

## 8 Naturally Fortified

"I want to be a ghost for Halloween," Fudge said. "A scary, scary ghost!"

"I think we can arrange that," Mom said. She was feeding Tootsie purple mush from a jar. Tootsie lets half of every spoonful ooze right back out of her mouth, so that Mom has to scrape it off her face and start all over again. It takes three tries to finish off one baby spoonful. Feeding Tootsie can be an all-day project.

"What about you, Peter?" Mom asked. "What do you want to be for Halloween?"

"Sixth graders don't wear costumes," I said.

"Really?" Mom said. "When I was in sixth grade . . ."

"That was a long time ago," I said, interrupting her.



"A hundred years or more?" Fudge asked.

"Not quite," Mom told him.

"What's Tootsie going to be for Halloween?" Fudge asked.

"A baby," I told him.

"Ha ha, Pee-tah," Fudge said, laughing. "You're funny!"

Everytime Fudge laughs, Tootsie laughs, too. And when she laughs with her mouth full, she really makes a mess. So now she had plums all over her face, plums drooling down onto her bib, plums stuck in her hair and plums covering her rattle, which she banged on her tray as she laughed.

Turtle hangs around when Mom is feeding Tootsie. He's developed a taste for baby food. Mom says it isn't good for him. He needs to chew up hard food to exercise his teeth and jaws. And once a week I give him a special tablet to help his breath. Lately he has the worst dog breath! I'm glad Sheila Tubman isn't around to tell me how bad my dog smells, because this time she'd be right.

Fudge says Turtle should rinse twice a day with Precious Breath, this new blue mouthwash that's advertised on TV. Fudge is very big on commercials. He's memorized all of them, and when we go to the supermarket he drives us up the wall, reciting his



dumb jingles about why we should buy this product instead of that one.

My father spends his mornings at the university library and works at home in the afternoons. "How's the book coming?" I asked him one day, when I got home from school.

"Slowly, Peter," he said. "Very slowly. I'm still gathering information. I hope to finish my research by Christmas and start the actual writing after the holidays."

Fudge stood in the doorway, nibbling a piece of cheese. "Dr. Seuss can write a book in an hour," he said.

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"I don't, but I'll bet you he can," Fudge said. "'One fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish. . . .' 'Do you like green eggs and ham? . . . I do! I like them, Sam-I-am!'"

"Okay, okay . . . that's enough," I said.

"Boys, I'm trying to work now," Dad said. "Do you think you could move to another room?"

Later, we were watching the six o'clock news, when Fudge's favorite commercial came on the air. "Oh, look," he said, "it's my dancing cats!" And he put down his Lego toys and watched.

"Everybody knows that cats can't really dance,"



I told him. "It's just a lot of fancy camera work."

"Shut up, Pee-tah," he said. Then, he turned to Dad. "They have cat food commercials and dog food commercials and people food commercials, so how come they don't have bird food commercials?"

"That's a good question, Fudge," Dad said, without really answering it.

"Myna birds of the world unite . . ." I began, trying to think up a clever commercial for bird food.

"What's *unite*?" Fudge asked.

"Never mind . . . never mind. . ."

"You sound like Uncle Feather when you say things twice," Fudge said.

"It's contagious," I told him.

"What's *contagious*?"

"Forget it," I said.

"We should feed Uncle Feather Choco," Fudge said. "If you give it to the one you love, first thing in the morning, you don't have to worry the rest of the day. It has forty-five vitamins."

"No, no," I said. "That's not it. It's fortified with vitamins."

"That's what I said. Forty-five vitamins."

"Not forty-five," I told him. "*Fortified*." And I spelled it for him. "*F-o-r-t-i-f-i-e-d*. It means that vitamins have been added."



"It does?" Fudge asked.

"Yes," I said. "And anyway, you shouldn't believe everything you see on TV, right, Dad?"

"That's right," Dad said.

"You lie when you make up commercials?" Fudge asked.

"No, but we sometimes exaggerate," Dad said.

"What's *exaggerate*?" Fudge asked.

