough of him. Trying not to grin, I nodded and slowly – very, very slowly – made my way back to my classroom. By the time I reached it, everyone was already inside getting out their workbooks.

'Hectorrrr!' sighed Mrs Vergara, picking up the register again and shaking her head. 'Why must you ALWAYS be late?' she asked, scratching her head now too.

I shrugged and slumped down into my chair next to Rajesh. Mrs Vergara is *always* shaking and scratching her head at me. It's as if she secretly has nits and only remembers that they itch whenever I'm in the room.

'OK, OK. Settle down,' she said, walking over to the whiteboard with a bright green pen in her hand. 'Now that everyone is *finally* here, let's recap the events leading up to the Great Fire of London.'

I realised my workbook was in my drawer at the front of the classroom and gave a silent groan. Not that I cared really. I sat and watched as Mrs Vergara's pen made big loopy letters on the board, leaving behind a shiny green trail just like a slug's.

'Psssssst! Rajesh!' whispered a boy's voice from the table in front of us where Robert and Mei-Li sat. A small piece of folded paper landed near my elbow.

Before Rajesh could reach for it, I grabbed the note and opened it up. It was a funny drawing of Mrs Vergara with flames coming out of her bum as if her farts had caught on fire. The words 'How the Great Fire of London REALLY started' were written above it. I looked over at Robert, impressed. I didn't think that a brainiac like him would have the guts to draw something so funny about a teacher. Usually any bits of paper he passed to Rajesh had maths equations on them or said something like 'Meet me in the library by the chemistry section.' But then, from over his shoulder, I saw Karina looking nervously at me. It was obviously her drawing that Robert had been passing along.

'Hectorrrrrrrrrrrrrrr. Something keeping you busy, is it?'

I quickly scrunched the paper up in my hands. But it was too late. Mrs Vergara was already standing in front of me.

'Give it here. *Now*,' she said softly, her head tilting to one side.

I looked over at Rajesh whose eyes were popping so far out of his head they looked like they were going to fly across the room, and then glanced at Mei-Li and stupid Robert. Mei-Li was frowning at Robert and Robert was sitting up straight and looking at the ceiling as if he had never seen it before. I could see Karina doing the same thing too. Giving them all a scowl, I handed the drawing over to Mrs Vergara.

I knew exactly what she was going to do next, because unfortunately, Mr Lancaster isn't the only champion-level stupid person at my school. Mrs Vergara is just as stupid, except instead of trying to catch me at things, she pretends to be nice to me. That's one of the tricks extra sneaky grown-ups like to use when they want you to think they're your friend and not your enemy.

Looking down at the drawing, Mrs Vergara shook her head. Again. 'Oh, Hectoooooorrrr! I'm disappointed

in you. I know you're so much better than this.'

'But – but it wasn't me! It was Karina's! She passed it to Mei-Li and Robert to give to Rajesh!'

Karina gasped and Robert shook his head. Mei-Li opened her mouth, but before she could say anything, Mrs Vergara bent down and pointed one long finger at me.

'DON'T blame *them* for YOUR behaviour,' said Mrs Vergara. 'This drawing is insulting and rude enough without you lying too. I just wish you could trust me enough to tell me the truth. I'm afraid I'll have to give you detention AGAIN.'

I opened my mouth to argue that it really hadn't been me – and that if it had, my drawing would have been *way* better and funnier – but I knew there wasn't any point. Whenever a grown-up tells me to trust them, I know it's the last thing I can do. Grown-ups only ever help people they like, and I've never met a single grown-up who likes me. Besides, I've been disappointing everyone since as far back as I can remember, so that wasn't anything new.

Mrs Vergara walked back to the whiteboard and asked a question about the fire. I saw Mei-Li looking at me so I gave her a scowl which made her turn away. As

bad as Mr Lancaster and Mrs Vergara are, there's nothing worse than brainiacs and teacher's pets, which is exactly what Mei-Li and Robert are. The boys are always called *brainiacs*, and the girls are always called *teacher's pets*, but they're both just as annoying as each other.

You can always tell right away if someone's a brainiac or a teacher's pet, because they act like it's the end of the world if they don't get an A or a gold star in all their tests. They NEVER forget their homework. In fact, some of them are so disgusting they even do *extra* homework. And all of them suck up to the teachers so much that their lips get stuck in a pout. Just go and see. Go and find a brainiac or a teacher's pet, and you'll see their lips are redder and poutier than everyone else's. Sadly, you probably won't have to look far, because every class in every school on the whole planet has got at least one. But I guess my class is the unluckiest class in the world, because we've got three. *Three* horrible sucker-uppers in one classroom. It's a nightmare.

