



KID APPEAL

BY DAVID LUBAR

Dwight Howtzler is an idiot. He's also my best friend. Brains aren't all that important most of the time, and they're definitely not the first thing I look for when I pick my friends. For example, Zeke Walther, that motormouth show-off, is super smart, but I'd never want to hang out with him.

There are lots of other things that make someone a great best friend, like loyalty and courage. Dwight's totally loyal. He'd never tell on me, no matter what I did. Even though he got six weeks of detention, Dwight never admitted he had help when he dumped twenty packs of cherry Kool-Aid into the school's new fishpond. I swear we thought there weren't

any fish in it yet. I guess it's a good thing only two of them were hiding in there at the time. They looked real pretty right before they turned belly up. It was sort of like a Dr. Seuss story. One fish, two fish. Red fish, dead fish.

And to this day, nobody who could punish me for it has a clue I was with Dwight when we snuck into the principal's office and replaced the regular CD of the National Anthem with one where the whole song was burped. At least he got only one week of detention for that.

As for courage, I know Dwight would stand right next to me if I got attacked by a band of ninjas or a pack of zombies. If I got bitten by a snake, I'd bet he'd even suck out the poison. As long as I got bitten on the leg or arm. If I got bitten on the butt, I'd understand if he let me die.

So being smart isn't important most of the time. But it's sort of helpful when you're entering a contest. And it looked like we'd be doing that. You see, right before the last bell, our teacher, Ms. Flayer, handed out a bunch of papers, like she does every Friday. It was the usual stuff: a bake sale, eye exams, a book fair, something about a sewage leak in the

cafeteria. Nothing important.

When she got back to her desk, she waved a sheet of yellow paper at us. "I hope some of you will consider entering this contest."

Contest? I loved winning stuff. I shuffled through the papers and found the yellow one. I got as far as the first line: CELEBRATE THE HISTORY OF NEW CAIRO.

I stopped right there. I'd rather celebrate the fact that my gum lasted for three hours this morning. Our teachers had been jamming the town's history down our throats since way back in first grade. After five years of that, New Cairo's past was the last thing I wanted to celebrate.

I guess Dwight read the whole paper, because he grabbed my arm as soon as we got into the hall and said, "We are so doing this, Charlie. It's going to be awesome."

"Doing what?" I pulled my arm free, which wasn't easy since Dwight is one of the biggest kids in our class.

"Look at this!" He shoved the paper in my face and pointed at the next line. WIN BIG PRIZES!!!!

Okay—that caught my attention. But I knew "big prizes"

meant different things to adults than it did to kids. Grown-ups actually seemed to think a kid would get all excited about a savings bond or a dictionary. Anything that's going to get my heart racing needs to say stuff like "radio controlled" and "Wi-Fi enabled."

But I guess, once in a while, an adult gets it right. According to the flyer, first prize was a trip for two to the grand opening of Splashtastic Park. I'd heard it had fifteen water slides and a gigantic saltwater wave pool, all inside a dome. That would be a perfect way to start summer vacation, which was only two weeks away. I'd been dying to go there ever since I'd seen the ads, but my parents said it was too expensive.

Suddenly, the history of New Cairo sounded a lot more interesting. I read the rest of the flyer. It turned out the New Cairo Chamber of Commerce—whatever that was—was sponsoring the contest to help celebrate the 150th anniversary of the town's founding.

"We have a week," I said after I read the rules. The projects had to be brought to school next Friday and set up

in the auditorium. The whole school would have an assembly at the end of the day to watch the judging.

"That's tons of time," Dwight said. "I do most of my projects the day before they're due. Or even that morning. And I've never gotten lower than a C minus. Except once or twice."

"I think, if we're gonna do it, we better give it a bit more time than just one day."

"If?" Dwight asked.

"I've got a ton of math and reading to slog through." I glanced back at our classroom door. Ms. Flayer seemed to think that homework kept kids from getting into trouble. If that was true, I never would have tried to make grilled cheese sandwiches for me and Dwight using his mom's iron or jump my bicycle from the garage roof to the porch last week. I was still picking scabs off my knee from the crash. But that's okay—I sort of like picking scabs.

