



*S*tockholm, Sweden.

*“... and this year’s Nobel Prize in Physics is awarded to Professor Albert Einstein.”*

*There was thunderous applause in the auditorium as Einstein came up to the podium to accept his gold medal.*

*Amazing, thought Griffin Bing. He didn’t comb his hair, even for this.*

*The legendary genius took his seat on the platform beside Griffin as the ovation quieted.*

*“Congratulations, Doc,” Griffin whispered.*

*“And to you, young man,” Einstein responded.*

*“Our next award,” the master of ceremonies went on, “is a new prize for us. Our first-ever Nobel Prize in Planning goes to a teenage gentleman from Cedarville, United States — Griffin Bing.”*

*Griffin rose, brushing off the satin lapels of his rented tuxedo. The place erupted with cheers, especially the front row, where his friends were sitting — Ben,*

*Pitch, Logan, Melissa, Savannah, and Luthor. They were all just as dressed up as he was, except for Luthor. They didn't make tuxedos for Dobermans, but clipped to his studded collar was a little black bow tie.*

*He felt a rush of gratitude toward them. They were the reason he was The Man With The Plan. No plan was worth anything without the right team to carry it out.*

*The auditorium resounded with celebration. It was a standing ovation! Fireworks went off — indoors! — with an earsplitting report.*

*Crack! Boom! Rat-tat-tat!*

*Crack! Boom! Rat-tat-tat!*

Griffin came awake with a start, the Nobel auditorium popping like a soap bubble, along with his dream. His clock read 12:18. It was the middle of the night.

*Crack! Boom! Rat-tat-tat!*

He sat bolt upright in bed. The sound wasn't coming from any dream.

He rushed to the window and threw the blinds open just as another barrage of pebbles ricocheted off the glass. Someone was in the yard! He lifted the window, peered out, and hissed, "Who's there?"

"Hey, Bing — nice bedhead!"

Griffin squinted into the gloom. There behind a honeysuckle hedge stood a tall, burly eighth grader

with pig eyes and a nasty sneer on his face. It was bad enough to be awoken from a super-great dream. But to be disturbed by the likes of Darren Vader was beyond annoying.

“Beat it, Vader!”

“Not till I show you this great thing I found.” For the first time, Darren stepped into the open.

The wheeze that came from Griffin threatened to suck the neighborhood dry of all oxygen. Instantly, he recognized the contraption the boy was wearing. It resembled the white rectangular backpack that astronauts carry on their space suits, only this one was worn in the front. It was the SweetPick, Griffin’s father’s latest invention.

Mr. Bing had developed several agricultural devices designed for orchard harvesting. But the SweetPick was different. It was made for the sugar industry, to cut and bundle stalks of cane. Mr. Bing thought it might be his big break as an inventor, his first step out of the small orchard field into the wider food-production world.

“Vader, what are you doing with my dad’s invention?”

No sooner had the words passed his lips than he knew: Darren’s mother was Mr. Bing’s lawyer. When the patent office had refused to approve the SweetPick, Mrs. Vader had taken the prototype to be professionally photographed for the follow-up application. Mr. Bing had brought it to her that very morning.

“What?” Darren was the picture of innocence. “This little thing? It’s just some hunk of junk I found in the garage. Oh, wait, I forgot the most important part.” He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket, unfolded it, and held it up against the device. He switched on a flashlight to make sure that Griffin could read it:

NosePick

Griffin saw red. “You take that thing home to your mom, or I’m calling the cops!”

“Well, that would be really scary,” Darren sneered, “except that it’s not patented yet. So if I get arrested, everybody’ll see the secret design. Dear old Dad won’t be too happy about that, will he?”

Griffin was getting angrier by the second. “Put it back! It’s one of a kind! If you break it —”

“Gee,” Darren teased, “I wonder what this switch is for.” He turned back to the honeysuckle and fingered the control that dangled from the pack.