There's Nathasha who sits right next to Mrs Vergara's desk and jumps up and down on her chair like a giant frog whenever she knows the answer to something. Then there's Robert who thinks he's funny

as well as clever even though he isn't either. They're both too scared to even look at me most of the time, so they like to pretend I don't exist. But *the* worst, *the* most irritating and *the* most pet-like pet of all the teacher's pets in all the world is definitely Mei-Li.

She joined our class last year and even though she doesn't speak like the rest of us and brings smelly foods for lunch like bright orange noodles and weird balls wrapped in black plastic, all the teachers love her. She has shiny black hair that's always in a ponytail, which she flicks whenever she gets something right, and she's always chewing on the end of a pencil, which makes her look just like a giraffe eating straw. She never gets anything less than ninety per cent on every single test, and she holds the record for having the most awards for anything that my stupid school gives awards for, even though she's so new. She would probably get an award for breathing if it existed! I hate her more than anyone I've ever met.

After class, I headed straight to detention, and sat in my usual chair in the corner of the room. I was the only one there. Again.

'Glad to see you made it on time for once,' said

Mr Lancaster, as he placed a handful of blank sheets in front of me.

Detention with Mr Lancaster is as boring as watching paint dry. I know, because one time that's exactly what he made me do. He made me sit by a school wall that had been painted and wait for it to dry. But usually he just makes me sit and write lines, like today. I think Mr Lancaster hopes that if he makes detentions boring enough, I won't want to do another one. But what he doesn't understand is that I don't really mind detentions. My brain calms down and my ears close up and my eyes stop blinking, and instead of seeing the room I'm in or the words I'm writing, I start to see brand new ways of getting back at everyone. Some of my best, most brilliant ideas have come from sitting in detention.

This detention made me realise that I needed to do something different. Something big. I needed to go outside the box Mrs Vergara's always talking about – the one inside your head that makes you do the same thing again and again. I needed to try something new. Something that would *really* get everyone talking about me, and which would be a hundred times better than putting snakes in the school soup.

I was just thinking about what that big something could be and writing out *I will not put snakes into the school soup* for the fiftieth time, when there was a knock on the door and Mrs Vergara's head and shoulders appeared.

'Mr Lancaster, mind if I speak to you outside for a moment?'

'Of course,' said Mr Lancaster, springing out of his chair. Giving me a look that warned me not to try anything, he followed Mrs Vergara out and shut the door behind him.

Jumping up, I tiptoed over to the door to listen. Mrs Vergara was probably telling Mr Lancaster all about the stupid drawing to get me into even more trouble.

Pressing my ear hard against the keyhole, I could just make out their voices. 'See here?' Mrs Vergara was saying. A noise that sounded like large pieces of paper being rustled followed her voice. 'He's the only one in the whole year group, possibly even the whole school, to be submitting drawings in this kind of comic-book manga style. For him to create whole characters and a storyline for what was quite a simple project on identity is really quite extraordinary. I think if we entered him

he would have a real chance of winning.'

'Hmmmm . . .' There were more sounds of paper, before Mr Lancaster said, 'Yes, these are quite something. He's always been rather good at drawing.'

I put my eye to the keyhole. But all I could see was Mrs Vergara's bright blue jeans.

'It's just a shame he's so badly behaved,' continued Mr Lancaster. 'The boy's an absolute menace. Snakes in the school soup one minute, beating up the Year Twos the next. In fact, he's probably destroying the classroom as we speak! Imagine if we entered him for a national art award! It would never do. He'd ruin the school's reputation – well, what's left of it.'

I pushed my ear even closer to the keyhole. I couldn't believe they were talking about me – and my drawings!

'I was thinking,' Mrs Vergara said, 'what if we told him that we *wanted* to put him forward, but that we can only do it if he starts behaving? It might settle him. His drawings are already so unique. Really extraordinary. It might give him focus. A reason to engage . . .'

The rustling of papers stopped.

'No,' said Mr Lancaster. 'No, Mrs Vergara. The boy's a lost cause. He would probably sabotage the

whole thing and get our school banned from the competition. Bad enough *we* have to put up with him. No reason to force him on to an awards committee and other innocent students.'

'I suppose you're right,' said Mrs Vergara. 'It's a shame. Such a waste of talent. But – yes, I suppose you're right.'

The door handle was suddenly being pushed down. Sprinting back to my corner, I jumped into the seat and grabbed my pencil just as Mr Lancaster came back in. He looked at me and then slowly around the room as if to make sure it wasn't on fire.

'Come on Hectooooooor, get on with it. We've both got homes to get to,' he said, seeing that I still had at least fifty more lines left to do.

I forced my hand to write as quickly as it could, even though it was shaking and my words were coming out wonky. My face was burning. And with every line I wrote, I thought harder and harder about what I could do next that would be bigger and worse than anything I had done before. Something to show Mr Lancaster and Mrs Vergara, and everyone else too, just how much of a menace I could be.