"We have to do it," Dwight said. "It's our only chance to get to the Splashtastic Park grand opening. I've heard it's going to be awesome."

“I don’t know....”

That’s when a high-pitched laugh shattered my thoughts. It sounded like someone was tickling a gigantic baby with a pitchfork.

“You guys are going to enter?” Zeke Walther, who’d slithered up behind us, cackled again, then said, “Forget it. Unless they add a nice last-place prize. There’s no way you losers have a chance. Not against me. I’m full of smarts. You’re just full of farts.” He smirked and walked off.

I turned to Dwight, held up my hand, and said, “Let’s do it.”

He smacked my palm. “We’ll show him who the loser is. I can already feel myself floating in that wave pool.” He closed his eyes and swayed from side to side like he was up to his neck in the water. Then he farted.

“Dwight! Knock it off.”

“Sorry,” he said. “I like making bubbles.”

“You’re not in a real pool,” I said.

“Good point.”

I reminded myself not to get too close to him once we hit

the water. And we were definitely hitting that water.

Somehow, some way, my idiot friend and I were going to win first prize. Whatever we did, I had a feeling I’d be doing all of the thinking and most of the work. That didn’t stop Dwight from spitting out a stream of ideas as we walked to my place.

“We could bring in cookies,” he said. “I could get my mom to bake them. Everyone loves her cookies.”

“It’s supposed to be about something from the history of the town,” I said. “Cookies don’t count.”

“What if she makes them now and we let them get stale? Then they’d be historic. And she lives here, so they’d be from the town.” He grinned at me. “Wow. I thought this would be harder.”

“It still won’t count,” I said. “Even if it did, we need to come up with something way better than cookies.”

“Oh.” Dwight sighed, stared at the ground for a moment, then let out a whoop and clapped his hands together. “I got it! This is perfect! We’ll make one of those diarrhea things.”

“What are you talking about?” My brain wrestled with itself, trying to think up any possible connection between

stomach cramps and history.

"You know, a shoebox diarrhea," Dwight said. "Where you cut out stuff, color it, and glue it in the box."

"That's a diorama," I said. "Not a diarrhea." Now my brain was wrestling with the image of Dwight carrying a sloshing shoebox to school. Luckily my imagination was nice enough to make sure the box had a lid on it.

"Diorama?" he asked. "You sure?"

"Yup. I'm positive."

"Shoot. I guess that explains why Mrs. Esheritchia kept laughing at me last year when I turned in my project and told her it was the best diarrhea I'd ever made." Dwight stared at the ground for another minute as we walked. "So, anyhow, you think we should make one of those?"

"Half the kids who enter are going to do that," I said. "The other half will probably do some sort of poster."

"What about the third half?" Dwight asked.

"That would be us," I said. "We need to come up with something awesome. We have to completely blow away all the shoeboxes and posters."

By the time we reached my house, Dwight had tossed out a bunch more suggestions—most of which had nothing to do with history. The couple things that might have worked would also definitely get both of us expelled if we brought them to school. Though I had to admit that the idea of making a full-size, fully working Civil War cannon was sort of cool. So was an authentic Samurai sword, even though I didn't think there was any connection between Japanese warriors and New Cairo.

A blast of freezing cold air hit us as we went inside. Dad must have been trying to use the thermostat again. Last year, to save energy, Dad bought this fancy electronic thermostat with programmable timers that controlled the heat and air-conditioning in all the rooms in the house. But he still didn't understand how to set it, so I never knew whether I'd be coming home to a refrigerator or an oven, or some combination of freezing and steaming rooms. The main control panel was in the hallway, right by the stairs. I switched off the air-conditioning and turned on some heat so the house would warm up quickly.

We went into the living room to watch TV and kick around ideas. My parents both worked, but Mom had left a snack for me.

“Whoa, that’s huge.” Dwight grabbed the half-gallon jar of crunchy peanut butter from the coffee table.

“Yeah. Mom’s been shopping at that new warehouse place, Big Globes. Last week, she bought a ten-pound bag of Fig Newtons.” I opened the box of crackers. It looked like there were enough to shingle a roof.

