

# What I Learned Over Summer Vacation

## Balderdash and Other Stories

By Lee Giles

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## Balderdash

School started back this week, and my teacher said we each had to take a turn telling the class what we did over the summer. Sarah and Michael, the twins, told all about their trip to space camp. They're practically astronauts already. Randy told about skiing in Chile in July! I've never even been skiing in January. Julie flew in a hot air balloon, and Steve built a car, though I'm pretty sure his dad did most of the work. Their summers were all so exciting, so interesting, so unique, that I knew my summer vacation story had to be absolutely amazing. I wanted them to fall out of their seats for the sheer thrill of it! Do you want to hear my story? You might want to strap on a seat belt.

Summer started out in the usual way with a bus ride home. I'm the first one on and the last one off, so it was just me and bus driver Fran left on the bus when a hail storm ripped through the sky like my big brother opening a box of marshmallow cereal. The hail stones were so big that they tore right through the bus hood and crushed the engine. Well, the bus wouldn't go anywhere without an engine, but I got an idea. The hail was covering the road like marbles. I took off a bus tire and told bus driver Fran I could get myself home. I laid the tire down flat and sat in it like a sled. I shoved off and used my backpack as a paddle both to steer and to push my way along the rolling, marbley hailstones, and I started slipping and sledding down the road.

That worked for awhile until I started slipping and sledding down a big hill and lost grip of my paddle-backpack. I was careening down the steep hill, screaming at the top of my lungs and instead of trying to steer, I wrapped my arms around my face. I didn't stop screaming when I realized the ground wasn't underneath me anymore. I didn't even stop screaming when I felt myself splash down. I stopped screaming when my tire hit a big rock and spilled me into the water. That's when I realized I was drifting down a river.

Sputtering and spitting the water spurting into my mouth, I grabbed hold of something floating along with me and just focused on staying afloat. I was looking around me and just saw trees on both sides, and I was wishing I knew my geography because then maybe I would know where I was being carried. But then instead of worrying, I reminded

myself I was on summer vacation and getting wet is a big part of summer vacation, so I figured I was getting off to a great start!

The water current slowed down and the river turned into a creek, and I found myself lying on the back of a baby elephant. I know you are thinking, what! Where did that elephant come from? I know that's what you are thinking because that's what I was thinking. I realized that the thing I grabbed hold of that was floating down the river was a baby elephant's trunk, not a branch or something. As the river thinned out, she rose up out of the water and took me with her.

This, of course, was an unexpected turn of events and required some quick thinking on my part. Unfortunately, in the last 180 days of school no one taught us anything about communicating with or controlling elephants, so I did my thinking while letting her carry me wherever she wanted to go. I had, however, read books and seen movies about animals who eventually found their way home, so I decided to trust that she was headed for her home, which I figured was probably the zoo since, how many people do you know have a baby elephant for a pet? Exactly.

The zoo wasn't our first stop though. The creek was surrounded by trees and I found myself on an elephant ride through the woods. I heard a cackling sound, you know, a really loud laugh that's not exactly contagious like a friendly, funny laugh is supposed to be. Then I heard yelling. Then I heard a squeal. It actually made me feel better that I was with Bucko, that's what I named the elephant. It just came out, "Hey, Bucko, where you taking me?" Like that. Bucko didn't seem fazed by the noises that I pretended not to be fazed by.

It wasn't long before the other noises stopped, probably because the crunching of the elephant's stomping was noise enough for everyone. Finally, we came into a small clearing in the woods and found the source of the cackle, yell and squeal. There was a horse, but the horse hadn't made any of those sounds. He was decorated with bright red and blue ropes and blinders and didn't pay any attention at all to me and Bucko. The dog had been the source of the squeal, and he repeated his squealy show when the cackler grabbed hold of him and wouldn't let him sniff or chase or whatever dog instinct had come over him in the moment.

The yellor was a boy, small compared to me, not that I told you how tall I am, but he wasn't taller than me and he wasn't a baby or toddler or anything either. I don't know what he had yelled about, but now his face was stone still, a looked-like-he-wasn't-breathing kind of still.

The cackler did it again, a sort of laugh-cough baring a mouth with four teeth left in it. Her hair was black or dyed but most of it was covered with a scarf that rivaled the horse's decorations for brightness of color. She asked me how I came to be riding Apará (*say a like the word a, the word par, then the word a again*). I asked if Bucko's name was really Apará and she said it was. She said the elephant was named that because she comes and goes as she pleases. She said she's like an apparition, she's there one minute and gone the next. Turns out my boy, Bucko, was a girl.

I mostly sat silent, which is not how I usually sit, but she knew Bucko, Apará, and she was talking like she's known her her whole life, which was impossible because I was the one riding her down the river. I had to quickly explain the whole river thing, and she explained that Apará wasn't from the zoo but from the circus. In fact her son and daughter-in-law, yellor's parents, were part of the circus. They were acrobats and the mom could do a head stand on the head of the father all while riding on the back of Apará's mother.

I displayed my excitement at the thought of a perilous headstand and was promptly invited to see the circus in action when we returned Apará. This is the part where we get to know each other, and I find out they are Gypsies and had always traveled with the circus, as in my father's-father's-father-before-me-was-in-the-circus kind of always. The cackler started telling me the most amazing stories, stories of circuses, of runaway trains, of renegade elephants, of robbers in the woods. They were the most amazing, unique, exciting and interesting stories that had ever been told. Well, I don't know that for a fact, but by my subjective opinion, they were!

