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Uncle Vince's Invention

Bored with the long summer holiday, but at the same time showing no desire to return to school, Bridget, and her younger brother Robert, spent a great deal of time arguing and bickering. And today was no exception. As they both sat at the kitchen table eating their breakfast cereal, Robert commented on his sister's eating habits.

"Why do you do that?" he began. Bridget took the bait. "Do what?" "Eat in that disgusting way. Like you're the creature from the swamp."

Bridget glowered at him and he wondered if she was going to lash out. He braced himself for the blow. But Bridget wrong-footed him again by smiling a secret and rather smug smile, indicating that she knew something he didn't, and continued eating her muesli. Robert found this more annoying than if she had hit him. Having a sister of twelve going on thirteen was often a huge wind-up, especially as he could never win any battles. She was bigger and stronger than him for a start, and it really annoyed him to think that being ten years old and still at primary school, he could never catch up with her and it would always be like this throughout his entire life. But he could still try to make her life tricky at moments like these, when boredom had set in.

As he planned his next move he stared at Fudge, their tortoiseshell cat, sitting near the table, no doubt waiting for an accidental spilling of some milky morsel. Robert flicked a soggy cornflake off the table for him. Unfortunately it landed bang in the middle of Fudge's back. Robert was about to lean forward to help the cat, when their mother rushed breathlessly into the kitchen.

"Haven't you two finished breakfast yet?" she yelled, glancing at the wall clock. "We need to leave! Now!"

"What's the rush?" Robert said casually, deliberately to annoy his mother.

"I thought I'd explained how important this job interview is for me. I knew you weren't listening. I've got to get there early because I

know how difficult parking can be. Now come on! Let's go! Bridget! Hurry up!"

Bridget, who'd been watching Fudge with interest as he tried unsuccessfully to reach the cornflake trapped in the fur on the middle of his back, rose from the table and said, "Okay," as if she was doing her mother a big favour.

Eventually, Mrs Watson managed to bundle them hurriedly into the family Renault parked outside their neat semi-detached house; but not before they'd had an argument over who would sit in the front passenger seat. Bridget won by the threat of yet another Chinese burn, and Robert sat moodily in the back seat until he got bored with sulking.

"So if you get this job, Mum, who's going to make our tea when we get home from school?" he demanded.

As their mother changed into a lower gear for the long climb up the steep hill towards their Uncle Vince's house, she said, "I'll be working flexitime."

Robert frowned. "Huh? What's flexitime?"

Bridget turned round and threw her brother a contemptuous look. "It stands for flexible, moron. It means Mum can pick and choose her hours."

Robert clicked his fingers at his sister, almost as if he could make her vanish. He knew it would annoy her, because he had mastered the skill of finger-clicking, whereas she still couldn't do it.

Mrs Watson, sensing the tension between her children, cautioned them about their behaviour. "Now please be good and no arguments while you're at Uncle Vince's. I don't know what he must think when you've both got a strop on."

"We're always as good as gold at Uncle Vince's," Bridget said. And to prove it, she turned back and talked to Robert with exaggerated politeness. "What do you think, Robert? Do you think Uncle Vince might have invented something interesting for a change?"

Uncle Vince, their mother's younger brother, was an inventor.

"I doubt it," Robert said. "Last time we went round there he'd invented a gadget for freezing non-frozen defrosted frozen foods. I

couldn't see the point in that."

"Nor could I, Robert," Bridget replied. "Still, there was that musical drinking glass that played 'Don't Stop Me Now' when you tilted it to have a drink. That was quite good fun."

"Perhaps," said their mother, "he might have invented something really exciting."

"Like what?" Robert asked.

"Oh, I don't know. How about a time machine? Then you could go back and look at dinosaurs. But make sure you're back in time for tea."

"Ha-ha!" Bridget and Robert cried in unison.

Mrs Watson pulled up outside her brother's rambling Victorian house, its grey walls covered in ivy. The children loved going to Uncle Vince's house, which was remarkable – not because it stood stately on the cliffs, overlooking the sea, but because it had so many rooms to explore, and each room contained interesting, half-invented, unfinished gadgets to look at. Most grown-ups, of course, thought the house was a mess, but to Bridget and Robert it was paradise.

They got out of the car, waved their mother goodbye, wished her luck with the job interview, and watched the vehicle as it disappeared back down the steep hill.

As they approached the house, they began arguing over who got to knock the weird, gargoyle-like face of the big brass knocker. To settle the argument, they tossed a coin and Bridget won.

"You cheated," Robert said, but only half-heartedly because he knew she hadn't.

But as they walked up the stone steps towards the front door, the knocker spoke to them.

"Speak! Identify yourselves!" it boomed.

"Er - I'm Bridget - and this is my brother Robert," Bridget told the knocker, trying to keep her voice from shaking.

"Can't he speak for himself?" the knocker questioned. Robert was staring at it with wide-eyed amazement, his mouth opening and closing like a fish.

Bridget nudged him. "Go on, Robert. Say something." "Hello! I'm Robert," he eventually piped up.

"Then come straight in, Robert and Bridget," the knocker announced, and the door swung open automatically.

"Cor!" Robert exclaimed as they entered the dark hallway. Out of the gloom at the far end of the hall there appeared a large hairy face, gliding towards them. The door slammed shut behind them.