After we got settled, I started searching for something to watch. There was a science program playing high up past the channels where they show all the infomercials. A couple guys in a museum were examining mummies.

“That’s it!” Dwight shouted. “We’ll make you into a mummy.”

“That’s crazy.” I looked at the front of his shirt. “And don’t shout when your mouth is full of crackers.” It’s a good thing my folks own a really good vacuum cleaner.

Dwight brushed off the crumbs. “But that’s how the town got its name. Right?”

“Yeah, that’s true....” From what we’d learned at school, right around the time of the Civil War this guy named Joshua Stirling traveled around the southwest, charging people money to see an authentic Egyptian mummy taken from a secret tomb in Cairo. When his wagon broke down near the Skenbatch Creek, he decided to stay there.

He built a little cabin and turned it into a sort of museum where people could come and see the mummy. And for a while, people did. But there weren’t a lot of people living around there at the time, so eventually everyone had seen it. Joshua Stirling could have moved on, but he liked where he was. So he tried something different. He started grinding up bits of the mummy to sell to people as medicine.

I guess people were pretty stupid back then, because Joshua Stirling made a ton of money with his mummy powder. He started selling other cures and remedies. After a while, he ran out of mummy, but by then he had a small store that sold all kinds of medicine, some of which actually made people better, or at least didn’t make them sicker. That’s how New Cairo began. A couple other companies also

started making medicine here, and then, about thirty years ago, they built a medical school and a hospital. Now the school and the hospital are among the best in the country.

Despite all of this, I didn't think that dressing me up as a mummy was going to get us any prizes. I put down the remote. "Let's get serious. How are we going to win this thing?"

"I know you said we can't use cookies for our project. But what if we gave cookies to the judges?"

Dwight's suggestion, as stupid as it was, actually gave me an idea. "We can't bribe the judges. But we can appeal to them."

"Peel them?" Dwight frowned. "They aren't going to let us do that."

"No. *Appeal* to them. We can make sure our project is something that they especially like. Hang on."

I dug the flyer out of my backpack. The sponsors were listed at the bottom of the sheet: Kendra's Chocolate Cottage, Delancy's Butcher Shop, and Mitchell's Sporting Goods. "Okay, so we need a project that people who are into

chocolate, meat, and sports will like." This was good. I'd bet Zeke wouldn't think of aiming at the judges.

"We could play catch with chocolate-covered meatballs. All the judges would love that." Dwight flashed me a grin, then he frowned and said, "Wait. Maybe it's a bad idea."

"I'm glad you figured that out all by yourself."

"Yeah. If they're chocolate covered, nobody would know there's meat inside." He scratched his head. "This could be tricky."

"At least we know what kind of idea we need to find."

"That's a good start." Dwight picked up the remote and switched channels. "Hey, look. Martians with chain saws. Cool. They have four arms."

"Whoa," I said as the scene got violent. "Make that three arms."

"This is great. I can't believe your parents don't block this channel."

"They don't know how." Like with the thermostat, my parents were clueless about technology. If they ever figured out how to use any of the electronics in our house, my life

wouldn't be anywhere near as nice.

At least the room was finally comfortable. I went back to the control panel and switched off the heat so it wouldn't get too hot. My folks had also spent big bucks getting new windows and extra insulation for the house last year. We sat back and watched the rest of the movie. By the time it ended, Dwight had to go home.

"We'll figure the rest out next week," I said. There was no way I was doing any extra thinking on the weekend. "At least we know what we're doing."

"We're going to win for sure," Dwight said.

I met up with him outside of school on Monday morning. Before we could talk about our project, Zeke strutted up to us and said, "You guys might as well quit right now. My project is going to be unbeatable."

"Doesn't matter what you do," Dwight said. "You're going to lose, because we—"

"Have a better one," I said, before Dwight could say

something stupid like *We're going to appeal to the judges*. I didn't want anyone to steal our plan.

"Yeah, right," Zeke said. "And I'm going to grow wings and fly around the school. Forget it. You're going to lose."

"Wanna bet?" Dwight said.

