

~ EPISODE ONE ~

THE EXQUISITE CORPSE

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A Very Unusual and Completely Amazing Story
Pieced Together Out of So Many Parts
That It Is Not Possible
to Describe Them All Here, So Go Ahead
and Just Start Reading

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

JON SCIESZKA

illustrated by CHRIS VAN DUSEN

This story starts with a train rushing through the night.

The full moon lights the silver rails winding around dark mountains, through deep woods, and over steep gorges of jagged rock and one freezing-cold rushing black mountain river.

I wish there was enough time to describe all of the funny (and touching) twists and turns — especially the Elephant Clown Party — that led up to now. But there isn't. Enough time. Because there is a ticking clock. And the two passengers we care most about don't know anything about it.

In a sleeping berth, in the third car from the end of the train, are two children, eleven-year-old twins, who have just run away from the circus.

The girl's name is Nancy. The boy's name is Joe.

They have no idea that those are not their true names. Though they will figure it out soon enough.

Up until two hours ago, Nancy and Joe thought they were orphans. That turned out to be not true, either.

Joe holds up the birthday card that has suddenly changed their lives.

"This isn't even in code! If our real mom and dad are such secret spies, wouldn't they have at least written in code?"

"Maybe they didn't have enough time," says Nancy.

Happy

HELP. NOW.

FOLLOW CLUES.

RESCUE US BY

PIECING TOGETHER THE EXQUISITE CORPSE.

Birthday.

LOVE, MOM & DAD



“Gets right to the point. And there is this mark. The same mark we both have on our right little toe. Who else would know about that?”

Joe frowns. “But we don’t really know if we are going to the right place. We don’t really know if the Exquisite Corpse is the Top-Secret Robot we’re supposed to piece together. And we don’t really know how to help.”

Joe is right to be worried. But he is worried for all of the wrong reasons.

The note *is* from their real mom and dad. They *are* going to the right place. The Exquisite Corpse *is* a very Top-Secret

Robot that can only be assembled by them. And because they were raised in a circus, Joe and Nancy have been perfectly trained for just this moment.

Fire juggling, trapeze flips, sharpshooting, bullwhip stunts, lock picking, lion taming, bareback riding, knife throwing, snake charming, disappearing, sword swallowing, and other circus skills can come in handy in all sorts of situations.

What Joe *should* be worried about is the clock—the ticking clock. Oh, so much more to explain. So little time.

Here, you will just have to piece things together yourself:

If the train makes it over the last treacherous gorge, there is a good chance that you and Nancy and Joe will have to deal with werewolves and mad scientists, real ninjas and fake vampires, one roller-skating baby, a talking pig, creatures from another planet (possibly another dimension), killer poetry, clues from classic children's books, two easy riddles, several bad knock-knock jokes, plenty of explosions, a monkey disguised as a pirate, two meatballs, a blue plastic *Star Wars* lunch box (missing its matching thermos), a ticking clock, and not just one bad guy but a whole army of villains, cads, scalawags, sneaks, rats, varmints, and swindlers. Also

several desperados, a gang of evildoers, and one just plain bad egg.

And you-know-who will have to piece together the Exquisite Corpse.

But first, the ticking clock.

It is attached to the last bridge.