"We embellish to make our point," Dad said.

"What's *embellish*?"

"Sometimes Dad has to stretch the truth," I explained.

"Thank you, Peter," Dad said. "That's a very good way of putting it."

"How do you know so much, Pee-tah?"

"Partly because I'm in sixth grade, and partly because I'm naturally smart," I answered.

"Then how come you got a fifty-eight on your geography test?" Fudge asked.

"Because Mr. Bogner tricked us with matching questions."

"What's matching questions?"

"It's what teachers do to you, to prove you aren't as smart as you think," I said. "You'll find out someday."

"But I am as smart as I think," Fudge said. "So there!"



I wasn't about to get into an argument over that one.

On Friday afternoon, Alex and I were downtown. We stopped off at the movie theater to have a look at the display of *Superman* photos. I had already seen *Superman* in New York, but Alex had missed it, so we decided that when it comes to town we'll try to go and see it together.

Next to the movie theater was an art gallery. There was something familiar about one of the paintings in the window. It was all white, with two black circles in the middle and a red square in the upper left-hand corner.

"I know that painting," I said to Alex.

"It doesn't look like much to know," Alex said.

I snapped my fingers. "That's a Frank Fargo painting."

Alex shrugged. "Who's Frank Fargo?"

"My friend's father. I was over when he was working on it," I said. "Let's go in. . . ."

The only other person in the gallery was a very tall, skinny woman with a neck like a giraffe's and more curly hair than I'd ever seen. She was really good looking. I liked the way she walked, with her head high and her back straight.



"Hello . . . what can I do for you?" she asked us.

"We were wondering about that painting in the window," I said. "The white one with the circles."

"It's called *Anita's Anger*," she said. "And it's by Frank Fargo."

"I told you . . . I told you," I said to Alex, who didn't seem that interested. "I know him," I said to Giraffe Neck. "He's my friend's father."

"Really?" she asked.

"Yes."

"How much does it cost?" Alex asked.

"Two thousand, five hundred dollars," she told him.

"What?" Alex said. "For that?"

"Yes. He's becoming quite famous."

"But it's nothing," Alex argued. "I'll bet I could paint the same thing in an hour."

"Just like Dr. Seuss can write a book in an hour," I muttered.

"What's that got to do with it?" Alex asked.

"Nothing, forget it."

"It may *look* simple," she said, "but I assure you it takes a lot of talent to paint that way."

That night I asked my parents if they knew that Frank Fargo was becoming famous.

"Yes," Dad said. "Didn't you?"



"No. Nobody ever told me. Nobody ever tells me anything!"

"Mom and I are considering one of his paintings. It's in a gallery downtown."

"That white thing with the black circles and the red square?" I asked.

"That's the one," Dad said. "Do you like it?"

"I don't know," I said. "It sure does cost a lot."

"That's the problem," Dad said.

"But now that I'm going back to work . . ." Mom began, looking up from her needlepoint.

"You're going where?" I said.

"Back to work," she told me. "I've been offered a part-time job by Dr. Monroe, a dentist in town."

"I thought you were sick of teeth," I said. "I thought you wanted to study art history."

"Art history will have to wait," Mom said. "For now, I've decided to be more practical."

I looked at Dad. *It's because of the book*, I thought. *That stupid book!* "You wouldn't have to be practical if Dad was president of the advertising agency, would you?"

"Peter!" Mom sounded angry. "That's not a very thoughtful thing to say."

I didn't care if she felt angry, because I did, too.

"It's all right, Anne," Dad said. "I think I know



what Peter's getting at. He'd like me to be president of the agency. Right, Peter?"

"Well, sure . . . who wouldn't want his father to be president?"

"But I don't want to be president of the agency," Dad said. "And you've got to try to understand that. I do want to write my book, though. And sometimes you've got to do what's really important to you, even if it's not practical."

"And I never said I was sick of teeth," Mom told me. "I said I wanted to think about a change in careers. So I'm thinking. It will be nice to have a job again. And if Daddy weren't at home, writing his book, I wouldn't be able to leave Tootsie . . . so it's all working out . . . you see?"