"How much?" Zeke asked.

Dwight turned toward me. "I have twenty dollars left from my birthday."

"I can match that," I said. It would wipe out my savings if I lost, but we had a great plan, and it would be wonderful to make Zeke a double loser.

"All right, then. We'll bet thirty bucks," Dwight said.

"Forty," I whispered to him.

"Forty," he said.

"You've got a bet," Zeke said. "This is going to be awesome. A trip to Splashtastic Park and lots of spending money. I can't wait to beat you losers."

He barked out his annoying laugh again and walked off.

"We'd better win," I said.

"We can't lose," Dwight said. "We have a plan. We just

need to work out the details.”

He was right. It wouldn’t be that hard to come up with something now that we had a strategy.

“Ready to get to work?” I asked Dwight when we left school at the end of the day.

“Absolutely. We are totally going to make an awesome project.”

We headed toward my house. A block later, Dwight stopped walking and spun toward Main Street. “Wait. We need to go into town first.”

“Why?”

“The new issue of *Zombie Ghost Pirates* comes out today.”

“The one where they fight the werewolf motorcycle gang?” I asked.

“That’s the one.”

“Then we definitely have to go into town.” I couldn’t believe a whole month had passed since the last issue had

come out.

We headed off for the comic book store. There was a lot of other cool stuff to look at. “We still have tons of time for the project,” I said when we finally left the store.

“For sure,” Dwight said. “Tons.”

The comic was awesome. So was the movie we stumbled across the next day.

“It shouldn’t be this hard,” Dwight said on Wednesday.

“Maybe we’re making it hard,” I said as I fiddled with the thermostat again. No matter how long we’d spent thinking and talking, we’d totally failed to come up with something that all three judges would like. That’s when it hit me.

“Hey—we don’t need to get all three judges to like us. Just two of them would be enough for us to win.”

Dwight stared at me. “But there are three judges.”

“Trust me,” I said. “If we get two votes, we win.”

“Which two?” he asked.

“Doesn’t matter. Whichever are the easiest. Let’s see....” I thought about the combinations. “There’s meat and chocolate, meat and sports, or sports and chocolate.”

“And we just need two?” Dwight asked.

“Yup.”

“That won’t be hard.”

“Not at all.” We sat there, thinking. And thinking. And thinking.

“Maybe something on TV will give us an idea,” Dwight said.

“No movies,” I said. “We can’t get distracted.”

“Definitely no movies.” Dwight flipped past the movie channels. “Hey, they’re reshowing the video game awards.”

“I missed them this year.”

“Me, too.” Dwight put the remote down.

It was an excellent show. So was the program after it that reviewed a bunch of new games.

“We have to go with one judge,” I said on Thursday.

“Meat, chocolate, or sports. We’ll just have to hope one of the other judges likes our project, too.”

“I vote for chocolate,” Dwight said.

“Me, too. Everyone likes that. Let’s see what we have around here.” I went to the kitchen cabinet. “Score!” Mom

had gone shopping the other day, and she'd bought a huge sack of chocolate bars.

I pulled them out. "We can make something. How about Joshua Stirling's cabin?"

"That would work," Dwight said. "But let me build it. You're not really good with your hands."

I didn't argue. Dwight might be an idiot, but he was great with tools and stuff. I could program all the electronics in the house and find stuff on the internet, but I pretty much stunk at anything that required coordination. My drawings in art class looked like they were done during an earthquake, and I'm the only student in the history of our school who got banned from the woodshop.

"Okay," I said. "I'll go online and find a picture."

We got to work. I found a drawing that was pretty detailed, and Dwight did an amazing job with the construction. He cut out windows and stuff, and even made some smoke for the chimney with a cotton ball.

"This looks awesome," I said when he was finished. It was a perfect model of the cabin, made out of chocolate bars.

"I told you I do my best work the day before something is due." Dwight stepped back and stared at the cabin. "How do we explain why we made it out of chocolate?"

"We don't," I said. "Nobody is going to ask. Come on, let's put this somewhere safe."

