Attack of the Yellow Smart Sack

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Prologue

I was at the Cantaloupe Valley Mall, trying to put the last week behind me—to forget it like it never happened. I didn't want to think about all of the weirdness, the late nights of dread and worrying, the days of being afraid to look in the mirror … all while listening to that ear-worm over and over and over. And having to feed it so it would just shut up!

I needed comfort food desperately, so I'd chosen the mall's food court to get my ultimate combo: an order of fries from *McDonalds* and a *Wendy's* Frosty. The mall was the only place in Cantaloupe Valley where you could get both.

While I watched the chocolatey soft-serve filling my cup, I noticed a girl in the crowd. She was probably two years younger than me, so most likely a fifth grader, with her mom. I didn't recognize her, but I wasn't looking at her face—I was staring at her backpack. *Her yellow backpack*.

And then I heard the song, drilling into my ears like Q-tips made of ice.

Ohhh, Yippie Dip Ki-Yay!
Yippie Dip My Way!
Don't trip or skip the Yip,
And don't skip or trip the Dip!
Ki-Yayyyy Ki-Yayyyy…

Something in me snapped. I couldn't see colors other than yellow and the only shape I saw was the yellow rectangle on the girl's back.

I yelled something. Something that sounded like, GAHH OVV ZERR NOOO! And before I could stop myself, I'd latched onto her backpack with both hands and tried ripping it off her. She screamed. Her mother grabbed one of the girl's hands and tried pulling her away. It was a tug of war between me and the mom over the girl and her backpack!

People were yelling, children were crying. But none of that really mattered because all I wanted to do was take that backpack and throw it in front of a speeding train! Just end its existence!

But the girl and her mother were strong. It was a true battle until I slipped in a puddle of ketchup. Refusing to let go, I tried using my free hand to grab the Pepsi machine above me so I could get back on my feet, but the whole machine broke apart and seven colors of soda sprayed over me, the girl, and her mom.

They both stood in the rainbow of soda spray and shielded their hair like they'd come from a hair salon. Their pause in the action gave me time to rip the backpack off her back and throw it to the floor. Then I pounded it with a plastic food court chair five times … ten times … *twenty times!*

Sweat and soda dripped from my forehead as I looked around the food court. Nobody was within ten feet of me. Just overturned tables and the spray of Pepsi products. But that song … it was still going!

Don't trip or skip the Yip!
And don't skip or trip the Dip!

Ki-Yayyyy Ki-Yayyyy …

It was coming from one of the fake gardens that surrounded the food court, a whole little jungle of plastic plants. I dragged the chair over to the garden, trying to locate the source of the music. The people all cleared a path, most likely fearing what I was going to do next.

If you ever trip the Yip or dip the Yip,
Don't ever skip the Ki-Yayyyy the ol' Ki-Yayyyy!

The song was coming from a speaker built to look like a frog. I raised the chair over my head and slammed it down on the frog five times … ten times … *twenty times!*

The music died.

I set the chair on the floor and dropped onto it. The food court was silent and it was still. Probably a hundred or two hundred people staring at me.

I took deep breaths and kept wiping my sweaty face with my sleeve.

"Sorry everybody." I sucked in a deep breath. "I just hate that song." Another deep breath. "And that backpack ... Is my Frosty ready?"

Chapter 1

Extinction!

When I look back now, I had no idea how my life was about to change. It all started seven days ago, in Ms. Kramer's science class.

"We're living in scary times," Ms. Kramer said. "The extinction rate is speeding up as more and more species fall prey to the greatest scourge in human history. Can anyone tell me what I'm referring to?"

Only one person in the whole class raised a hand—Heidi Height. I wasn't surprised. She probably knew as much as *Wikipedia*.

"Yes, Heidi?"

"Climate change."

"Yes! Climate change." *Ding! Ding!* Ms. Kramer tapped the little bell on her desk. It was the kind you see on hotel desks in the movies. She rang it whenever we were talking about something that we needed to take extra seriously. She called it the "Wake Up Bell." This was another reason that she was my favorite teacher.

"Up on the whiteboard is a list of some of the species that have gone extinct."

Western Black Rhinoceros

Caspian Tiger

Arabian Ostrich

Barbados Raccoon

Pocket Gopher

Mexican Grizzly Bear

Ivory-Billed Woodpecker

Golden Toad

“Can anyone guess how recent these species went extinct?”

Of course Heidi’s hand flew up.

“Anyone besides Heidi?”

Justin Reynolds, my best friend, raised his hand. He was as loyal as a pet dog, but not someone you’d pick first to be on your trivia team.

“Yes, Justin?”

“2015.”