"No!" I said. "Everything is different."

"What do you mean?" Dad asked.

"I don't know . . . just everything . . . Mom going back to work, you writing a book, us living here, Tootsie being born . . . Fudge going to kindergarten . . . me in sixth grade . . . everything is different."

"And you don't like it?" Mom asked. "Is that what you're trying to say?"

"I don't know if I do or if I don't."

"Changes take some getting used to," Dad said, "but in the long run they're healthy."



I didn't feel like listening anymore. So I said, "Can I call Jimmy tonight?"

"Sure," Dad said. "Go ahead."

Jimmy answered the phone. "Hey . . . how's it going?" he asked. I could tell that he was eating something.

"I don't know," I told him. "Everything's different. I can't get used to it."

"Well, everything's the same around here, except that you're gone." He must have swallowed because his voice cleared. He told me about school and about our friends and about the way Sheila Tubman is telling the whole world how much she misses me. And then he said, "Peter, I have a confession to make."

"What's that?"

"I've been using your rock. Not just sitting on it, but *using* it. You know what I mean?"

"It's okay," I said. "Don't worry about it."

"No kidding?"

"No."

"You're a great friend. You know that? A really great friend."

"I have a confession to make, too," I said. "I've been using my Kreskin's Crystal. Not just looking at it, but *using* it to get to sleep at night."

"Oh," he said.

"So I guess we're even," I said.



"I guess so." But he didn't sound as if I were the world's greatest friend anymore.

"I saw a painting by your father today," I told him, ready to change the subject. "The white one with the black circles and the red square."

"Oh, that one," he said. "My father painted *that* one right before my mother left for Vermont. One night they had this big fight, and she threw red paint on the canvas. That's how the red square got there. And that's why it's called *Anita's Anger*."

I didn't know what to say, because Jimmy never talks about his parents' divorce. So I changed the subject again. "Do you know how much it costs? Two thousand, five hundred dollars! Can you believe that anybody would pay that much for it?"

"Shows how much you know about art, Peter." It sounded as if he had something in his mouth again. *Pretzels*, I thought. "My father's last three paintings were sold for over two thousand dollars apiece. So before you go around opening your fat mouth, you should find out what you're talking about!" And he hung up.

*Great! Just what I needed. My best friend hanging up on me. He'll probably call back in ten minutes*, I thought.

But he didn't.

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I waited until Halloween afternoon to call him. "It's me," I said. "I'm sorry."

"About what?" he asked.

"You know . . . about the price of your father's paintings."

"Oh, that."

"It just so happens that my parents are thinking about buying it."

"Which one?"

"You know . . . *Anita's Anger*."

"Oh, that one. You should tell them to buy a different painting. *Anita's Anger* is a rip-off. Even my father says so."

"But you said . . ."

"I know what I said."

For a minute neither of us spoke. Finally, I asked, "So what are you doing for Halloween?"

"The usual," he said, "nothing. How about you?"

"I'm taking Fudge trick-or-treating."

"How'd you get roped into that?"

"I volunteered."

"You volunteered?" I think he was chewing gum this time. "You weren't kidding when you said everything's changed!" He *was* chewing gum. I could tell he was blowing a bubble, and I thought I heard the pop when the bubble broke.



My mother and father were surprised when I told them I'd take Fudge trick-or-treating. But Alex said he'd come with me as long as he didn't have to walk next to Fudge, or hold his hand crossing streets, or anything gross like that. Besides, we planned to take him out early, bring him home, then go out by ourselves. And I knew how badly he wanted to go with us, and not with Mom or Dad like all the kindergarten babies.

Alex called for me at six-thirty. And when I saw him, I couldn't believe it! He was wearing a costume. A sheet decorated with black circles and one red square.

"I'm *Anita's Anger*," he said. "You like it?" He turned around a couple of times holding his arms out.

"It's different," I said.

"What are you?" he asked.

"Me?" I said. I was wearing jeans and a flannel shirt, the same clothes I'd worn to school that day.