Dwight and I picked up the cabin. He'd built it on a board we'd found in the basement. We carried it to the spare room. "It'll be safe here," I said as I closed the door.

"Think we'll win?" Dwight asked.

"We've got at least one vote," I said. "I'll see you in the morning. You can help me carry it to school."

I went back to the kitchen. The table was covered with leftover pieces of chocolate. There was no way I was going to throw any of that out, and I couldn't put it back in the bag, so I ate it all. That was a mistake. I gave myself a pretty bad stomachache.

Mom got all concerned when I didn't eat dinner and crawled up to bed early. But I told her I was fine. I was going to be even finer a week from now when I jumped into the wave pool at Splashtastic Park.

I woke up in the middle of the night, freezing. I really had to figure out a way to keep Dad from ever touching the thermostat. My stomach still hurt but not as badly. I staggered downstairs and switched on some heat, then hurried back upstairs because I had to go to the bathroom.

Friday morning, my first thought was *I'm sick*. I was burning hot. My pajamas were all soaked with sweat. But when I got out of bed, I felt fine. It was the room that was hot. I guess I'd set the temperature a bit too high. I'd been sort of in a rush last night.

There was a note from Mom taped to the bathroom mirror. "I hope you're feeling better. Call me at work if you're still sick and I'll come home."

Right after I got dressed, the doorbell rang. It was Dwight.

"You're kind of early," I said.

"I couldn't wait. This is going to be the best day ever." He grinned and held up a video camera.

"What's that for?"

"I want to get a shot of Zeke's face when he loses. Maybe

I'll add music and put it on the internet. I have software that makes it all real easy."

"Perfect." I could just imagine Zeke's expression when the judges gave us first place.

I opened the door to the spare room and staggered back as a blast of warm air hit my face. Really warm air. *Oh no....* The spare room was right above the furnace. I looked at the table. Joshua Stirling's cabin was now Lake Stirling.

"It melted," Dwight said.

"We lost," I said.

"No way. We can't let Zeke win."

I stared at the puddle of chocolate. We'd never be able to fix it.

"We gotta go with my first idea," Dwight said.

"We don't have time to make a cannon," I said.

"No. Not that. The mummy," he said. "Remember? It's perfect. We'll turn you into a mummy."

"Forget it. It's stupid. And it won't help us with any of the judges."

"No, it's not stupid. It's totally awesome. All the judges

will love it,” Dwight said. “Think about it. Everyone else will have boring stuff. We’ll have a living, walking mummy.”

“Yeah, and a living, walking loss to Zeke, or one of the other kids who had a week to do a project.”

We argued about it for a while longer. Finally, I had to admit that it was our best idea. Mostly because it was our only idea. “But why me? Why don’t we make you the mummy?” I asked.

“It was my idea,” he said. “And I’m better with stuff like that than you are. If you wrapped me, I’d look like a Father’s Day present from a five-year-old.”

He was probably right. Besides, I guess it would be sort of cool to stagger around school like a mummy.

“Come on,” Dwight said. “Let’s find some sheets.”

I was glad that Mom had already left for work. I figured she’d have a problem with Dwight and me cutting up her sheets, but if I won a contest, she’d be so shocked I was betting she’d forgive me. I didn’t exactly have a lot of victories in my past. That became real obvious last year when Mom decided to make one of those scrapbooks where you

brag about all the stuff your family has done. After a couple days of finding nothing to scrap about, she gave up and decided it would be more fun to make flowerpots.

I went to the closet in the upstairs hallway where Mom kept the sheets, towels, and blankets.

“They’re green,” Dwight said as he leaned over my shoulder.

“Yeah. That’s not gonna work.” It looked like we were losers for sure.

“Mummies get old, right? So we could say it’s moldy.”

“That’s completely stupid.” I thought as hard as I could, and actually came up with a solution. “Hey—I know. We could paint them.”

“Got any paint?”

“I’m not sure.” I started looking through all the closets in the house. Finally, I found a shelf under the bathroom counter with first-aid stuff. “Bandages!” I shouted when I saw the boxes. My mom didn’t just buy food at the warehouse store. We had big boxes of everything from garbage bags to detergent. So we had plenty of bandages.