The whole class laughed.

Ms. Kramer quieted everybody with a look. “Justin isn’t too far off. Anybody else want to try?”

We all turned to Heidi. I noticed she had a yellow backpack hanging on the back of her chair. Really bright yellow, like a radioactive banana.

“Early 1960’s,” Heidi answered.

“Correct,” Ms. Kramer said. “This list is only a small sample of species that have gone extinct since the early 1960’s. And you might need to know this list for a quiz that might be happening tomorrow on chapters five and six.” *Ding! Ding!* She tapped the little bell on her desk. Frantically, everybody copied the list of extinct animals into their science notebooks.

The lunch bell rang.

I loaded my stuff into my backpack and lined up for lunch. Ms. Kramer grabbed a brown paper bag from her coat cubby and led the way to the cafeteria.

My name is Lewis Izinger, and whenever our class goes anywhere in Cantaloupe Valley Middle School, we go in alphabetical order, which means I follow Heidi Height *everywhere*.

As we walked, I stared at her yellow backpack. It looked very smooth. So smooth and soft that I wanted to touch it. And I did. Just a quick touch.

“Don’t touch the backpack,” Heidi snapped.

“I didn’t.”

“You did. I know you did.”

“So what? Is it a crime?”

“Perv.”

“Lame-o.”

“Perv.”

“Lame-o.”

We kept at it until we reached the cafeteria, where I got the patty melt and a side of yellow corn. Justin got the patty melt and a side of broccoflower.

Thankfully, we didn’t have to sit in alphabetical order. Justin and I took our regular spot by the windows overlooking the foursquare court. Heidi sat one table over with the Nichol twins, Jenny and Penny.

“It felt like skin,” I whispered to Justin.

“What?”

“Heidi’s backpack. It’s smooth and soft as skin.”

“What kind of skin?”

“Like a puppy’s. Like a puppy’s bare belly.”

“Ooh, that is soft and smooth.”

“Smart Sack,” Heidi said to the backpack as she laid it on the table, “find chocolate pudding.” Justin and I watched as it began shifting its innards, all kinds of bulges were moving around as it looked like items inside were being rearranged and reorganized. Then the movement stopped and Heidi lifted the flap. A chocolate pudding cup sat in the mouth of the backpack. “Smart Sack, play *Yippie Dip Ki-Yay.*”

Ohhh, Yippie Dip Ki-Yay!
Yippie Dip My Way!
Don’t trip or skip the Yip!
And don’t skip or trip the Dip!
Ki-Yayyyy Ki-Yayyyy …

“This is my favorite song!” I said, drumming my fingers to the beat.

“Mine too,” Justin said, bopping his head.

We both sang along with the words.

“Don’t trip or skip the Yip!
And don’t skip or trip the Dip!
Don’t ever skip the Ki-Yayyyy the ‘ol Ki-Yayyyy!”

Chapter 2

The All-New Yellow Smart Sack Backpack

Justin and I lived one bus stop apart. We always sat in the seat behind Tommy Finley. He was handsome. Not to me. But according to girls. I noticed that he had the yellow backpack, too. I could see it hanging a little bit into the aisle. I nudged Justin.

"Look, Tommy has one of those backpacks," I whispered. "Want to feel it?"

"Smooth and soft as a puppy's bare belly skin? Of course I do."

We both touched the backpack. It was the smoothest and softest material ever. But we must've poked it off balance because it fell into the aisle.

Tommy turned. "What are you doing, I-licker?" Tommy always called me I-licker, which was his funny take on Izinger. I didn't think it was funny, but I never made a fuss because Tommy was a lot stronger than me.

"Sorry, Tommy, let me get that for you." I lifted the backpack—it was light as a feather.

"Keep your paws off my Smart Sack." He grabbed it as the bus came to his stop.

"Sorry again, Tommy," I said. "No homework tonight?"

"I wish. We got that science quiz tomorrow for Kramer."

"You brought your science book home?"

"Only way to study for it, I-licker."

"There's a science book in there? But it's so light."

He opened the backpack and we peered inside. I counted three text books, four lacrosse balls, two cans of tuna, a bottle of Powerade, a hairbrush, and a five-subject megabinder.

"Smell you later, I-licker."

He got off the bus.

"It was light as a feather."

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"The All New Yellow Smart Sack Backpack," I read off the website. Justin had gotten off at my stop so we could research the mind-blowing backpack at my house. We sat at my desk, scrolling through the website's series of comic book panels that showed off the Smart Sack's exciting features.

"Light As Air," Justin read, pointing to a picture of a scrawny kid struggling to put a 50 pound dumbbell into the Smart Sack. And then he was able to lift the Smart Sack with a single finger.

