11 Catastrophes

Dad stopped talking about his book. I had the feeling it wasn't going very well. Instead, he talked about growing vegetables and how to cook them Chinese-style, or about the Princeton University hockey team. He took me to all their home games. When Jimmy Fargo came to visit, he joined us.

"I'm really into violence," Jimmy said. "I think hockey's a great game. It's a lot bloodier than football, and there are more team fights."

"That's *not* what hockey is all about," Dad argued. "It's a game of skill, of timing, of precision."

"Yeah, sure," Jimmy said. "I know all of that. But it's still great to see the blood bounce on the ice."

"Blood bounces on ice?" I asked.

"Yeah," Jimmy said, "and so does vomit. See, it has to do with the temperature of the ice versus the temperature of the body and . . ."

"Jimmy, please!" Dad said, turning green.

"It's true, Mr. Hatcher. They both bounce on ice."

"Maybe so," Dad said, "but that's not the reason we go to the games."

"I know," Jimmy said. "But it's a nice side event."

Dad shook his head and began to check off players' names on the list inside his program.

Jimmy leaned across me and tapped Dad's arm. "I'm not a violent person, Mr. Hatcher. Don't get the wrong idea. It's just that it's a healthy way to use up some of my aggressive energy."

"Hey, Jimmy . . ." I said.

"Yeah?"

"Shut up!"

"Okay . . . sure," Jimmy said, and he was quiet until nearly the end of the third period when four of the players got into a fight. Then he stood up and yelled, "Kill . . . kill . . ." I tugged at his sweater until he sat down again.

Later, when I was in bed and Jimmy was in his sleeping bag, he said, "I've been seeing the school psychologist twice a week. She says I have a lot of anger

because my parents split up. Take my word for it, Peter . . . divorce is a catastrophe! You should watch your parents all the time and listen to every word they say, so they can't ever take you by surprise."

For the next couple of weeks I paid close attention to my parents, looking for possible signs of divorce. But I didn't see or hear anything unusual, and soon I got tired of watching and listening. Besides, whenever my parents fight, they wind up laughing.

In February, we celebrated Tootsie's first birthday. She carried on a family tradition of smashing her fist into her birthday cake. Grandma, who believes in handing out gifts for everyone, *not* just the birthday person, brought me a four-color ball-point pen, and Fudge, a new Brian Tumkin book.

"Read!" Fudge told Grandma.

She took him on her lap and read him the latest story about Uriah, one of Brian Tumkin's characters.

"I used to really like his books when I was a little kid," I said.

"I'm not a little kid," Fudge reminded me. "Next year I'll be in first grade. You want to see a little kid, look at the birthday girl!"

The birthday girl was sitting in her high chair making a mess. Grandma had brought her a new baby-

proof cup, one that refused to turn over no matter how hard Tootsie tried. Finally Tootsie screeched, picked up the cup and dumped her milk over her head.

"Tootsie's first birthday party could go down as a real catastrophe," I said.

"What's a *castradophie*?" Fudge asked.

"It's when something goes wrong," I said.

"Or when *everything* goes wrong," Mom added.

Talk about catastrophes! Six weeks later Tootsie learned to walk. At first it was just a few feet at a time, from Mom to Dad, or from me to Fudge. But pretty soon she was toddling all over the place. Sometimes she'd crash-land. And if no one was watching, she'd laugh and start all over again. But if she caught one of us looking at her, she'd start bawling and wouldn't stop until she got an arrowroot cookie.

And Tootsie wasn't the only one crash-landing. Fudge was learning to ride his bicycle. One of his major problems was stopping. Instead of using his brakes, he kept trying to jump off while his bike was still going. I was wrong when I told him he might get a couple of scraped knees. Elbows, knees, and head were more like it. Constantly. But he refused to give up. He was really determined to get to ride to school.

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Finally, toward the end of April, Mom and Dad decided that Fudge had mastered the art of bike riding well enough to ride to school with Daniel, who had learned on his front lawn, just the way he said he would, without a bruise or a scrape anywhere. And it would have turned out okay, if only Fudge had remembered to use his brakes when he got to the bike rack at school. But he didn't. So he crashed into the rack, knocking down a pile of bikes, and he wound up with scraped elbows, scraped knees and torn jeans.

"Don't tell Mommy," Fudge said, "or she'll never let me ride to school again."

"I think Mommy's going to notice anyway," I said. "You're a mess!"

I carried him into the nurse's room. Miss Elliot washed off his cuts and bruises with peroxide, and when she did, Fudge let out a howl. Not that I blamed him. I could practically feel the sting myself.

But Fudge didn't stop with one howl. He kept it up, making such a racket that Mr. Green, the principal, heard him and came running down the hall.

"What's going on here?" Mr. Green said.

"Scraped knees and elbows," Miss Elliot said.

"Scraped knees and elbows," Mr. Green repeated. "When I was a boy I had scraped knees and elbows

all the time. Used to roller-skate and fall down week after week."

Fudge sniffled and said, "Too bad you weren't any good at it."

"Who says I wasn't any good at it?" Mr. Green asked.

"You just said you were always falling down," Fudge said.

"That's because I took a lot of chances," Mr. Green said. "Now, I want you to hurry back to your classroom, because we're having a surprise visitor in a little while."

"Who is it?" Fudge asked.

"It's a very famous man. Someone who writes and illustrates children's books. His name is Brian Tumkin."

"Brian Tumkin is alive?" Fudge asked.