"He's a sixth grader," Fudge said. "And Tootsie's a baby and Turtle's a dog and Mommy's a mommy and Daddy's a daddy but I'm a scary, scary ghost. . . . Whoooooooooooo." Fudge swooped across the room.

"You mean you're not going to wear a costume?" Alex said. "Not even a mask?"

"Sure I am," I said. "It's uh . . . upstairs. . . . Wait



a minute and I'll go get it." I raced up the stairs and found Mom changing Tootsie.

"Where's Fudge's disguise?" I asked her.

She looked blank.

"The one he sent away for . . . you know . . . four cereal box tops and twenty-five cents. . . ."

"Oh, *that* disguise," Mom said, sprinkling baby powder on Tootsie's backside. "I'm not sure."

"But, Mom . . . I need it right away . . . so please try to remember."

"I thought you said you weren't dressing up this year."

"I changed my mind . . . and Alex is downstairs, waiting."

"Let's see," Mom said, fastening Tootsie's clean diaper. "It could be in with Fudgie's toys. He's always liked that disguise. Look in his closet, in the red toy box."

I ran down the hall to Fudge's room and threw open his closet door. *The red toy box, the red toy box . . . let's see . . . here it is!* I dragged it out and rummaged through it, and there at the very bottom, in a Pepperidge Farm cookie box, were the black eyeglass rims attached to the rubber nose, and the stick-on beard and moustache. I also found an old hat that once belonged to Grandfather Hatcher. I smoothed it out and



put it on, along with Fudge's disguise. I checked myself in the bathroom mirror, then ran downstairs.

"That's mine!" Fudge hollered when he saw me.

"I'm just borrowing it for a few hours. . . ."

"No . . . no . . . no!"

"No?" I said. "Okay . . . then you don't get to go trick-or-treating with me and Alex. You can go with Daddy like all the other kindergarten babies. Good-bye!" I flung off the glasses and rubber nose, tossed them aside, and acted like I was really going to leave without him!

"No!" he cried. "Come back, Pee-tah."

"Not unless I get to wear the disguise."

"Okay . . . you can wear it . . . but it's still mine, right?"

"Yeah, sure. It's still yours." I looked over at Alex, who was shaking his head. Alex still can't figure out my family.

We grabbed our UNICEF boxes and our pillowcases to hold our loot, and we left.

We worked our way up one side of the street, then down the other. When we got close to Mrs. Muldour's house, Alex said, "Maybe she'll give us some worms for a treat."

"Worms?" Fudge said.

"Yeah," Alex told him. "She's very big on worms."



"So is Uncle Feather," Fudge said.

"Uncle Feather is a bird," I said.

"Why does everybody keep saying that?" Fudge asked. "I *know* Uncle Feather is a bird." He was quiet for a minute; then he said, "What does she do with her worms?"

"You know. She eats them," Alex said.

"Really?" Fudge asked me.

"We think so," I told him.

We walked up the path to Mrs. Muldour's house, and Alex rang the bell.

"If she gives us worms, we can feed them to Uncle Feather," Fudge whispered.

"Shush . . ." I told him.

Mrs. Muldour opened the door. She was wearing a jogging suit. "Well, well, well . . ." she said. "What a cute little ghost."

"I'm not cute . . . I'm scary!" Fudge told her. "Whoooo. . . ."

Mrs. Muldour clutched at her chest. "Oh my, you are a scary ghost."

"Hi, Mrs. Muldour," Alex said.

"Hello, Alex. That's an unusual costume you're wearing."

"It's called *Anita's Anger*," Alex said. "I got the idea from a painting I saw downtown."



Mrs. Muldour turned away from us and called, "Beverly . . . Beverly . . . come here . . . you've got to see this. . . ."

Right away I knew it was *her*. Giraffe Neck. I knew before I could even see her face. I knew by the way she walked from the other room to the front door and by the curly hair. "This is my daughter, Beverly," Mrs. Muldour said to us. Then she turned to Beverly and said, "Alex is dressed as a painting. Can you guess which one?"