"Musically Enhanced," I read. The picture showed a couple of young girls playing a song from their phone into the Smart Sack. The next picture showed them and their classmates dancing to the Smart Sack's musical playback. Even the teacher was boogying down.

Justin shook his head. "I can't see Ms. Kramer doing that." He pointed to the next feature. "Smart Search." The picture showed a slovenly boy dumping his whole desk drawer of clutter into the Smart Sack. Then he said the word "slingshot." The next panel was the boy finding the slingshot at the top of the Smart Sack's jumble of contents. "That's how Heidi got the chocolate pudding."

"Ooh, I like this one …" The picture showed a girl taking a test in class while the Smart Sack whispered the answers to her. The next panel was her showing off an A+. The name of the feature was 'Smarter You.'

"Do you think that's how Heidi knows everything?"

"Yup. And now we can too."

Then, as we scrolled to the very bottom of the website, we finally saw the MSRP—Manufacturer's Suggested Retail Price: $99.99.

Both of our jaws fell.

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I set the table for dinner, including some long fancy candles, while my mom and dad prepared the food. It was a family tradition that we all pitch in together. Sometimes the tradition included kisses and hugs between them, and whenever that happened, I'd fake vomit. But not tonight because I wanted to be taken seriously.

Mom served the salad and Dad spooned out the rigatoni. I poured the beverages. We all took seats.

"Alright, Lewis. What's with the candles?" my dad asked. He was a naturally suspicious person, especially when it came to me.

"I wanted to set a friendly atmosphere."

My mom took a sip of lemonade. "What were you and Justin reading about in your room?"

"Oh, not much." I waited until they both got back to chewing. "Just the most exciting backpack ever invented … the Yellow Smart Sack!" I dimmed the kitchen lights and set my *iPad* on the table. It was already loaded with the Smart Sack's website.

"The All New Yellow Smart Sack Backpack," Dad read aloud.

"It can play music, sort through your stuff, and even help with homework." I used my elbow to block the part that showed the backpack helping the girl cheat.

"Is that the price?" my mom asked. "$99.99?"

"That's just the MSRP."

"MSRP?"

"Manufacturer's Suggested Retail Price."

"So what does it really cost?"

"The MSRP."

"Stop playing games with us, Lewis."

"I'm not playing games. I'm not."

"Maybe for your next birthday."

"I just had my birthday."

"That's very expensive for a backpack."

"Yeah, but it's because of all the things it can do. The kids who have it at school are already getting better grades. I need it so I don't fall behind."

“Compelling argument, Lewis, but we can’t afford that right now.”

They both made sad faces. Not as sad as mine, though. But that was about to change.

Chapter 3

The Barter Business Bureau

"I struck out, too," Justin told me the next day in homeroom.

"I don't know how much longer I can endure this old crap sack." I slammed my blue backpack onto the desk. It was all scuffed up with a couple of rips and every zipper was missing teeth which meant none of the pockets closed all the way.

Justin shared my misery. His orange backpack was just as old and beaten up.

Then, who should enter homeroom sporting an All New Yellow Smart Sack Backpack? Stan Humphries! Of all people! He was the shortest and hairiest person in seventh grade. He only came up to my chin and had sprouts of hair growing out the end of his nose and at the edges of his eyes. The only two things he ever said were, "That's lit" and "Who crapped their pants?"

Justin shrugged. "Well, we could always try earning money. That's what my dad suggested."

"But how? Did he give you any ideas?"

"By providing a product or service that people would find valuable and then setting a fair price."

"That would take days or weeks."

We both stared at Stan's Yellow Smart Sack. Then I had a thought. And the more I thought about that thought, the happier I felt. "Ooh, I got it."

"What do you got? Tell me."

"We barter."

"Barter? What's that?"

"Trading with others—swapping one thing for another."

"But nobody's going to trade away their Yellow Smart Sack."

"Right, so we build up to that."

"How?"

"By increasing the value of everything we trade for." I sat back and rubbed my hands together like a criminal mastermind. "I saw this story online about a guy that started with a paperclip and ended up with a *house*."

"No way. Malarkey."

Stan was trying to write with a ballpoint pen, but it was out of ink.

"Watch," I said to Justin before leaning forward. "Ah, Stan, want to make a trade?" I held out my ratty nub of a pencil.

"That's lit," he said. We traded.

Justin and I nodded at each other.

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During algebra, I traded the pen to Molly Fuglestad for an all-day butterscotch lollipop. I swapped that for one of Benny Lipscomb's Captain America action figures. Then in the locker room before gym, I bartered the action figure to Danny Timmons for a *Coca-Cola* beach towel. After gym, I gave Jerome Howard the towel in exchange for a *God of War* video game.