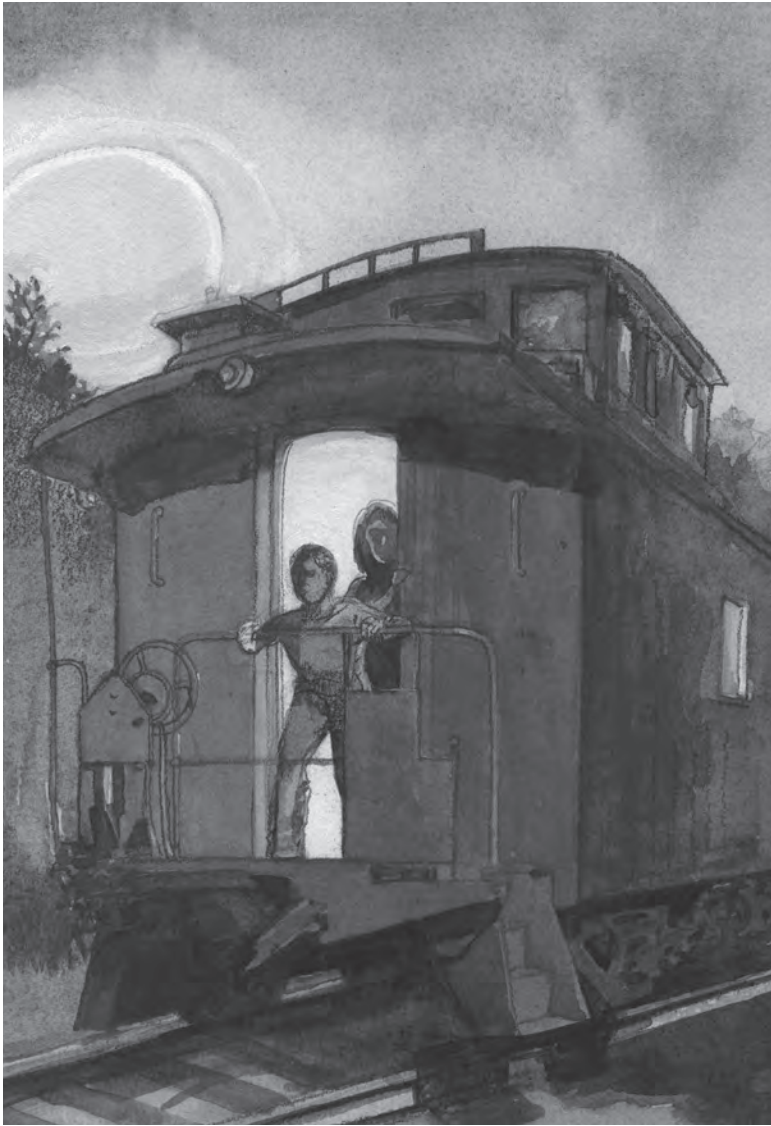
And, of course, there is a wire that leads from the clock to an entire bundle of dynamite.

Joe and Nancy's train rushes toward that bridge.

The second hand of the clock has exactly forty-seven more ticks before it reaches its very explosive alarm time.

Joe looks once more at their birthday card.

“So now what do we do?”



~ EPISODE TWO ~

THE LOST CLUE

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

KATHERINE PATERSON

illustrated by JAMES RANSOME

Do?” said an ominous yet familiar voice outside their berth. “There is nothing you can *do*, kiddos. In exactly forty-seven ticks of the clock, this train will come to the final bridge, and I do mean *final!*”

“Boppo?” Joe stuck his head out between the curtains to see the painted face and bright red nose he thought they’d left far behind. “What are you doing on this train?”

Boppo laughed. It was an evil unclown-like sound that sent shivers down our heroes’ spinal columns. “Did you think you could run away so easily? But, no time to chat. I have to

de-train before de train de-molishes.” And with that Boppo raced away in the direction of the caboose.

“Pull the emergency cord, Nancy!” cried Joe as he leapt from the berth and gave chase.

Nancy yanked the red handle above the berth. Almost immediately the great train shuddered and squawked to a stop. In the distance she could hear it — a gigantic explosion. She pushed her way down the aisle, which was quickly filling with passengers who were furious at being so rudely awakened. She found Joe staring off the back of the train. Boppo was long gone.

“Nancy, we’ve got to get off this train. Now. While it’s stopped.”

“And not warn the police about Boppo?” Nancy was horrified. “No,” she said, “first we need to make an anonymous tip. If only we had a cell phone.”

“There are lots of people milling around,” said Joe. “I’ll pickpocket a phone.” Joe had picked up a lot of useful tricks working in and around a circus.

“That’s dishonest,” said Nancy, who was highly moral, “but I guess it’s better than letting potential killers get away.”

