

# 1

## Summer

**I**t was a sort of hot day in August, but not too hot you couldn't play outside. School was coming up, so eight-year-old Christopher Anderson and his best friend Bobby were trying to make the most of the summer they had left. Much to the dismay of their parents, they launched bottle rockets into the sky—one landed on top of Chris's grumpy neighbor, Mr. Laketon's, car. Chris and Bobby immediately ran back into Chris's house. The next day they did it again.

Then there were the water gun fights with other kids on the block. And the secret meetings of the *Chris and Bobby* club, in Chris's treehouse. All they talked about was their schemes, like what kind of trouble they'd cause at school. During the summer, they did nutty things like climbing out of the treehouse window and seeing if they could grab onto one of the further branches of the tree. Once Chris fell and broke his leg, and he always bragged

that when it happened, he never cried. Eventually that story got old.

Chris and Bobby lived next door to each other, and in the house next to Chris, lived an elderly couple, the Petries. They were nice; they acted like grandparents to every kid on the block.

One day, Chris noticed a FOR SALE sign on their front lawn. Then, after a while, it became a SOLD sign. Chris later found out that they were going to move in with their daughter, who lived in the city.

It was always a problem when somebody moved away. You never knew who would move in next. It could be the nicest kid in the world or a bunch of loons.

Everybody would miss the Petries, and it was sad when they drove away, down the block, and disappeared out of sight. They probably lived in the neighborhood longer than anybody else.

“They always gave out the best Halloween candy,” Bobby said.

Chris nodded in agreement. Then they went back to his house to launch another bottle rocket.

A week later, like magic, there was another moving truck in front of the Petries’ house. Whenever new people

moved in, every kid on the block gathered around on the streets to see who the new family was. If it was just grownups, or a man, woman, and a baby, they got bored, and went back to their business. But this time it was something interesting.

“Who do you think it’ll be?” Bobby said when he saw Chris coming out of his house.

“I dunno. You don’t think it’ll be a movie star, do you?”

“Probably not,” Bobby replied. “What if it’s a secret agent?”

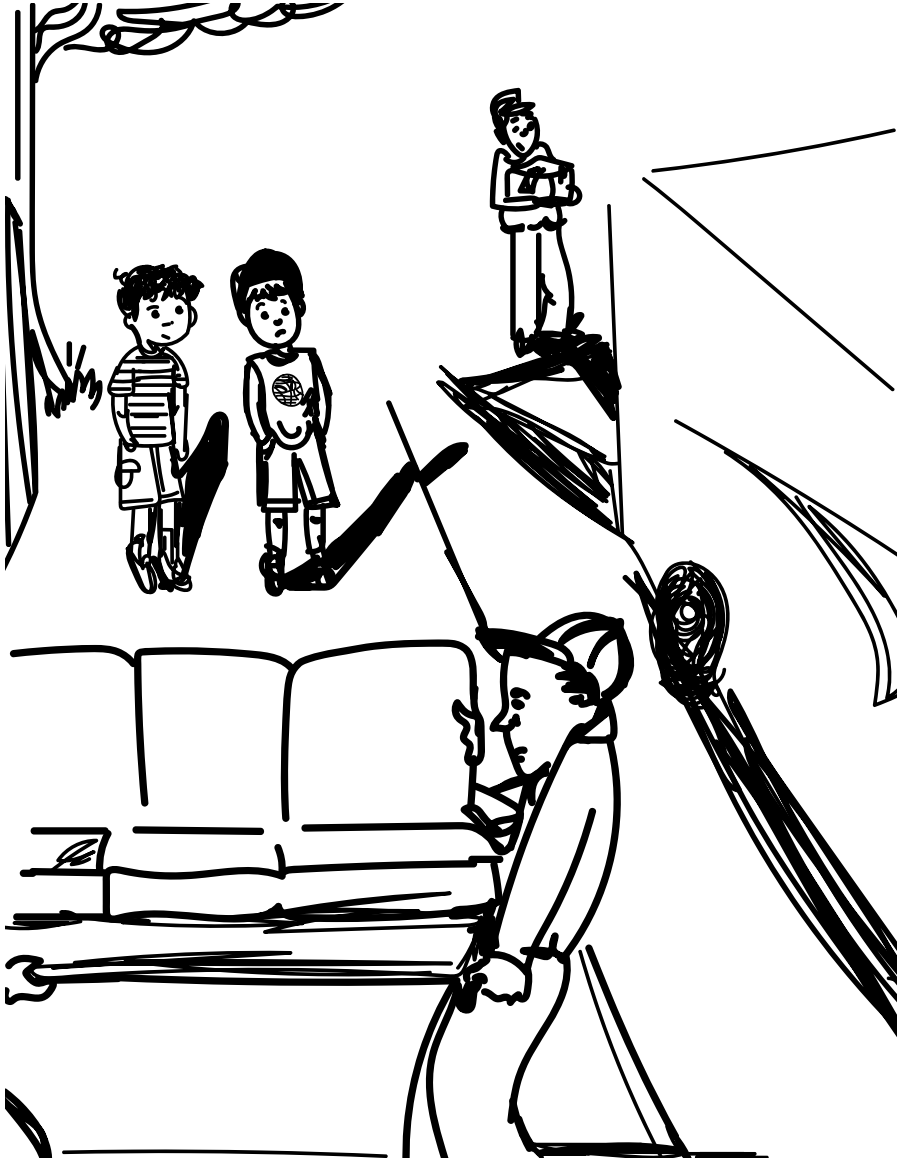
Chris shrugged. “If it was a secret agent they probably wouldn’t move in with a big moving truck. Or at least not during the day time. They’d probably come at night.”