"Alive and well and on his way to our school."

"Brian Tumkin is alive!" Fudge said again. "I never knew that. Did you know that, Pee-tah?"

"I never thought about it," I said.

Mr. Green faced Miss Elliot and said, "Lucky break for all of us that he's agreed to do a program for our girls and boys."

"I'm afraid I don't know who he is," Miss Elliot said.

"Then you must be dumber than I thought," Fudge told her. "First you put peroxide on my cuts, without blowing to take away the sting. And now you don't know who Brian Tumkin is."

"I never blow on cuts," Miss Elliot said. "You can spread germs that way."

"Mommy always blows when she puts on peroxide."

"Yes . . . well . . ." Mr. Green said. "Let's get back to our classrooms now. It's almost time for our special program."

At ten o'clock we all filed into the auditorium. Then, Mrs. Morgan, the librarian, introduced Brian Tumkin, telling us that millions of kids have read and loved his books, and how lucky we were that he was able to make a last-minute stop at our school.

Brian Tumkin walked on stage. He was tall, with gray hair and a gray beard. He waved to us. Then he turned and beckoned to someone backstage. "I've brought a friend with me," he said. "Come on Uriah . . . hurry up . . . the boys and girls are waiting for you."

Nobody came out on stage, but Brian Tumkin pretended that Uriah had. He pretended to be holding Uriah's hand, and he kept talking to him as if he were really there. I thought, *Either this guy is really whacko or he's a great actor*. Finally he looked out at the

audience and asked if any of us saw Uriah. Someone down front called out, "I see him!" I didn't even have to look. I knew who that voice belonged to.

"You see," Brian Tumkin told the rest of us. "One of you can see Uriah. Come on up here, young man."

Next thing I knew, Fudge was on stage. I slid down in my seat.

"What's your name, young man?"

"Fudge."

"That's an unusual name," Brian Tumkin said.

"I know it," Fudge said.

"How would you feel about helping me out today, Fudge?"

"It's a real privilege," Fudge said.

I couldn't believe it! He'd finally learned how to use the word. You could see that Brian Tumkin was impressed. He said, "Well, it's a real privilege for me, too."

"That makes it unanimous!" Fudge said.

"My, you certainly have an impressive vocabulary," Brian Tumkin said.

"I learn a lot of words at home."

"That's wonderful."

"Some of them I'm not allowed to say in school. Some of them my bird can say. His name is Uncle Feather."

I slid lower down in my seat.

"What grade are you in, Fudge?" Brian Tumkin asked.

"Kindergarten."

"Who is your teacher?"

"I started out in Rat Face's class but now I'm in Ms. Ziff's class. She's a lot nicer than Rat Face."

I covered my face with my hands.

"Uh . . . let's get on with our chalk talk now, shall we?" Brian Tumkin said.

"What's a chalk talk?" Fudge asked.

"I'm going to sit down at my easel," Brian Tumkin said, walking across the stage. "And you're going to describe a person to me. And I'm going to draw the person you describe. Do you think you can do that?"

"Yes," Fudge said. "It's a man."

"Oh, I'll need more help than that," Brian Tumkin said, picking up a piece of chalk. "Is he tall or short?"

"He's tall," Fudge said, "and he's got a fat belly that hangs over his pants, and he's mostly bald but he's got some hair around the edges, and he wears glasses, and he's got a pointy nose and a moustache that curls down around his mouth . . ."

Brian Tumkin was drawing as fast as Fudge was talking.

". . . and he's got a crooked front tooth, and his

feet are very long, and he walks like this," Fudge said, giving us a demonstration.

"Like a duck?" Brian Tumkin asked.

"Yes," Fudge said. All of a sudden I knew who Fudge was describing, and I wanted to get out of the auditorium as fast as I could. But then Fudge looked out at the audience and called, "Where are you, Pee-tah? I can't see you." And I knew that I couldn't get up without having everybody look at me, so I slouched down as low as I could and didn't answer. "Pee-tah . . . can you see me?"

I let out a groan. Joanne, who was sitting behind me, giggled.

"I can't find my brother," Fudge told Brian Tumkin.

"You'll find him later," Brian Tumkin said. "Now . . . you haven't told me what this man is wearing."

"Oh," Fudge said. "He's wearing a blue shirt, and a tie with stripes, and brown pants and brown socks and brown shoes and brown shoelaces."

"Brown shoelaces," Brian Tumkin repeated. "Okay . . . there we are. . . ." He brushed off his hands and held up the picture. "Does he look like anyone you know, Fudge?"

"Yes," Fudge said.

"Who?" Brian Tumkin asked.

"Mr. Green," Fudge said.

The audience laughed.

Brian Tumkin smiled. "Who is Mr. Green?"

"The principal," Fudge said.

Now the audience roared.

"Oh dear," Brian Tumkin said. "Oh my." He put his hand to his mouth, and you could see that he was trying hard not to laugh.

Mr. Green went up on the stage then and introduced himself to Brian Tumkin. They shook hands. Mr. Green said, "I think that's a wonderful drawing and I'd like to have it for my office. Would you sign it for me?"

"Certainly," Brian Tumkin said. "I'm very glad you like it." He signed his name across the drawing and handed it to Mr. Green.

Everyone clapped.

Then Fudge said, "Mr. Green, was this a catastrophe?"

And Mr. Green laughed and said, "Not quite, Fudge. But I'm sure you'll try harder next time."

I was sure, too.