A phone was appropriated from a passenger in the dining car and the authorities were called. With a clear con-

~ EPISODE TWO ~



science, our noble twins left the borrowed phone on the rear platform, climbed off the train, and walked forward past the stalled engine. Ahead in the moonlight they could see on their left the shining rails upon a second railway trestle and on the right the twisted metal remains of the bridge their train had been scheduled to cross.

“Now what?” said Joe, peering down into the deep gorge that lay beneath the once-twin spans. “It would take us hours in broad daylight to hike down and up this chasm, and we’d never be able to swim that roaring river at the bottom anyway.”

“Fortunately, the moon is bright,” said the valiant girl, “and having been raised in a circus, we are expert tightrope walkers. We will walk across the surviving bridge.”

“Without a net?”

“Naturally,” said Nancy. “Take off your shoes. We’ll do it sock-footed.”

We won’t say that Joe was afraid, but he was a better pickpocket than acrobat. Still, by humming a cheery tune and never, ever once looking down through the gaps between the ties into the abyss or to the side at the mangled wreckage of the destroyed bridge, he managed to follow his sister across the treacherous rail.

“Well,” said Joe, “that wasn’t so bad. Now all we have to do is follow the clues, find the pieces, put together the Exquisite Corpse, and rescue our parents.”

“Look at the birthday card again,” said Nancy. “See if it gives us any clue to begin with.”

~ EPISODE TWO ~

“I left it on the train!” cried Joe. “I’ve lost our only clue!”

“Perhaps I can help, dearies.” Coming toward them out of the night shadows was a sight so frightening, it was almost enough to make them turn and race back across the ominous gorge.



~ EPISODE THREE ~

THE FOUND CLUE

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

KATE DICAMILLO

illustrated by CALEF BROWN

It was Boppo, of course. His hair was standing up on top of his head in a way that was not at all attractive. It made him look quite mad.

“You should do something about your hair,” said Nancy. “It makes you look crazy.”

“I am crazy!” shouted Boppo. “Plus, I just walked sock-footed over an ominous gorge. It’s enough to make anyone’s hair stand on end.”

“I can’t believe you followed us,” said Nancy. “The stealth! The daring!”



“Yes, well,” said Boppo, “I have some advice for you: never underestimate a clown.”

“What’s that noise?” said Joe.

“Do you mean that tick-tick-ticking?” said Boppo.

“Yes,” said Joe.

“I hear it, too,” said Nancy.

“I thought you kids might like a little show,” said Boppo.

“No, thank you,” said Nancy. “It’s dark. And we’re in a hurry.”

“Oh, everyone has time to be entertained,” said Boppo. He laughed and put a hand in one of his pockets.

“You’re not going to juggle, are you?” said Joe.

“Please don’t juggle,” said Nancy. (Nancy, you will remember, is highly moral; and highly moral people find juggling objectionable.)

“You don’t have time to juggle,” said Joe. “We called the authorities. They’re on their way. You’re in big trouble, Boppo.”

“Oh, I think not,” said Boppo. “Watch very carefully now, dearies. Don’t take your eyes off your friend Boppo.” Boppo pulled a meatball from his pocket.

“Oh, I hate it when you juggle meatballs,” said Joe. “It’s so boring.”

“And messy,” said Nancy.

Boppo pulled another meatball from his pocket. “Shhhh,” he said. “Keep your eyes on the clown.” He reached into his pocket a third time and pulled out a ticking, humming thing.

“It’s a bomb!” said Nancy.

“I guess you can’t say juggling is boring now,” said Boppo, “can you?” The clown began to juggle the two meatballs and the bomb.

“Oh, Joe,” said Nancy, “what should we do?”

“Let’s be patient,” said Joe.

“Patient?” said Nancy. “Patient! What if while we’re being patient, the bomb goes off?”

“Shhhh,” said Joe. “It will happen. You know it will. It always does.”

“But it’s a bomb!” said Nancy.

“Just be ready to use your catlike reflexes,” said Joe.

Boppo juggled. Boppo laughed. The meatballs and the bomb flew through the air, faster and faster: meatball, meatball, bomb; meatball, meatball, bomb. The twins braced themselves. And then it happened, just as it always did.