By the time I got to Ms. Kramer's class, right before lunch, I was up to a smart watch with a cracked screen.

Justin came into class and dropped down onto the chair next to me. I could tell he wasn't doing too well with the bartering.

"What do you have so far?" I asked him.

He held up a paperclip.

"That's it? What did you start with?"

"*Two* paperclips."

Ms. Kramer handed out the quiz. I paid very close attention to Heidi. She was racing through the quiz like she knew every answer. The classroom was dead quiet. If the Smart Sack was feeding her the answers, it was doing it telepathically.

After the quiz, Ms. Kramer talked more about the extinction rate. She showed maps of the world that highlighted the warming trends in the oceans. I used the time to barter. Using only hand signs, I traded the cracked smart watch to Shelly Bangalore for an autographed copy of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*.

At lunch I turned the book into a single *Airpod*.

Then I spent the rest of the school day trying to hunt down anybody else who also only had a single *Airpod*. And I found him—Stan Humphries, of all people.

I bartered the single *Airpod* for his Yellow Smart Sack.

"That's lit," he said.

"That's lit." I felt butterflies as I handed over the *Airpod* and he put the new backpack into my arms.

Justin was still holding that pitiful paperclip. "Tomorrow will you help me barter for a Yellow Smart Sack of my own?"

I could hear his voice but I was very busy adjusting the straps and thinking about which of the amazing features I should try first.

"Lewis? Did you hear me?"

"Yeah, yeah. Tomorrow."

On the bus ride home, I shifted all the things from my crap sack into their new yellow mansion. Justin kept petting it like it was a cat.

"So soft … and smooth," he whispered.

I knew he wanted to come over to my house, but I really wanted some alone time with my Smart Sack. So when we reached my bus stop I put a hand on his shoulder.

"Sorry, Justin, I'm not allowed to have anyone over today because my Grandma is coming to celebrate a birthday."

"Which Grandma?"

"Izinger."

"But her birthday isn't until March."

How did he know that? "Well I didn't say we were celebrating *her* birthday."

"Then whose?"

"My Great Uncle's."

"Which one? Orville or Sherm?"

"Hey," the bus driver shouted. "Are you getting off? We're holding up traffic."

"Gotta go." I hurried to the door.

"Which Great Uncle?"

"Yes, uh huh." I jumped down the steps and ran to my house. The bus started driving away.

"Which Great Uncle?" he yelled out the window.

I pretended not to hear him.

"Lewis, *which Great Uncle?*"

Chapter 4

Let the Good Times Roll

I thought about showing my new backpack to my mom. But then she'd probably ask a bunch of questions. Somehow, she'd find a problem with how I bartered my way from a stubby pencil to a Yellow Smart Sack. Instead of being proud, she'd be disappointed or maybe even angry. And then my dad would get involved, and before I knew it, one of the best days of my life would be ruined by parenting.

So I snuck into my house and up to my room.

"How was school?" my mom called out from her home art studio, two doors down from my room. Her hearing was freakish.

"Fine!"

"Anything interesting happen?"

"Nah! I have homework! Big deadline tomorrow! Starting it now!" I closed my door and slipped the Yellow Smart Sack off my shoulders. It was light as a feather! I thought about weighing it on my bathroom scale with all my stuff inside. But first I wanted to record a song on it.

I started emptying everything out of it. It seemed like a good idea because if the backpack had stuff inside when I tried recording a song, maybe the stuff would get in the way of the recording. I hadn't really thought of it until now, but I never asked Stan whether it came with instructions.

Then I felt *the ribs*. The sack's inside was as smooth and soft as the outside. But there were also about eight or nine hard bands across the front and back, under the skin-like lining. They felt like bones. Which would be crazy. Certainly the instructions would explain what the bony things under the skin-like material were. I just needed to get those instructions from Stan.

I put the Smart Sack next to my desktop's speakers and played *Yippie Dip Ki-Yay* on my music app.

Ohhh, Yippie Dip Ki-Yay!
Yippie Dip My Way!
Don't trip or skip the Yip!
And don't skip or trip the Dip!
Ki-Yayyyy Ki-Yayyyy!

I started shaking my hips to the music.

Don't trip or skip the Yip!
And don't skip or trip the Dip!
Ki-Yayyyy Ki-Yayyyy …

I'll admit, I never dance. Izingers aren't dancers. But I could feel the music like never before and my body just started moving to the rhythm.

Then I noticed *the breathing*. There was a little bit of movement in the Smart Sack—its yellow surface slightly rose and fell like it had lungs or something.

