

FREAKOUT ISLAND

BY JUSTIN CHRISTOPHER

For the umpteenth time that week, Leo Wriggly blew a bubble so big it covered his face like a bright pink spider's web. Ick! No! Not again! The gooey gum stuck like glue, and each time he tried to pull a piece off he felt as if his mop of hair might come with it.

Leo desperately needed help, but he couldn't ask his mum or dad. Not after having been told ten million times to STOP EATING SO MUCH GUM.

Of course, this wasn't the worst gum incident ever. Once he'd eaten three packets in one go and produced a bubble so brilliant that when it popped it covered his *entire* head. Leo celebrated, because surely this was the biggest bubble ever blown...until minutes later when he realised that gum and hair are NOT friends. His dad decided the only way to get the Dubbly Bubbly strawberry-flavoured mess out was for Leo to get a number one buzz cut at the barbers. OMG! OH MY GUM!

Afterwards, Leo Wriggly felt he might as well have been bald!

Man, that had *almost* made him give up bubblegum for good.

But today as Leo looked in the mirror, examining the goo all over his face and hair, he suddenly had the most wonderful thought. He wasn't going to be in trouble after all, and it was thanks to the jar of peanut butter in his wardrobe. It was also thanks to his two best friends at school, Jono and Yang, because one day in English class Ingrid Salzburger had told them that if you accidentally burst gum all over your body you could cover it with peanut butter, and it would come off. So that afternoon Leo tried the suggestion, and it worked!

It was a miracle! How utterly wonderful.

No telling-off.

No gum in his hair.

No trip to the barbers.

Leo felt very thankful for having two such cool friends.

Now Leo felt he could blow any bubble he liked.

And he did.

Leo Wiggly lived with his mum and dad in a tiny house in the northern town of Gumsberry. Despite its size, Leo's parents still liked to pack every square centimetre of the place with an unimaginable amount of junk. It was always a major struggle to find the TV remote, and sometimes the TV itself was completely buried by clothes, boxes, and any number of useless items which should have stayed on the shelves of Poundland.

A few days after his success with the peanut butter, Leo arrived home from school, poured himself a glass of milk and found a free corner of the couch on which to sit. He was about to watch one of his many favourite movies starring Burp Lancaster. Yes, yes, he knew the actor's real name was actually *Burt* Lancaster, but when Leo was a toddler he'd accidentally called him Burp.

So Burp he became.

Leo and his dad often watched Burp movies together, and because Burp chewed Dubble Bubbly bubblegum when he was flying planes, Leo did the same thing. As Burp always saved the day while chewing gum, Leo thought this was a good enough reason to buy packets and packets of the stuff.

Leo was all settled to watch his movie when his dad appeared right in front of him. He sat down cross-legged like a child. 'Well?' Mr Wiggly asked.

'Well what, Dad?' Leo replied.

'Gonna ask me how my day was?'

'How was your day, Dad?'

'Well, thank you for asking, Son! Today was a WINNER WINNER CHICKEN DINNER! Your mum and I won three prizes. Tha-reeee! Count 'em! Tha-ree!'

'Wow,' replied Leo. 'What were they today?'

Mr Wiggly cleared his throat and sprang up into standing position. 'Some design software, a packet of chalk and twenty cans of cow tongue. We get them all tonight. What about you, Son? What are you going to do this afternoon?'

Leo sat back in his seat. 'Well, thank *you* for asking.' He giggled. 'I was going to watch Burp Lancaster, and then maybe play *MidNite Raider* in my room.'

'Yes, you're very good at that! I've seen the way you fly the plane on that game, very good! When you become a pilot you can spoil your old mum and dad and fly them around the world. It'll be your way of thanking us for all the hard work we've done!'

None of this made any sense to Leo, because for as long as he could remember his mum and dad never had an actual job. Instead, they were Professional Competition Winners.

Every morning as he made breakfast and his school lunch he watched his parents, still in their pyjamas and slippers, staring at their computer screens. His dad drummed the table with his fingers and his mum furiously bit her nails.

When the postman arrived Mr and Mrs Wiggly sprinted down the driveway together. Once they reached the letterbox they held each other's hands and performed a quick game of paper-scissors-rock to see who was allowed to open it.

Having seen what was or wasn't in there, Mr and Mrs Wiggly would either trudge back up the driveway staring at the ground and sulking, or leap into the air like two overly excited dolphins, shouting 'WINNER WINNER CHICKEN DINNER!' It was nice to see them happy. It would be less nice to eat cow tongue for a fortnight.

Leo started watching his movie, but soon had to pause it as his mum came in, sweating from having carried a large box, and sat down to open it. 'All right, dear?' she asked.

'Good day?'

'Okay, I guess,' replied Leo. 'Oh, I forgot to tell you, next Monday it's *Bring Your Child to Work Day*.'

'OH, GOODIE!' his dad replied.

Leo felt as if he were about to burst out laughing, but then he realised his dad was deadly serious. 'But, Dad,' said Leo, holding in another giggle. 'Mum... You can't... I mean...how could *you*...'

'WHAT?' his mum protested. 'Don't dare say it. Don't you DARE say it!'