Boppo fell asleep. Mid-juggle. He simply dropped to the ground in a deep and profound and peaceful slumber. A meatball fell on top of him and then another. But before the bomb could hit the ground (or the clown), Nancy (oh, brave, moral Nancy!) made use of her catlike reflexes and reached out and grabbed hold of it.

“Good job, Nancy,” said Joe. “Toss it here.”

Nancy threw Joe the bomb. Joe turned and threw it off into the darkness. “Teamwork!” said Joe. There was a thump. A wham. And then there was total silence.

Boppo whimpered and then began to snore.

“Narcoleptic clowns are a really sad phenomenon,” said Joe.

He bent over Boppo.

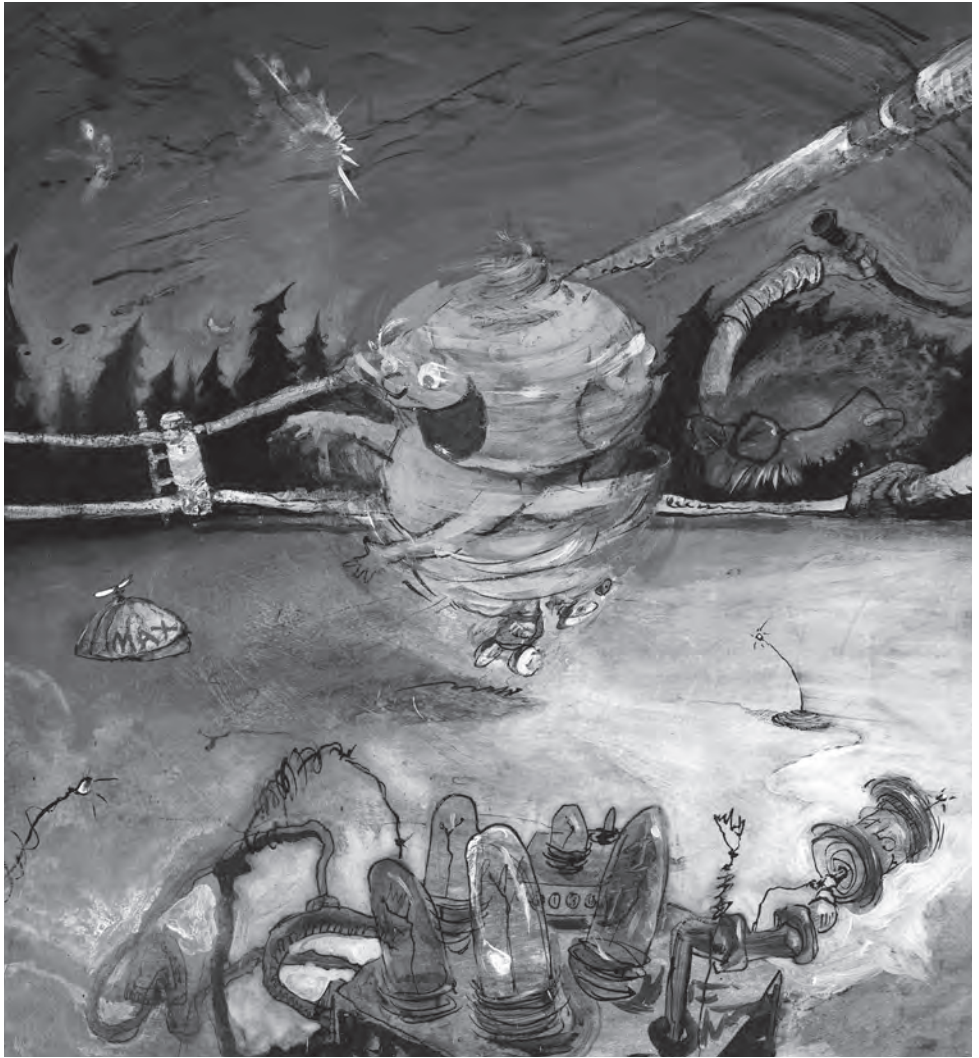
“What are you doing?” said Nancy.