It had to be a trick of the mind. It was probably just vibrating to the song. It couldn't be breathing. That would be over-the-top weird. That would make it *alive*.

***

The next day on the bus to school I was about to sit next to Justin when Tommy noticed my Smart Sack.

"You got one, I-licker?"

I nodded. "Yesterday."

"Sweet."

"Yeah."

"Want to sit?"

I dropped so fast that he had to move his hand before I sat on it.

"Lewis?" I heard from behind. "Lewis, why're you sitting up there?"

I'd never noticed how annoying Justin sometimes sounded.

"Have you tried recording anything on it yet?" Tommy asked.

"Yeah. It's got great playback."

"Better than hi-def—must have a subwoofer or something."

"Oh, yeah. A subwoofer for sure."

Tommy gave me a punch in the shoulder. "Wait until you see what it can do for you on tests." He slow nodded and I did too.

"Well," he said as we reached school, "welcome to the club. I'll catch you in Kramer's class."

I followed him off the bus, through the glass front doors, and then I lost sight of him around the media center. I'd always wondered how popular people lived. What kind of stuff did they talk about? What activities did they like to do? Which bathrooms did they prefer? Now I was getting a peek behind the curtain. All because of the Yellow Smart Sack.

"Lewis, why didn't you sit with me? Why didn't you wait for me?"

I marched to homeroom and Justin marched right behind me.

"Lewis, you said you'd help me with bartering today. Remember?"

We took our seats and I placed the Smart Sack on my desk. "Smart Sack, find mini powdered donuts."

It began shifting its innards as items inside were rearranged and reorganized. Then the movement stopped and I lifted the flap. The mini powdered donuts were on top. I opened the wrapper and devoured a donut.

Stan Humphries came into homeroom wearing *another Yellow Smart Sack*.

"You got another one?"

"Sure. I told my parents the first one got torn up in a table-saw accident in Mr. Wheeler's class. No problem."

"Nice play!"

"Parents are chumps."

"Lewis? The bartering?"

“Okay, Justin. Stop your whining.” I took a deep breath and then licked the powdered sugar off my fingers. “Stan, would you trade your new Yellow Smart Sack for Justin’s …” I waited for Justin to take the hint and present his trade offering. He held up the paperclip.

Stan burst out laughing and I did too. We couldn’t stop. Justin put the paperclip back in his pocket.

When our laughter finally died, Stan sniffed the air and asked, “Who crapped their pants?”

We started laughing again. Justin stared at his desk.

Chapter 5

Pythagorean Theory

I counted the Yellow Smart Sacks on my way to second period.

Nine. Tommy Finley, Stan Humphries, Heidi Height, Jimmy Riley, Janey Pablono, Raj Marwan, Rory Eccelson, Loraine Jacobs, and Caitlyn Adams.

We nodded to each other as we passed in the halls. It was a pretty small club. I hoped it stayed small. If everyone got a Smart Sack, it wouldn't feel as special anymore. I figured I should start complaining about it, maybe discourage others who were considering getting one. Not everybody was cut out to have a Smart Sack.

I got to algebra and made a big show of getting it off. I dropped it onto the floor next to my desk and exhaled.

"Like wearing a straitjacket. Who designed this thing? And it feels heavier every time I put it on."

I checked around the room. Nobody seemed to be listening except for Dr. Ambrose. He was bald and boring. I didn't know what he was a doctor in, but it sure wasn't in liveliness.

"Why do youths prefer to wear backpacks everywhere they go?" he asked me. "When I was in school we kept our things in our lockers. We only carried what we needed for each class. Now everybody weighs themselves down with everything they own. Like turtles."

I shrugged. "I don't even know the combination to my locker. I couldn't get inside it if my life depended on it."

"Lockers seem to be a foreign concept these days. I would hazard a guess that over half of the lockers in this school are empty."

He shook his head and scowled at all of the backpacks. I was the only one with a Smart Sack.

"We have a test today so I hope everybody brought their A-game."

That's what he said before every test. He started passing them out. I hadn't studied for it. Honestly, after I traded the *Airpod* to Stan for the Smart Sack, I'd pretty much forgotten about anything else except the Smart Sack. It had dominated my whole night. But my memories were all jumbled, like when you're running a fever and your thoughts get blurry and you're not sure if you're hallucinating or not.

Oh, crap. The test was on the Pythagorean stuff. Stuff I was never going to see again because it wasn't useful except in seventh grade algebra class.

The first question: $A^2 + B^2 = ?$ I sighed. Dr. Ambrose was cleaning the lenses of his eyeglasses.