'Well, I mean,' Leo stammered, unable to hold the words in his mouth. 'You don't really work, and Dad doesn't either. Do you?'

'How rude!' replied Mrs Wiggly. 'We're PCWs!'

'I know that,' said Leo. 'But it's not a real job, not like a doctor, or an accountant.'

Mr Wiggly leapt off the carpet as if he'd been sitting on a hot stove. 'I beg your pardon? Look at last year! We won a PlayStation 4, a giant jar of jellybeans, a salamander... He

died, of course but how was I to know a lizard needs water? Um, what else, a flatscreen TV, a life-size Batman statue, *three* leaf blowers and a year's supply of beef jerky.'

'Which you should stop eating, it gives you gas,' said Mrs Wiggly, prodding her husband in the belly. 'Stinks out the bathroom that does. Pooo-wee!'

'And don't forget the pogo sticks,' Mr Wiggly continued, pointing to a long thin box in the corner, covered in dust.

'*And* the giant pink chimpanzee,' continued Mrs Wiggly. '*And* the electric guitar!'

'Mum, it's a left-handed guitar,' said Leo. 'None of us are left-handed.'

'A guitar's a guitar, Son!'

'Ooooooh, who's being a little party pooper?' Mr Wiggly said, and gave Leo a horse bite on his thigh, causing him to squeal and fall to the floor.

Meanwhile, Mrs Wiggly walked towards the kitchen, flinging the tea towel over her shoulder. 'Not a real job. Pfft. And take a bath, you've got gum in your hair.'

Hearing that, Leo decided he was better off out of sight. He scarpered upstairs, but not to have a bath.

If Leo's parents were arguably a bit obsessive, so was he. He played *MidNite Raider* before school and after school, before breakfast and after breakfast, before dinner and after dinner. If he could have played it on the toilet he would have. He even played it in his dreams.

To him, sitting in the cockpit of an aeroplane, even if it wasn't a real one, was better than anything in the whole world. He loved to soar through the clouds, then land on an aircraft carrier in a thunderstorm, or in the Mongolian desert.

It made him feel like a real pilot being trained for a war, or an FBI agent who had been sent on a top-secret mission, or best of all, had been instructed to rescue his hero Burp Lancaster from the Amazon jungle where he was being chased by jaguars and snakes.

It didn't even matter that Leo played the game in a room so small it was barely big enough for a single bed and a desk. Every day Leo dreamt of flying for real, wearing an actual pilot's uniform, with a real hat and a briefcase, and really truly heading for the south of France. Sometimes he was so engrossed in a flight that when his Dubble Bubbly became rubbery and tasteless, he *had* to swallow it, otherwise he'd crash and die.

Even worse, he'd lose his place on the *MidNite Raider* leaderboard.

And there was a very real danger that was going to happen now.

'Leo!' It was his dad, and he did not sound happy. 'LEEEEEEEEEEE-OOOOOO!'

'Not now, Dad,' Leo replied, his heart racing at having reached Level 9. The only other player he knew who'd reached Level 9 was KillerBee007, and he was the boss. But now Leo was getting close to the BEST SCORE EVER.

Ever!

'LEEEEEEEEEEE-OOOOOO!'

'Not now, please, Dad!'

'YES NOW. This gum on the toilet seat. I don't think your MUM put it there. Come and clean it off, NOW. Who puts bubblegum on a TOILET SEAT!?'

Suddenly Leo lost all concentration. His hands shook and his brain became a tumbling Jenga puzzle. His plane, which was attempting a perfect landing at Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris, was wobbling and diving out of control.

Leo was sweating now, and panicking. Just a few seconds before he could have been the best pilot in the world, but not now. His plane crashed into the Eiffel Tower, bursting into a ball of flames. Leo punched his desk and let out an almighty sigh. He was exhausted.

KillerBee007 was still world champion.

Someone was stomping down the hallway. But when Leo's bedroom door was thrown open he saw something that cheered him up instantly. In fact, he laughed so hard that snot came right out of his nose. His father was standing there holding a toilet seat.

'What *is* it about gum?' Mr Wriggly asked. 'It's disgusting!'

'I'm sorry, Dad, I was going to come and help you but I was sooooo close to getting my highest score ever, even higher than KillerBee—'

'Your gum eating is OUT OF CONTROL!' said Mr Wriggly, pointing to the bright red blob stuck to the underside of the toilet seat, which as Leo could now see, was broken.

Leo's mum came up close behind her husband, and peered around him at Leo. 'Don't you ever go swallowing it, either,' she said. 'Did you know that if you swallow bubblegum it will take seven years to digest? SEVEN YEARS! That's more than a decade! Even worse, if you keep swallowing it you'll blow a bubble out of your butt! I saw it with my own uncle Fred. Once he swallowed too much Dubble Bubbly and blew a bubble out of his bum that was so huge he ended up in hospital. He nearly drowned.'

'Drowned?'

'Did I say drowned? He nearly *died*.'

'Well, either one would be bad,' Dad said, and laughed at his own joke.

'Chewing too much gum will *wear out your jaw*,' Mrs Wriggly said.