“I’m searching his pockets,” said Joe.

“Oh, but Joe, that’s not moral.”

Joe pulled several red noses out of the clown’s pocket. The noses were followed by a rubber rat. The rubber rat was followed by a book of poems by Edna St. Vincent Millay. “Clown pockets kind of give me the creeps,” said Joe. And then he said, “Wait a minute. Here it is! Our clue, Nancy. Here’s our destiny. The card.” He stood. He held it over his head.

“Lovely,” said a voice, “just exactly super-de-dooper. I’ll be taking that, then. Such helpful children.”



~ EPISODE FOUR ~

DIG THAT PIG

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

SUSAN COOPER

illustrated by TIMOTHY BASIL ERING

It was a pig. A very large, lean, elegant black pig with a white patch around one eye. He looked exceedingly dangerous. “I’ll take it *now*,” he said, and he held out his front hoof.

Down on his right hind hoof there was a small red arrow, just like the birthmark the twins had on their right little toes, but they didn’t notice that. After all, they were facing a large, threatening pig. And it was dark.

Joe still had Boppo’s rubber rat in his hand. Quick as a wink, he thrust it at the outstretched hoof, called telepathically to his twin, and bravely dived off the bridge into the

gorge. Nancy dived after him, even more bravely. (Don't you agree? I mean, she'd had an extra moment to think about it.) The river was a long way down, but they had both been making excellent swallow dives from the high trapeze since they were five years old.

Fortunately, the freezing water had been made pleasantly warm by the explosion of Boppo's bomb. The twins had a short but refreshing swim. They clambered ashore, and as they shook themselves dry, they heard a loud splash in the river behind them. Then another. What was happening, out there in the dark water?

"Run!" said Joe.

They ran through the trees, with vampire bats swooping frustrated above their heads, and soon came to a clearing. Given the circumstances, you might expect them to have come upon a gingerbread house and a witch. Instead, they saw in the moonlit clearing a full-size boxing ring, in which an athletic-looking baby was twirling in rapid circles. He wore tiny roller skates, a diaper, and a baseball cap with MAX written on it, and he was laughing.

Outside the ring, a small man was jumping up and down, cracking a bullwhip. They could tell from his shock of

~ EPISODE FOUR ~



mad white hair that he was Albert Einstein. Or maybe not. But he was certainly mad.

“Faster! Faster!” shouted Albert Einstein.

“Leave that baby alone!” Nancy called, full of moral fervor. Once in a while her moral fervor got the better of her.



She ran up and seized Albert Einstein's bullwhip, cracking it expertly so that its long leather lash snaked around him and pinned his arms to his sides.

The baby went on roller-skating around the boxing ring, laughing merrily.

"No!" shouted Albert Einstein, struggling to move his pinioned arms. "It's my greatest experiment — we're solving the secret of perpetual motion! E equals MC squared plus . . . something else. We're nearly there!"

Then he stared at Nancy and Joe. “It’s you!” he cried. “Artoo and Deetoo! The Corpse twins, on the trail to piece together my Secret Robot! Have you got your passport?”

Joe had the birthday card clenched tightly in one hand; he opened it. “You mean this?” He elbowed his sister. “Nancy — lighten up —”