“Don’t touch that —”

What happened next was straight out of Mr. Bing’s patent application. *Flack!* The U-Bundle mechanism launched a length of twine out past the target. It boomeranged and wrapped itself three times around the bush. Small teeth on the end of the rope bit in tightly,

cinching the cord. A split second later, *Whack!* The Safe-chete blade knifed out and sliced through the honeysuckle branches. The neat bundle tipped over and landed at Darren's feet.

"Whoa!" said Darren, surprised and impressed. "Check it out!"

Barefoot, Griffin sailed down the stairs and out of the house, struggling to be quiet in his fury. He hit the grass running, and made a beeline for Darren.

Big Darren Vader was not normally intimidated by the smaller Griffin. But the blind rage could be felt from a range of thirty yards. He turned tail and fled, though weighed down by the heavy equipment.

*Flack! Whack!*

Suddenly, an escape route appeared in the hedge separating the Bing home from their neighbors. Darren disappeared through the opening. Hot on his heels, Griffin tripped over the neatly bundled cedar shrubs, ripping open both knees of his pajama pants. Then he was up again, pounding across the neighbors' yard, fueled by white-hot anger.

*Flack! Whack!*

A perfectly pruned rosebush was cinched and slashed, all in the blink of an eye.

"Stop doing that!" Griffin seethed.

"It's not my fault these controls are so sensitive!" Darren shot back. The Safe-chete blade beheaded a petunia.

Griffin made a lunge for the back of the SweetPick's harness, but Darren sidestepped. A lasso of twine snapped past Griffin's ear.

Darren was still defiant. "I feel sorry for you, Bing. If my folks bet our future on a NosePick, I wouldn't show my face around town."

"It's a *SweetPick!*"

Darren beat a hasty retreat for the road. Griffin was determined not to let him off so easily. He was going to show his father, and also Mrs. Vader, how Darren was treating a top secret prototype like it was a sandbox toy. The SweetPick had been entrusted to Mrs. Vader in good faith. If this was how she looked after it, Dad should think about getting another lawyer.

Despite his reduced speed, Darren was hard to catch up to. He played middle school football, and ran with a high-stepping gait that covered a lot of ground.

*Fine*, thought Griffin. *I'll beat him at his own game.* He threw himself at Darren's legs in a flying tackle. One arm found its target around Darren's knees. The other found the dangling button that operated the SweetPick.

*Flack! Thud!*

The Safe-chete mechanism burst out and lodged itself in the trunk of a large sycamore tree.

Griffin knew a new panic. "Pull it out!"

Darren yanked with all his might, but the blade was truly stuck. He turned to Griffin. "You are so dead!"

“Me?! You’re the one who stole it!”

Darren nodded solemnly. “Yeah, but you’re the one who broke it.”

“I wouldn’t even be here if you hadn’t woken me up! I’d be safe in my bed having a really good dream!”

“Well, maybe if your dad invented something normal for a change, I’d be able to resist making fun of it!”

It was the last straw. With a howl of outrage, Griffin clamped his arms around Darren and wrestled him to the ground. With a deep *thwang*, the Safe-chete blade was dislodged from the trunk. The two boys stopped fighting and stared at it.

“Let’s get this back in my garage before our parents kill us!” Darren blurted.

“Right!” Griffin agreed.

It rankled to have to help Darren cover this up when the whole thing was the jerk’s fault to begin with. Yet Griffin forced himself to focus on the big picture. It would be satisfying to see Darren get in trouble. But keeping the SweetPick a secret was far more important, at least until it was patented. So he accompanied Darren back to the Vader house and helped his enemy stow the prototype under a tarpaulin in the garage. He even nodded when Darren said, “Tonight never happened. Got it, Bing?”

Then he padded home, still barefoot, pajamas ripped in the knees. *Anyway*, he reflected, *there would be plenty of opportunities to take revenge on Darren*. It would be easy for The Man With The Plan.