"**C squared**," a voice whispered in my ear. My body electrified with goosebumps. I looked around the room. Nobody was paying attention to me. The voice had been crackling and scratchy, like dry leaves when you step on them.

I jotted down the answer, my fingers unsteady. My whole hand was shaking. I took a deep breath and went on to the next question.

The side of a right-angled triangle that is opposite the right angle is called a:

"**Hypotenuse**," the voice said. It sounded like it was choking on something. I checked around the room again, but still no one had heard the voice except for me. I wrote the answer. My hand wouldn't stop shaking. The point of my pencil cracked off.

I got to my feet and walked toward the pencil sharpener. My balance was wobbly and my feet felt extra heavy and sluggish, like I was walking around on shoes made of cinderblocks. I sharpened the pencil and returned to my seat. I was actually afraid to go on to the next question because of that voice in my head.

It had to be the Yellow Smart Sack, didn't it? Tommy hadn't mentioned anything about a voice. I should've asked Stan for the instructions.

My eyes went back to the test and I reluctantly read the next question.

When was Pythagoras of Samos born?

I tensed up as the voice gave me the answer. "**570 BC**."

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On the bus ride home I sat next to Tommy. I knew Justin was feeling lonely and rejected again, but I really needed to talk to someone else who had a Smart Sack.

"I had a test today in Ambrose's class," I said hushed, like I was planning a bank robbery.

"And did you do well on it?"

"A+."

"That's the Smart Sack advantage, I-licker." He gave my head a noogie.

"But the voice was … you didn't tell me about the voice."

"Well, it's not really something you can describe, is it? You just have to experience it."

"It's not something I want inside my head." I stared at the Smart Sack on my lap.

"Then don't take it with you to tests. Man up or get F's. Your choice."

Tommy was so cocky. How could he be like that?

"Think of it this way, I-licker; you can listen to that voice all the way to Harvard if you want to." He smirked. "Smart Sack, find hairbrush." His Sack's innards began shifting around. He lifted the flap and took out his hairbrush. His smirk faded. "What is this stuff?" Tommy cringed as he pulled his hand away from the brush. Little strands of a clear glaze hung between his fingers and the brush. He tried flicking the glaze off, but it clung like spider webbing.

I had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. My hands were shaking again as I slowly lifted the flap of my Smart Sack and peeked inside, while Tommy stared inside his.

All the contents in both Smart Sacks were covered in the glaze.

He swabbed a bit of it with his finger and smelled it. "I think it's … *saliva.*"

Chapter 6

Fuzzy

When I got home I took the Smart Sack into my bathroom and emptied it out. Then I wiped everything down with paper towels. The text books and my lunch tote were slick with the glaze, but it was easy to clean. Some of the folders were a bit soggy, but the worst damage was to my science notebook. It was swamped. I started peeling the pages apart to see if any of them might be saved, but they were all too wet and unreadable. I wadded up the notebook and threw it in the trash.

I realized my phone was still in the Smart Sack. I fished around in the bottom and found it in a puddle of the sticky glaze. I plucked it out. It was dripping with the stuff. Too much dripping to be a glaze. It was now a goo. I carefully scrubbed away the goo with a towel and hand-sanitizer.

I tried wiping out the backpack itself. But every time I pressed the paper towel against the inner lining, the Smart Sack would squeak a little and more glaze would ooze from it. To be honest, I didn't care anymore that the material was soft and smooth … nothing should've been oozing from the pack!

I called Stan Humphries. We'd exchanged info after our laughing fit in homeroom. I knew we'd only done that so we could keep goofing on Justin, but now I had more important business to talk about than Justin and his paper clip.

"Who crapped their pants? This is Stan! Leave a message!" *Beep*.

"Stan! This is Lewis. Lewis Izinger. Hey, listen, I'm having some trouble with the Smart Sack. I can't tell if the stuff that's coming out of it is like a gel to keep things cooled off, or if the inner lining is leaking a—" *Beep*.

I dialed again.

"Who crapped their pants? This is Stan! Leave a message!" *Beep*.

"Stan! This is still Lewis. Lewis Izinger—what is leaking out of the Smart Sack and why? I never asked you whether the Smart Sack came with instructions. Or whether the packaging had a customer service number. So give me a call when you get this. Thanks."

I sat down on the toilet seat and stared at the Smart Sack, the mess of moist paper towels, and all of my school things drying on the counter. What was happening?

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That night I was lying in bed asleep. I woke up to find an extra lump under the covers near my feet, a lump that was moving steadily up the bed toward me, and when I lifted my blanket to see what the lump was … the Smart Sack was eating my feet and chewing its way up my legs with rows of shark teeth that were glistening red with my fresh blood—

"AHHH ZEER WOOOB NOOO!"