Leo nodded.

'You'll rot your teeth,' said Mrs Wiggly.

Leo nodded again. It was stifling hot in this tiny room. 'Please,' he said. 'It's just that bubblegum is sooooo satisfying. And you can hang up posters with it!' he added, proudly pointing to the many pictures of aeroplanes which covered his room from floor to ceiling. Mr Wiggly did not seem convinced.

'Okay, I'll try to stop eating *so much* gum,' he said and spun around to face his computer. There was a message from KillerBee007.

It said, 'Better luck next time. LOSER.'

Leo made a face and prepared to launch a new flight. He reminded himself that, overall, his life wasn't too bad. He had his two best friends from school, Jono and Yang, and another best friend, his little scruffy doggy Peace and Quiet. He had his own bedroom and *MidNite Raider* and his own stash of Dubby Bubbly.

But things were about to turn very, very bad for poor Leo Wiggly, and it was through no fault of his own. In a matter of weeks this fairly ordinary boy was about to be trapped in a nasty place by even nastier people.

And as if that wasn't bad enough, some very strange things were about to happen to Leo's body. In particular, his *butt*.

The next day, Leo had just arrived home from school and was sitting comfortably at his computer with some cheese and crackers when he heard someone calling from the lounge.

It was his mum and she sounded very happy. 'Leo?' she called. 'Dearest, darling Leo, sunshine of my life? Could we possibly see you for a minute?'

‘Or when you’ve finished your turn on *MidNite Raider!*’ his father added. ‘We don’t want to interrupt your turn.’

A minute or so later Leo stood at the door to the lounge and peeked around the corner. That was when he felt something was wrong: very wrong. The lounge was *too* clean. Leo could actually see the floor, and the TV had absolutely nothing draped over it. But even stranger was the behaviour of Mr and Mrs Wiggly, who sat beside each other on the couch, as upright as meerkats, but smiling like the creepiest of clowns.

‘What’s happened?’ Leo asked quietly. ‘Are you breaking up?’

‘Ha! Of course not. In fact quite the opposite,’ said his dad, and gently patted an empty spot on the sofa. Leo crept towards his seat, watching his parents as if they were convicts about to escape. He folded his arms, deciding to stand instead of sit.

‘We’ve got some news,’ said his mum, rattling ice cubes around in her glass.

‘You’re having another baby?’ Leo blurted. ‘We’re moving? You got a *job*?’

‘Ooh, look at your imagination go! No, dear, it’s none of those things. We just wanted to tell you about our best ever WINNER WINNER CHICKEN DINNER.’

Mr Wiggly cleared his throat, took a deep breath and placed his hand on Leo’s knee.

‘We...are going on a holiday,’ he said.

‘Wow,’ Leo replied. ‘A holiday? Where are we going?’

‘We are not,’ said Mrs Wiggly. ‘It’ll be just your dad and me. And we didn’t have any time to find you a babysitter so we thought Aunt Margo—’

‘*Aunt Margo?*’

‘Yes, Aunt Margo.’

‘The one who never sends me birthday cards and calls me Little Mr Clever Clogs?’

'That was a compliment, Leo,' said Mr Wiggly. 'No one's ever called *me* that!'

'Look,' said Mrs Wiggly. 'It's only for two weeks and—'

Leo shook his head so quickly that his mop of hair flashed about like tussocks of grass in the wind. 'Why can't I come with you?' he asked.

'Because we won a voucher, honey,' Mrs Wiggly replied. 'And we work very hard, and quite frankly I think I deserve—'

'What about *Bring Your Child to Work Day*?'

'Leo, pu-leeeeease!' his mum continued. 'We can't miss this holiday, you should see the castle we're staying in! And the food and *everything else* is free. We're flying BUSINESS CLASS!'

Leo slumped onto the couch and buried his face into a cushion. A few seconds later he heard the sweetest words from his dad.

'We'll buy you *MidNite Raider* VERSION TWO!'

Leo sprang up like a jack rabbit. '*Really?*'

'Really,' said Leo's parents at exactly the same time.

'*MidNite Raider 2?*' Leo repeated. 'But, but...but it's only just come out, you can't even buy it in the shops...but you can buy it at the—'

'—airport, I know,' Mr Wiggly finished for him, with a knowing wink.

Leo's smile quickly turned to a frown. 'Dad, did you read the fine print?'

'*What* fine print?'

'The fine print on the competition you won? We learnt about it at school. Fine print is the tiny writing at the bottom of a form. Most people don't read it but it's really important. Do you ever read the fine print, Dad? Or Mum?'

Mr and Mrs Wriggly laughed so hard that Leo felt as if the sofa they were sitting on was a tiny ship rocking about on a rough sea.

'What is *wrong* with the education system these days?' Mrs Wriggly scoffed. 'Why don't they teach you how to win competitions instead?'

'Dad,' Leo persisted. 'Please promise me you'll read the fine print.'

'Yes, yes, of course!' his dad said.

'Dad, do you really have to leave me with Aunt Margo?'

'Leo, my son,' Dad said. 'Everything will be fine.' And he held out his hand, but Leo hugged him instead.