Each box had something ridiculous, like two hundred yards.

"We don't need sheets. We have real bandages." I dragged a box from the shelf and handed it to Dwight. "Wrap me up."

Dwight opened the box. He stared at the bandages for a moment, then stared at me. "I think you need to take off your shirt and pants."

"Why?"

"It'll look weird if you have clothes on under the bandages. Come on, take 'em off."

"I don't think so."

"You have to. We're going to be late."

"Okay. But I'm keeping my underwear." I pulled off my shirt and dropped my pants.

Dwight had trouble getting the first part of the bandage off the roll. But once he got started, he wrapped me real quickly. After he finished my right leg, he said, "This stuff is hard to tear. Got scissors?"

"No time for that. Just do it in one piece."

"Sure. There's plenty."

Dwight left slits for my eyes and nose. But he taped over

my mouth. He ended up using the whole box. Mom wouldn't miss it. There were several more boxes of bandages on the shelf.

Before we left, Dwight grabbed another box. "Just in case we need to patch you up or anything."

We headed out. I walked like a mummy, which was pretty easy since the bandages made it hard to bend any of my joints. I had to admit, I was starting to feel like we could actually win the contest.

Halfway down the block, Dwight handed me the extra box of bandages. "Here, hold this so I can get a good shot of you."

I took the box and Dwight held up the video camera. Then he took his right hand off of it and rubbed his thumb against his fingers. "Man, that stuff is really sticky."

"Sticky?" I glanced down at the box through the slits. According to the label, they were STAY-STUCK BRAND ADHESIVE BANDAGES.

Adhesive?

Below, a bit smaller, it read: WITH SUPER HOLDING POWER THAT NEVER LETS GO. And below that, even smaller: CAUTION:

REMOVE SLOWLY.

I thought about what it felt like when I ripped even a small Band-Aid off my arm.

“You idiot!” I screamed at Dwight. It didn’t come out as any real words, since my lips were taped over. I threw the box at him.

He ducked. “Hey! Watch out. You’ll hit the camera.”

I tugged at the end of the bandage, where it dangled from my hand. “It’s all stuck to me!” I gave him a shove.

“Knock it off!” He shoved me back. “Dummy mummy.”

I staggered and stepped off the curb, which made me stagger a couple more steps on my stiff legs. A car whizzed toward me. I looked right at the driver. He looked right at his cell phone.

I’m going to die.

I tried to spin out of the way. Luckily I didn’t get hit. The car just nicked my finger as it shot past.

I’m going to live.

Before I could sigh in relief, I was yanked off my feet.

I’m flying?

The rear bumper had snagged the end of the bandage from the tip of my finger. I guess the driver was still on the phone, because he didn’t seem to realize he was pulling me down the road. I managed to stay on my feet, but I felt like I was waterskiing. I yanked my hand back, hard.

That worked. The bandage started to unwind. My relief didn’t last more than a second, though. After my arm got unwrapped, my body started to unwind. That made me spin. I was having a hard time staying on my feet. Everything was happening too fast. I was spinning, staggering, and skittering across the hard asphalt.

Oh yeah—and screaming. Especially when the unwinding reached my head and I felt my eyebrows get ripped off.

The bandage reached my left leg. I had to lift it in the air as it unwound, or my other leg would get tangled and I’d go down for sure. I was balancing on one foot now. I could smell burning rubber as my sneaker started to melt.

When the bandage reached my other leg, I realized I had an even bigger problem. The car made a right turn. The bandage pulled around the streetlight on the corner. I was

getting yanked toward the pole. A lucky leap kept me from smacking right into it, but I was whipped around the corner and flung through the air. Now I really was flying. Finally, the end of the bandage was yanked from my leg, taking my sneaker with it.

I sailed across the street and thudded to a facedown landing. I was too dizzy to move. I hurt all over. And from the smell of it, I'd landed in the yard of someone who owned several enormous dogs. Which helped explain why I slid so far after I hit. But at least I'd survived. Dwight caught up with me, still carrying the camera.

"Oh no," he gasped.

"What?"