I woke myself up shouting and sat up in bed. I ripped the covers off. Phew. No Smart Sack. I clicked on the lamp and scanned my room. The Smart Sack was sitting on my desk. It wasn't moving. It was exactly where I left it.

It had only been a nightmare.

I considered getting out of bed and checking it for more leaks, but I didn't need to freak out again. I kept the lamp on for the rest of the night.

When the sunlight started coming through my window, I couldn't tell for certain whether I'd slept since my nightmare. My thoughts were fuzzy as I got out of bed and into my school clothes. I grabbed everything that had dried overnight on the bathroom counter and started putting it back into the Smart Sack. But something else had changed overnight. The inside was dry, but the outside was … fuzzy.

Very short fuzz, almost like the fuzz on a peach or on Stan Humphries' nose. It was yellow, the same color as the rest of the Smart Sack. I turned it over and inspected all the sides. The fuzz was everywhere on the outside, even on the shoulder straps.

For some reason I wasn't freaking out over this newest oddity. Maybe it was because I was too exhausted to be freaked out, or maybe it was because I'd already freaked out enough for one day. But the fuzz did make the Smart Sack kind of cuddly.

I'd wanted a dog since I was five years old, but my parents weren't dog people. They weren't even cat people. They weren't guinea pig, hamster, or gerbil people either. So I'd never had a pet. But I'd had a name picked out just in case a pet suddenly came into my life …

"C'mon, Jasper," I said, slipping on my fuzzy Smart Sack. "Time for school."

Chapter 7

Jasper

I sat next to Tommy again on the bus.

"What's up, Izinger?"

He called me *Izinger*. I sat a bit taller. "Good morning, Tommy. Did your Smart Sack stop leaking?"

"Yeah. But I had to throw away my notebook for Kramer's class. Can I copy your notes into my back-up?"

"It ruined your science notebook? *Only* your science notebook?"

"Everything got soggy, but the science notebook was beyond saving. It was just a slobbery mess."

I got a prickly sensation on my scalp. And goosebumps on my arms. Each by themselves, those two things aren't too bad. But at the same time? There was something disturbing about what Tommy had just said, and my body was telling my mind to wake up. Like Ms. Kramer's Wake Up Bell.

He ran his hand along my shoulder strap. "Yours is growing fuzz, too?"

"Yeah! I noticed it just this morning. It's really soft." I rubbed my chin against Jasper. "I kind of like it."

"Me, too. I gave mine a name: Loki."

"Mine's Jasper."

"Could I pet Loki or Jasper, *please*?" Justin begged. I could feel his head bobbing right behind us.

We pulled into school. I didn't bother keeping up with Tommy or slowing down for Justin. I needed to find Stan and get some answers.

When I got to homeroom he was already there, but something was different about him. Instead of the normal glint in his eyes, they were kind of milky with dark circles under them. He looked sick.

"What's going on, Stan?"

"Hey, Lewis." He looked at me but wasn't really focusing his eyes on anything. His voice was off, too—deeper than normal.

"Did you get my messages?"

"I don't know the square root of Madagascar."

Justin took a seat. "What's wrong with Stan?"

"Stan," I said, snapping my fingers to get his attention. His eyes swiveled between me and Justin.

"I've seen fire and I've seen snakes, and nickels bigger than paper plates."

"Okaaay." I sat back and studied him. His Smart Sack was growing fuzz, but it was thicker and longer than Tommy's and mine. His looked like a plush yellow hairbrush.

"Can I pet your backpack, Stan?" Justin asked.

"Sure, Loafers."

Justin looked at me. “Why’d he call me Loafers?”

“Stan, did the Smart Sack come with any instructions?”

“My Smart Sack is named Loafers, you silly twit.”

Justin giggled while petting Loafers. “Ooh, it’s very soft.”

I snapped again to get Stan’s attention. “So, about the instructions—”

“I gave Loafers a shampoo.”

Justin sniffed Loafers. “Smells like Fresh Linen Febreze.”

“Stan, did you shampoo your Smart Sack with Febreze?”

The bell rang. I walked to second period in a kind of daze. What was happening to Stan? I counted thirteen Smart Sacks on the way to algebra. And without a single exception, they were all growing fuzz.

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I hated going to Heidi for anything. She was a snobby and arrogant know-it-all. But maybe she had some insight into all of these strange developments.

Ms. Kramer kept us busy with a lab on greenhouse gases. It required us to spray certain aerosols into a terrarium full of miniature rainforest plants and record the temperature every two minutes. I was lab partners with Justin. I wasn’t surprised that he spilled two of the aerosols on his lap, but I was surprised that the terrarium’s temperature rose eight degrees Celsius in just thirty minutes.