Bobby nodded and they waited as the men from the moving truck carried out big fancy furniture and were being yelled at, by a man in a business suit, not to drop anything.

Then there was a woman who came out of their car, and a boy with spiky brown hair who came out after her. He looked like he could be Chris and Bobby’s age. They wanted to go over and talk to him, but he disappeared into

the house along with the woman, who was probably his mother.

It seemed like the furniture in the moving truck was



never-ending. Out came more fancy tables and chairs, and a big lamp that looked old but well kept.

“What kinda ritzy people are these guys?” Bobby said. Chris agreed. It seemed like whoever this family was, they belonged in a mansion. Not that Chris and Bobby’s neighborhood wasn’t nice, but these new people made it seem like nothing, compared to wherever they probably came from.



The day after that, Chris heard sawing and and banging sounds coming from the house next door. He woke up early that morning to find two men working in the big oak tree right across from Chris’s treehouse. Chris’s first thought was, maybe this new kid is having a treehouse built in his backyard too! That didn’t bother Chris one bit, although he was assuming the new boy was copying him. But it might be fun, if they became friends, to have two treehouses across from each other. The ideas were already churning. If they tied a bunch of clothes together and had one kid on either side hold the ends, another kid could climb between them like a makeshift zip line. Or, if this

kid was so rich, he could get a real zip line.



By this point, school was very soon. Only two days away. One morning, Chris's parents sat him down in the living room to have a talk.

“Chris,” said his dad.

“Chris,” his mom repeated. Chris

slouched on the couch and waited for his mom and dad to get on with it. “Yes?”

“You know that last year, you got in trouble... a lot of trouble. Almost all the time,” Chris's dad said.

Chris nodded. “Yeah.” This didn't bother him at all.

“Well, you know, it's not a *good* thing to get in trouble,” his mom added. “Your report card from second grade had us worried you might even get held back because of all your shenanigans. Your grades were a bit low, too.”

Chris shrugged. “So what is it? I mean, what did you ask me to come down about?”

Chris's mother and father shared a glance before turning to him. “We want you to... be *nice* this year.

Please, don't cause any trouble. It's not fun going down to your school and hearing about all the tricks you pulled on your teachers. We don't like hearing things like that, because we love you very much. Do you understand?" Chris's mom said.

Chris nodded. "Okay."

Then his dad jumped in. "And I want you to know that if you cause any more trouble, there will be problems. There were problems last year, and there will be problems this year if you keep on with this attitude of yours toward your school. We send you there to get an education. Not to have you running wild, sticking wet wads of toilet paper on your classroom ceiling and waiting for them to fall on your teacher's head." Chris saw his dad almost break into a smile when he said that. Remembering his second grade teacher, Mrs. Berne's, reaction when those wads started dropping on her head made Chris want to burst out laughing too. But he also understood his parents. After all, causing trouble was fun. *Getting* in trouble was not.