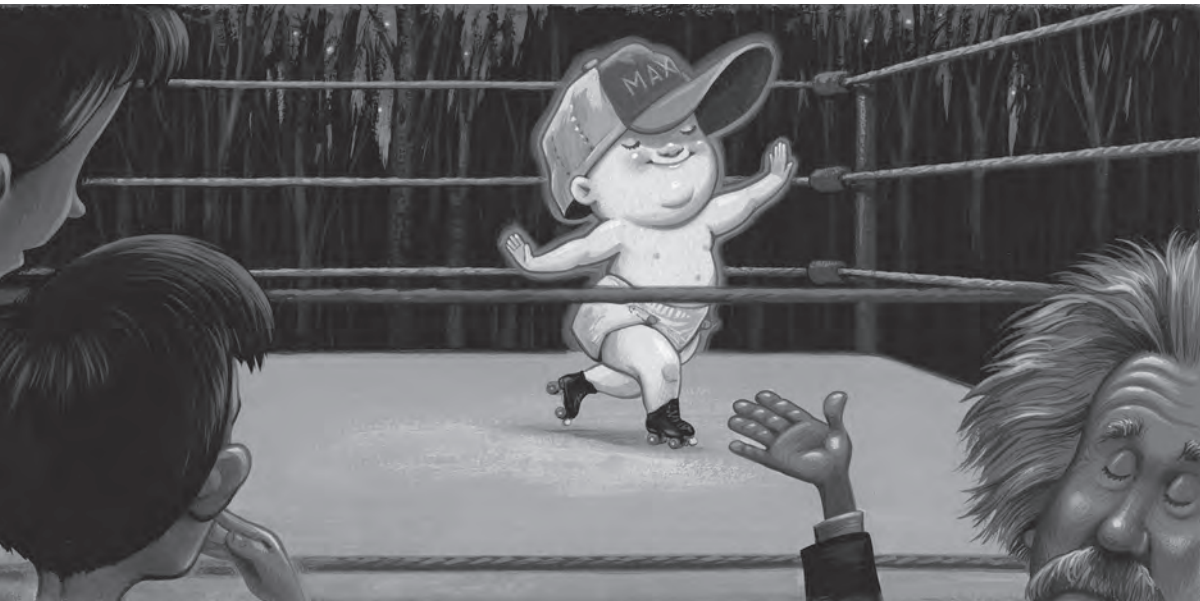
Reluctantly Nancy gave the bullwhip a twitch, so that Albert Einstein spun like a top and was free.

The baby was roller-skating faster and faster now, singing — quite creditably — the theme from *Star Wars*.

Albert Einstein beamed as he saw the card. “There it is — just in time! You are a credit to your parents, my dears. Max is your clue to the next step on your trail, and you must get there before the sun rises! It’s that way!”

He pointed beyond the boxing ring, into the shadows.

But there was a clopping and a rustling sound behind them, and into the clearing came Boppo, riding on the pig.



~ EPISODE FIVE ~

THE EXQUISITE CORPSE

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

GREGORY MAGUIRE

illustrated by CHRIS VAN DUSEN

Hold everything,” said Boppo.

Everyone obeyed as much as possible. Joe held the birthday card with their parents’ urgent cry for help. Nancy held the bullwhip in readiness. The baby held the last note in the *Star Wars* theme song. Einstein held his breath.

“I’m not holding a thing, including you! Get off my back!” snarled the dripping black pig with the white eye patch. Boppo hung on as the pig began to buck like a bronco. “I tell you I’m not joining forces with you!”

“We can work together as villains!” cried Boppo, mopping his clown face with a trail of nine linked handkerchiefs in different colors. “Trust me.”

“I *never* trust another villain!” answered the pig. He snorted and contorted so quickly that the eye patch flung off. Without that clever disguise, Joe and Nancy suddenly recognized him as Genius Kelly, the dancing pig from the circus they had tried to run away from but that, increasingly, seemed to be hunting them down.

“Can we stop holding our breath now?” wheezed Einstein.

“You don’t need permission to breathe,” snapped Nancy. She turned the bullwhip on Boppo the clown and Genius Kelly the dancing pig and bound them together. She snared the pig’s hooves in a secondary loop, of which she was particularly proud because it brought the pig into a snout dive right before them all.

Joe, Nancy, the baby, and Einstein stared fiercely at the immobilized pair of evil circus agents.

“I want some answers and I want them now,” said Nancy. Her prowess at the bullwhip was going to her head. “First things first. Genius Kelly, I never knew you could talk.”

“The world is full of surprises,” replied the pig. “Did you know that as Winston Churchill led Britain to victory in World War II, every night he smoked a pink cigar while sitting in a bathtub filled with rubber cement?”