"Nothing." His voice sounded weird, and his face got as green as Mom's sheets.

"Tell me."

"I guess the adhesive kind of took a tiny little bit of skin with it."

And my shorts, I discovered as I glanced over my shoulder. They were gone. Ripped right off me. They'd saved

my skin. At least, a little bit of skin where the shorts had been. As for the rest of me, above my waist and below my thighs, my body looked like I'd been peeled. It took a moment for that fact to sink into my numbed and dizzy brain. I stared at my hands and then down at my arms and legs.

I'd been peeled like an apple. No, more like a tomato. I looked like I had the worst case of sunburn the world had ever seen. The whole top layer of my skin was gone. It was a thin layer, but I had been kind of attached to it.

Then the pain kicked in. That's when I passed out.

I woke up in the hospital. It was Saturday. I was covered in real bandages this time. My parents were so happy I was alive that they didn't yell at me too much.

Dwight came to visit me that afternoon. "How you doing?" he asked.

"How does it look like I'm doing?"

"It looks really cool. Too bad it's nowhere near

Halloween.”

I sighed. “I guess Zeke won.”

“No way. Check this out.” He held up the video camera and started playing a clip.

I saw a title on the screen.

NEW CAIRO

From Mummies to Medicine

150 Years in 150 Seconds

Then I saw myself walking along in my original mummy outfit. I winced as I watched my unwinding body spin and tumble like a really bad gymnast’s. I cringed as the camera zoomed in on my peeled body. In the middle of all that red flesh, my white butt looked like a blob of mayonnaise on a boiled hot dog.

My own screams were replaced by those of sirens. The paramedics showed up. Dwight had recorded the whole trip to the emergency room and all the action of the doctors and nurses working on my damaged body. Then he’d edited everything down to the highlights.

“You showed this at school?” I couldn’t believe all the kids had seen me sprawled out on the ground, barer than naked. I’d have to move to another town. No, another planet. Even that might not be far enough. “Everyone saw it?”

“Yeah. Sure. Nobody else did a video, so they let me play it on the big screen in the auditorium.”

“And the judges liked it?”

“Well, the chocolate lady and the sports guy both threw up and ran out of the room right after you got peeled. But the butcher loved the whole thing. So, like you said, you appealed to one judge.” Dwight paused, frowned, then said, “Wait...peeled...appealed. I think there’s some kind of connection.”

“Drop it,” I said. “What happened after that?”

“Since the butcher was the only one left to vote, we won

first prize. I'm going to Splashtastic Park. And here's your half of the bet." He put a twenty-dollar bill on my chest.

As I looked down at the money, I thought about his words. *I'm going to Splashtastic Park.* "You mean *we're* going to Splashtastic Park."

"You really want to wade into salt water next week?" Dwight asked.

I imagined how that would feel on my peeled body. It would definitely sting. "I guess not."

"That's what I thought. So I asked Zeke."

"Zeke!" I bolted up. That was a huge mistake. I felt like someone had just swiped my whole body with an enormous piece of sandpaper.

I let out a scream and slumped back down.

"Yeah, Zeke," Dwight said. "I've been thinking about things, and even if you got out of here in time, I'm pretty sure it's a better idea if I go to Splashtastic Park with someone smarter. You'd probably get us kicked out five minutes after we got there. No offense. You're a good friend and all. You're loyal. You're courageous. But you have to

admit, you're sort of an idiot."

I opened my mouth to argue. *No, Dwight, you're the idiot.* Then I closed my mouth. What could I say? Dwight was right. He was going to Splashtastic Park. He was a winner. He had all his skin. I was the kid who let someone cover him in bandages and walk him down the street. I was an idiot. A skinless, bandaged idiot.

"Well, I'd like to hang around," Dwight said, "but Zeke won a couple movie tickets for second place, and he's sharing them with me. The show's starting soon. I gotta go." He headed out.

I stayed where I was. Skinless. Friendless. Prizeless.

Well, it could be worse. At least I'd have a lot of scabs to pick soon. I wondered whether I could grind them up and sell them for medicine. Then I could start my own town. I guess I could call it Stupidville.