So he agreed and promised he'd try to be nicer this year. It seemed easy enough.

## 2

# Back to School

**O**n the first day of school, it was already decided. Chris would be nice. Well, he would try.

That morning, as Chris's mom dropped him off at school, he walked inside proudly, feeling like a new boy. A new *nice* boy who would stay that way the rest of the year, and, if he could manage it, the year after that and on and on until he forgot he ever was mean. That was the plan. As Chris walked down the hallways, he lifted his head and suddenly noticed Bobby.

“Hi, Chris!” Bobby exclaimed.

They rushed up to each other and performed their top-secret handshake, which wasn't so top-secret, since they did it in front of everyone.

“Hey,” Bobby said, “did you see the name of our new teacher? It's Ms. *Fizzlebottom*! If that's not weird, I



don't know what is." He started cackling but Chris only gulped and stayed quiet. He guessed it probably wouldn't be too nice of him to make fun of his new teacher's name.

This, Bobby noticed. He stopped laughing and stared at Chris oddly. "Uh... hey, Chris, are you all right? Do you not feel good or something?"

Chris widened his eyes. He seemed *that* different? "No! It's just... well, everybody's got different sorta names. It's not her fault."

Bobby shrugged as they continued walking down the hall. "I... guess. But you know something? I heard somebody say she gives the *whole class* extra homework if



only one kid misbehaves. What a jerk, right? We'll have to set her straight real fast." Bobby grinned and elbowed Chris in his side.

Chris was about to agree when he remembered that dumb old promise. *Be nice*. It couldn't be this difficult all the time, could it?

Chris looked down again and tried to think of something nice to say. "Well... anyway, it's probably not even true. Who'd you hear it from?"

"Peter DeMarco."

That figured. Peter DeMarco was in the fifth grade and always making up things to scare the littler kids. Now Chris was sure what he said about their teacher was a lie.

"Don't believe him," Chris said. "Anybody who believes Peter DeMarco is an idiot." Then Chris gulped and turned his head to Bobby, who didn't seem to realize Chris had been rude to him.

"Well, I dunno." Bobby shrugged. "Peter and my brother are best friends. I don't think he'd lie to me."

Chris knew he *would*, but he bit his tongue and kept walking until he and Bobby reached the cafeteria. The place was buzzing with kids. Shoes were scuffling on the new, polished floor. *It won't be clean for long*, Chris

thought, as a boy dropped a French toast stick covered in maple syrup on the floor.

Chris and Bobby glanced around the cafeteria, scanning it for the table that had a sign reading, “Ms. Fizzlebottom, Third Grade.” When they found their table, they sat down next to each other. Chris sat on the very end of the bench to avoid getting squashed between Bobby and some other kid. Immediately after they sat down, Chris recognized the boy sitting across from them. It was the new, ritzy guy on the block. But he didn’t look so fancy. Good thing, because the kids would have really given it to him if he came to school wearing a suit and tie.

Instantly, he started up conversation. “What the heck kind of name is Ms. Fizzlebottom?”

Chris held his breath to keep from laughing and clenched his hands into fists. Being nice was definitely harder than he thought.

Bobby joined in. “That’s what I said! It sounds like her butt is fizzling out a fart or something.”

The boy across the table started laughing like crazy. Chris slouched over and watched as Bobby and the boy had a funny-mean conversation. Chris wanted to join in. But he had to be nice.



“I’m Kevin,” the boy said, introducing himself to only Bobby.

“I’m Bobby.”

Chris felt left out. But he worried that if he joined in and started making fun of Ms. Fizzlebottom, somehow, she’d find out. Then he’d get in trouble, which he promised his parents he wouldn’t do. Chris felt like he was going to burst.

“This is Chris,” Bobby said, gesturing towards him.

Kevin nodded toward Chris, but that was the extent of his greeting. “Anyway, Bobby, do you like Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles? I have nine action figures from the show.”

“I love that show!” Bobby said. “I have two action figures, but I saw this really cool one at the mall last week, and I asked my mom to buy it for me, but she said no.”