“Is that true?” asked Joe, who, being ninety seconds younger than Nancy, was sometimes gullible.

“All of it. Except the part about Winston Churchill. Never be surprised by surprises; it’s bad for the digestion. Did you know that your stage name, Sloppy Joe, is really a cunning code name devised to throw alien enemies off the trail in case they tracked you down to the Sick and Tired Circus?”

“No! I thought it was my stage name because my thinking is sloppy. What with my being so much younger and more immature than Nancy. And constantly reminded about it by Ringmaster, who never let me talk in public. What’s my real true name when I am not disguised as Sloppy Joe?”

“Joe Sloppy.”

“Clever! No one would ever guess.” Joe trusted everyone so nicely. This is a charming trait, if sometimes dangerous.

Nancy asked, “If my stage name is Dancy Nancy, then what’s my real name? Nancy Dancy?”

“No,” said the pig. “You’re his sister. Your real name is Nancy Sloppy.”

“I don’t think I like that.”

“We haven’t time to convene a meeting of the Everyone-Feel-Sorry-for-Nancy Club. Your brother has another question. Yes, Sloppy Joe?”

Nancy stuck out her tongue at the pig. Joe said, “Since you’re answering questions, what is an Exquisite Corpse?”

“It’s a yoga position invented by Winston Churchill at the height of World War II in which you balance yourself on your eyelashes and touch your knees to your adenoids.”

“Is that true?”

“All of it. Except the part about Winston Churchill. Actually the position was invented by his evil twin brother, Princeton Churchill.”

“Don’t listen to a word of this!” shouted Boppo. “Almost every word he says is a lie, including *low-cal* and *de-caf*!”

Nancy drew herself up straight. “Now look. I’m a girl proud of a certain inner compass that guides her right in terms of her —” She paused.

“Morals?” interrupted Boppo and Genius Kelly witheringly.

“Timing,” she declared. “It is time for some true answers. I get the feeling Genius Kelly is using his garbled history to distract us from something important. I want to know what an Exquisite Corpse really is before we go any further.” Suddenly she got a circus-y sort of idea about how to deal with these lunatics. Clown with them. “Knock, knock,” she said.

“Who’s there?” they all answered, except the baby.

“Thermos.”

“Thermos who?”

“Thermos be an explanation of the Exquisite Corpse, and I want it now.”

“That’s easy,” said Einstein, who out of anxiety, probably, had been trying to crochet his hair into a pot holder. “Listen carefully. You understand that corpses of any sort follow a routine pattern of corruption and decomposition. But if you can manage to get some flitch or bit of a corpse — a fingernail, a dying leaf off a tree, a bird’s feather — up to warp speed, you can generate a shadow-thing, an exquisite replica, which might last long enough to be useful. Myself, I experimented with a lock of my baby hair that Mama had saved in a volume of poetry by Edna St. Vincent Millay, and look



what I have now.” He indicated his nimbus of white hair. “The grafting was painful but it proves my point. I call the process Renaissance.”

“Excuse my sloppy thinking, but I thought the corpse was a robot,” said Joe.

“Even a robot can be regenerated by my warp-speed process,” said Einstein, “if you start with a useful cog or the right computer chip or maybe a pair of triple-A batteries. And if we get the corpse of a slain robot to regenerate, it might be capable of bringing Nancy and Joe to rescue their mom.” He shrugged at the clown-and-pig roll-up as if to say, *Sorry, villains.*

“Didn’t we need to rescue both our parents? And didn’t you call us Artoo and Detoo?” said Nancy.

“I was just trying to get the baby in the *Star Wars* mood,” said Einstein. “I suppose you’ve guessed there are sometimes glitches in trying to generate an Exquisite Corpse, and the baby is one of them. I hadn’t expected to make the introductions just yet, but I suppose, as Genius Kelly advises, never be surprised by surprises. Children, allow me to present your illustrious father, Professor Alistair Sloppy.”

“Daddy?” whispered Joe and Nancy.

The baby smiled broadly and wet his diaper, which was, when you come to think of it, not much of a surprise.