When the lunch bell rang, I got in line behind Heidi. It was the first time ever that I was happy to be alphabetically linked to her.

Ms. Kramer walked us to the cafeteria.

“Heidi, I see your Smart Sack is growing fuzz, too.”

“Penelope.”

“Excuse me?”

“Her name is Penelope. What about it?”

“Do you have any idea why it’s growing fuzz? All of them are.”

She shrugged. “It’s a simulation.”

“Of what?”

“Duh. A pet simulation.”

“Is that what the instructions said?”

She shook her head really slow. The kind of slow that tells me I’m a moron. “There weren’t any instructions.”

“None?” Now I was shaking my head really slow. “Then your theory about the pet simulation is made up? You don’t know what’s going on, either?”

We’d reached the lunch line. She headed toward her table with the Nichol twins, but paused and turned back to me. “You’re right, Lewis. I don’t know why they’re growing fuzz. But instead of worrying about it, I’m going to trust my theory and enjoy the experience.” She gave

me a nasty little snort and turned back toward her table and the Nichol twins. “Penelope, find chocolate pudding.”

Chapter 8

A Chat

"Jasper, find *iPad*." I could feel the innards moving around the Smart Sack on my back. "She thinks it's a pet simulation."

Justin was already at our lunch table. "Who thinks what is a pet simulation?"

"Heidi thinks that's what the Smart Sack is."

"That's not a bad guess."

"But that's all it is: a guess." I set the Smart Sack on the table and lifted the flap. "Not again." The glaze was back. And my *iPad* was slick with it. "Another leak."

"What's it leaking?"

"I don't know." I emptied everything out and got to work deglazing it all, practically emptying the whole napkin dispenser.

Justin stared and ate his meatloaf casserole. How could he eat at a time like this?

"Look, Lewis. Heidi had a leak, too."

She was taking everything out of Penelope and using a packet of wet wipes to clean her stuff. Justin and I looked around the cafeteria. We counted six other kids emptying out their Smart Sacks and deglazing their belongings.

"This is nuts!" I finished cleaning the *iPad* and brought up the Smart Sack website. I couldn't find anything about pet simulations, fuzz growing, or leaking. "They don't even have a troubleshooting guide or an FAQ!"

"Not even an FAQ? That's horse manure," Justin said, absentmindedly petting Jasper.

"I really don't know what to do now …" I noticed a customer support live chat feature. "Here's something." I clicked on it and entered Hello into the dialogue window. The little dots started blinking, indicating that somebody on the other end was typing.

Hello, the chat window sent back. This is Maximilian. You may call me Max. What is your name and how may I be of help?

This is Lewis and I have a Smart Sack that is leaking and growing fuzz.

The little dots blinked for quite some time.

"What're they saying?" Justin asked. He moved to the seat beside me and watched over my shoulder.

I'm sorry to hear that, Lewis. May I ask which generation of Smart Sack you purchased?

"There are different generations?" Justin wondered.

Probably the latest one, I typed back. I've only had it for about two days.

The little dots blinked for a minute. Finally:

The newest model does extract fluids when digesting.

"What does that mean?" Justin asked. "Digesting what?"

My fingers were quivering as I typed the next question. Could you explain what the Smart Sack is digesting?

Max took some time typing his response. While I waited, I chewed my fingernails. I bit off a good chunk of my thumbnail when Max finally wrapped up:

Digesting whatever nutrients it's being fed. How can it grow and flourish without nutrients?

Justin and I looked at each other.

So the Smart Sack *is* a pet simulation?

As Max was typing, my eyes stared at the little blinking dots.

"What kind of nutrients should it be getting?" Justin asked. "Maybe that's what you should ask next. Maybe there's a special food you can buy."

"Shhh."

What a wonderful term: pet simulation. Yes, Lewis. You need to take great care of your Smart Sack. Mustn't starve it of nutrients or affection.

Is there anything more I should know? Like what it will be doing next?

I'd never typed so fast in my life. My whole body was tingling with curiosity and nerves. Justin and I watched the dots blinking and blinking. Finally:

Evolution isn't an exact science. Each Smart Sack will develop at its own pace. I'd be on the lookout for audible cues as it tries communicating with you.

My breath was frozen in my throat. I didn't know how to respond. Max wasn't done, though. The little dots were doing some more blinking.

But guessing by the progress you've described, the next feature you will see will be when it sees you.

My brain began ringing bells. Wake Up Bells.

Good luck, Lewis.