"Hello, Leonardo!" they both cried, pleased to see their uncle's Irish wolfhound.

The dog padded up to them and came face to face with Robert. He looked as if he could swallow the boy in one gulp. He was almost as tall as Robert, but he had soft brown eyes and was as gentle as a kitten.

They both stroked and cuddled the enormous dog who was pleased to see them and wagged his rather scrawny tail; and then, like an old butler, he turned and silently led them down the hall. They followed him out through the messy kitchen, across the contraption-filled utility room, and into their uncle's garage-cum-workshop.

But what was this? Instead of finding their uncle surrounded by weird machinery, some crazy invention he was working on, here he was humming happily as he screwed a small bulb into the rear offside brake light of an ice cream van.

"Hello, you two," he said as if he'd been expecting them. "What do you think of my latest invention?"

Bridget looked disappointed.

"But it's an ice cream van," she said.

"And they've already been invented," Robert added. "There's one that parks near the beach."

"But this," their Uncle Vince announced proudly, "is no ordinary ice cream van."

He made a grand sweeping gesture towards the vehicle. "This is a time machine," he declared. "What do you think of that?"

Off To Newton Abbot!

Bridget and Robert stared at the van for a very long time. Robert was the first to break the silence.

“Is it really a time machine?” He was dying to know.

“I hope so.” Uncle Vince grinned, and for some inexplicable reason seemed delighted with their reaction. “I haven’t tested it yet, but that’s the general idea.”

Open-mouthed, Robert turned to his sister. “Mum told us he might have invented a time machine.”

Uncle Vince frowned thoughtfully and scratched his chin. “Hmm. Interesting. How could she possibly know that? I’ve not told anyone yet. Not anyone.” He smoothed his hands palm downwards to make a point. “Not know how!”

“I think it was a coincidence.”

Puzzled, Uncle Vince’s eyebrows shot upwards. “Coincidence?”

“Yes, I think Mum was joking.” “Ah! That explains it.”

“But it just looks like an ordinary ice cream van,” Robert complained.

“That’s the whole point, Robert. I wanted a machine that could travel in time and not look conspicuous.”

“Conspicuous!” Bridget cried. “You mean if you turned up in an ice cream van in King Arthur’s time they wouldn’t notice something odd about it?”

Uncle Vince stroked his chin thoughtfully. “I admit it might be somewhat difficult to explain to Sir Lancelot what a 99 cone is, but...”

Robert interrupted to ask what conspicuous meant.

“It means something fairly obvious that you’d notice,” Bridget told him.

Robert fell about laughing. “You’d notice an ice cream van all right, especially if you were a stone-age man or a dinosaur.”

Their uncle seemed a bit put out. He sniffed huffily and said, “I suppose you think I’m a bit...” He swivelled a finger around the side

of his head.

“Oh no,” Bridget said. “Mum always says you’re unconventional.”

“It’s Dad who thinks you’re barmy,” Robert added. “Ridiculous!” his uncle said, absent-mindedly dropping the used brake light bulb into one of the plentiful pockets of his cargo pants.

Bridget patted the side of the van. “You must admit, this van will seem strange to people living in Victorian or Georgian times—”

“Or prehistoric times,” Robert interjected.

Uncle Vince looked at his watch. Suddenly he became excited and impatient, and spoke hurriedly. “My original idea was to go forward in time - say about one week. Find out what wins at the Newton Abbot horse races, then come back and place a bet on the winners.”

He stopped and looked serious, just like their dad did when he confessed to stopping off for a quick pint on the way home from work.

“But,” he continued, “I realised how wrong it is to muck about with time. Time travel is for discovery, and as time travellers we have a duty to behave as mere observers.”

Bridget eyed him shrewdly. “Then why did you choose to use an ice cream van as a time machine?”

“Temptation!” Uncle Vince laughed. “I couldn’t resist it.” Robert was distracted by a large pile of chains and handcuffs on a bench, along with some hoods and masks. “What are these for, Uncle Vince?”

His uncle laughed delightedly. “Those are for my escapology act.”

Robert frowned as he tried to work this out.

“The Great Harry Houdini!” his uncle explained. “I’ve been studying his escape methods. I’ve become an expert at lock picking, and I’ll be doing some escape tricks to raise money for charity at the Moreton Summer Fete. And the lock picking’s already proved useful. I took the ice cream van out for a test drive, left the keys in the ignition when I got out and locked the door, so I was able to pick the lock and get back in. And talking of ice cream vans, we’re

wasting time! Come on! All aboard the time machine. It's forward to the races at Newton Abbot next week."

He began singing a song called 'We're in the Money' as he opened the door on the driver's side.

"Are we coming with you?" Bridget asked, her eyes widening with excitement.

"You don't want to miss the trip of a lifetime, do you?" their uncle chortled.

"Coo-er. Cool!" Robert exclaimed, running round to the passenger side.

"What about Leonardo?" Bridget said. "Can he come with us?"

Uncle Vince stopped as he was about to climb into the van. "Hmm. Hygiene might be a problem. Customers might object to buying ice cream from a van with a great hairy..." He saw Leonardo was looking up at him with sad, appealing, obedient, I'm-really-no-trouble-at-all-and-I'll-do-anything- you-say-Master eyes.

"Oh blow it!" Uncle Vince cried. "You can come with us, Leonardo. Hygiene - pygiene - who cares!"