Beverly studied Alex for a minute. "Well, with the white background, the black circles and the red square . . . it must be *Anita's Anger*."

"Right," Alex said.

I thought about telling Beverly about the night Jimmy's parents had had their big fight, and how Mrs. Fargo had dumped red paint on Mr. Fargo's canvas, and how Mr. Fargo had named his painting *Anita's Anger* because Anita is Jimmy's mother. I thought about telling her the whole story. But then I remembered how I've told Jimmy things that I wouldn't have told anybody else, and I knew that if I were Jimmy, I wouldn't want my best friend telling the whole world secrets about my family.

"Do you really eat worms?" Fudge asked, out of nowhere.



I gave him a kick but that didn't stop him.

"Pee-tah says you eat them all the time, and he knows everything because he's naturally smart, except for matching questions."

Mrs. Muldour and Beverly looked at each other.

Fudge continued. "So did you?"

"Did we, what?" Mrs. Muldour asked.

"Eat worms for supper tonight?"

Alex let out a groan, and I could see our business going down the drain.

Mrs. Muldour smiled at Fudge. "Yes, we did," she told him.

Beverly added, "There's nothing like home-baked worms. And my mother's recipe is the best."

"We eat them instead of cauliflower," Mrs. Muldour said. "We need to get our vitamins one way or the other."

"Are your worms fortified?" Fudge asked.

Alex groaned again.

"My worms are naturally fortified," Mrs. Muldour said. "They're chock full of vitamins. No preservatives, nothing added. Just the real thing!"

She was beginning to sound like a commercial for worms. I could hear the announcer saying, "*Buy Mrs. Muldour's naturally fortified worms. . . . They're chock full of vitamins . . . grind them up in your*



*favorite recipe, blend them into your milkshakes, serve them instead of cauliflower on those special occasions. . . .*

"Would you like to taste my special worm cookies?" Mrs. Muldour asked Fudge.

"Yes," Fudge said, following Mrs. Muldour into the house.

We marched through the house to the kitchen. On the counter was a big plate of cookies.

"Fresh out of the oven," Mrs. Muldour said.

"They look like chocolate chips," Fudge said.

"They are," Mrs. Muldour told him. "Chocolate-chip-worm cookies."

"Which part is worm?" Fudge asked.

Mrs. Muldour laughed. "You can't see the worms. I grind them up and mix them into the flour."

*Just like my commercial, I thought.*

"Go on," Mrs. Muldour said, offering the plate of cookies to Fudge. "Take one."

Fudge chose a cookie and held it to his lips. But he hesitated and I could see that he wasn't sure he really wanted to taste a chocolate-chip-worm cookie after all.

Beverly took one and shoved it into her mouth all at once. "Ummmmmm," she said. "These are really good, Mother." She took another and ate it quickly,



too. Then she brushed the crumbs off her hands.

Fudge bit into his cookie. He chewed it up very slowly. "It's good," he said. "You can't even taste the worms."

Mrs. Muldour offered the plate to Alex and me. We each took a cookie.

Fudge asked if he could have another, and Mrs. Muldour said she'd do better than that. She wrapped a little package of cookies for him to take with him.

When we got home, Fudge dumped out his pillowcase on the dining-room table. He arranged his loot in stacks and counted everything. "Eleven M&M's, seven Nestlé's Crunch . . . five Hershey's without almonds . . . three with . . . two Milky Ways . . . one granola bar . . . four apples . . . and six worm cookies. . . ."

"What did you say?" Mom asked him.

"Nothing, Mom . . ." I told her. "He didn't say anything . . . did you, Fudge?"

"Here, Mommy," Fudge said, "have a cookie. Mrs. Muldour just baked them."

"Thank you," Mom said. She tasted it. "Ummmm . . . very good. I wonder where she got her recipe?"

"It's been in her family for a long time," I said.

"And they're naturally fortified with . . ."



I didn't give him a chance to finish. "No preservatives . . . no additives . . . naturally fortified . . . and chock full of vitamins . . . right, Fudge?"

"Right, Pee-tah," he said, smiling, and I knew that he understood.