Chris shifted uncomfortably at the very edge of the bench. It might have been better to be squashed.

“Uh... hey Kevin,” Chris started. He finally thought of something to say, but his voice was drowned out by Kevin and Bobby’s loud and slightly annoying conversation. So he got a little louder. “Hey, I-I think we live next door to each other.”

Kevin turned his head to look at him. Chris’s face was frozen in an awkward smile.

“Yeah?” Kevin said. “Which house are you? To the left or the right?”

“Left. I saw you started building a treehouse in your backyard too! What, are you copying me?” Chris joked.

Kevin stared at him like it wasn’t so funny. “No. Why would I copy you? I just wanted a treehouse, is all.”

Chris smiled and gulped. So that conversation went flat.

Bobby shrugged and turned back to Kevin. “Say, Kevin, where did you move here from?”

“Not so far away. I used to go to a private school; y’know, the places where you always have to wear those fancy suits and ties, and shoes. I hated it.”

“Sounds awful,” Chris remarked.

Kevin just looked at him with a straight face. Then he turned back to Bobby.

“When’s Ms. Fizzlebottom gonna show up? I feel like we’ve been waiting forever.”

Instantly, Chris thought of a joke. A funny-mean joke. And without remembering his promise to be nicer this year, he blurted out, “Maybe she’s busy fizzling out a bunch of farts.” Kevin burst out laughing, and so did Bobby. Finally! Chris waited for the sound of someone clearing their throat, or an angry hand on his shoulder. But that never came. Maybe Chris could be funny-mean without getting in trouble after all!

“Gross!” Kevin laughed. “Now the whole classroom’s gonna smell!”

The girl sitting next to Kevin—Charlotte Gibson,

the biggest tattletale in the whole school, possibly the whole *world*—wrinkled her nose and glared at the boys. “You guys are so gross.”

“Stop eavesdropping on our conversation. No one is even talking to you,” Kevin said. The girl scrunched her eyebrows. Then she turned and shifted away from them on the bench.

“You’d better watch it, *boy!*” Bobby said, like a cranky old man. “She just breathed near you. Maybe you got cooties.”

Kevin stuck his tongue out and pretended to vomit. Chris and Bobby laughed. So what if Kevin was funny-mean? Right then, the cafeteria monitors clapped their hands. They yelled out, “Everybody look and listen!”

From years of practice, everyone knew what to do. They clapped and repeated what the cafeteria monitors had said. “Everybody look and listen,” the kids yelled back. “Ms. Jenny’s first grade class, please line up at the back doors with your teacher,” the monitor said. “Mr. Michaels’ fifth grade, please line up with him at the back doors.”

But once lined up, they didn’t move, because the kids were being much too noisy. Bobby’s older brother,

Mark, and his friend Peter were two of the noisiest fifth graders in Mr. Michael's class. Their yelling and hooting forced Mr. Michaels to clap and say the line.

“Everybody look and listen!” he called out.

Everyone in the cafeteria turned and stared at the loud fifth graders.

“Everybody look and listen,” they repeated drearily, and then followed Mr. Michaels out into the hallway.

Through the windows between the lunchroom and the hallway, Bobby and Chris saw Peter DeMarco stick his tongue out at them and gesture towards the door. Chris and Bobby scrunched their noses, confused.

“Ms. Fizzlebottom's third grade class, please line up at the back doors with your teacher,” the cafeteria monitor announced.

Through the back doors, Ms. Fizzlebottom came walking in. She looked a little like an army general because of the way she walked—back straight, swinging her arms and legs in perfect unison. She had chestnut colored hair, all wrapped up in one crazy beehive hairdo, and wore a long orange dress buttoned to her neck. She certainly wasn't carefree and loose, like Chris's first grade



teacher Mrs. Berrymont. Mrs. Berrymont gave the class Doughnut Mondays. Chris missed first grade.

The class got up at once. It was so quiet in the lunchroom you could hear the shuffling of backpacks, the gathering of lunch boxes and their ‘just-in-case’ sweaters laid across the table. Chris had never heard so much *nothing*. Ms. Fizzlebottom *was* scary.

Once everyone lined up, no one dared say a word. Chris and Bobby exchanged glances. Maybe Peter was not such a liar after all.