As I sat next to the Gypsy grandmother on a log by the fire with a pot of something cooking over it, I asked her how she came to live and tell such marvelous, stupendous, outrageous stories. She told me she was the best story teller because she had lived a lot of life and had learned the secret ingredient to telling a story.

I'm curious even if curiosity did kill the cat, but I'm not a cat, so I don't have to worry about that, and I asked her right away what the secret story ingredient was. She looked at me like she was scrutinizing my thoughts that I thought I had hidden. Then she cackled. I liked the cackle a lot more up close, with those four teeth wagging in front of me, than when I didn't know whose teeth that cackle was behind. Then she told me that she couldn't tell me the secret ingredient. "Not yet," she said. Oooo, now isn't that tantalizing? Not yet. I wasn't going to run home with a *not yet* promising that *some time* a secret would be revealed.

The cackler served me goolash. I don't know if that's really what it was, but that's what it looked like. That's what my dad calls dinner when he empties everything leftover in the fridge into a pot and adds water. They didn't have a fridge, but same idea. Then I saddled up on Bucko, or you could say climbed up onto Apará's back, and we followed the cackler and yeller riding in the cart pulled by the horse of many colors. Did you see us in our mini parade? You probably heard about it if you didn't. I love a parade and started waving at the gaping gawkers along our route to the circus. One little girl asked for my autograph. I obliged, of course.

While I was signing my Hancock, Apará started sniffing into the wind. As I handed back the paper to the little girl, Apará took off charging in a direction almost opposite of the horse and cart. I didn't have time to call for help. I just grabbed on and went for a wild ride. Apará galloped through the streets. People dove to the right and to the left to get out of the way. Cars crashed, distracted by the site of a rampaging pachyderm.

Apará ran as the crow flies and didn't seem to want to bother with dodging obstacles. They dodged her or they got run over. She crashed over the flower pots in front of the *Stop and Smell the Roses* flower shop. She crashed into the *Five and Ten* which has been indestructible for the last century. She managed to bulldoze her way through the aisles and out the loading doors in the back. I managed to grab up a lollypop when we passed the front counter. I tossed a dollar from my pocket which I'm sure would cover the lollypop but certainly not the mess Apará made.

I popped the lollypop into my mouth and congratulated myself on snatching up a root beer flavored one. Apará wasn't slowing down, and I

got to thinking about the circus acrobats, yeller's parents who rode on an elephant's back, his mother balancing upside-down on top of his father's head. I thought if they could do that, then I could probably ride standing up and sucking on a lollypop. I slowly got to my feet. I stood tall and threw my arms up in the air to signify my triumph. My left arm hit a traffic light post and knocked me off balance. I swung around the post and grabbed on with my lollypop still protruding from between my lips. I wrapped my legs tight around the pole and held on.

I didn't slide down right away because of the still-fresh memory of rope burn from gym class, but then I didn't dare slide down because two police dogs started barking at me and attacking the post as if that would somehow get me down. I went up. I made it all the way to the very top and sat on top of the traffic light. I guess my feet must have dangled down over the lights because cars starting stopping instead of going, but maybe they were just distracted from driving because a kid was sitting on the traffic light.

Traffic came to a standstill, as they say. The police came out of their office to see what the dogs were yapping at and what all the cars were honking at, and what they saw was me! I waved. They called in a helicopter. It circled overhead, and I had to climb up a rope ladder they dangled from the helicopter for me. But before they could take me home, they got a call about an elephant that had barreled into the annual peanut festival.

My synapses were firing and I figured it must be Apara at the peanut festival. I figured that must be how she got away from the circus in the first place and then away from me. She had smelled those peanuts and just couldn't control herself. She is just a kid after all. You may think there's no way she could smell that festival a full ten miles away, but elephants can actually smell twelve miles away. If you don't believe me, Google it. I'm telling the truth.

I felt like a spy, flying over town in a helicopter, looking for the trouble-making elephant. We spotted her easy. It's not like we were looking for a needle in a haystack. We were looking for an elephant in a peanut pile which had been a peanut pyramid before the peanut-loving

pachyderm pounced on it. (Mr. Johnson always builds a peanut pyramid for the peanut festival.)

I pointed to Apará and looked over at the helicopter pilot to see if he could see her too, but the pilot wasn't looking down. He was looking awful. He was wriggling like he was trying to scratch an itch that covered his whole body and his lips were looking puffy. In fact his whole face was looking splotchy, red and bumpy. Then I remembered seeing something just like that before when my dad accidentally ate some shellfish and we had to rush him to the hospital. It's easy to remember because I have a memento. My brother and I took pictures of ourselves wearing bedpans as hats.

I gestured to the helicopter pilot that his face was red and puffy and that he should let me down with the rope ladder to go get the elephant. I think he understood or at least was too puffy to care because he didn't object when I kicked the ladder out the helicopter door. He hovered over the peanut festival and I climbed down and jumped off onto a pile of plush peanuts, prizes for the pick-the-winning peanut game where you reach into a barrel and pick up a peanut, and if it has a mark on its shell you get a stuffed peanut, you know, like a stuffed animal but legume instead. I learned about legumes from my elderly neighbor.

Once I was on the ground, I had to formulate a plan. Apará was not going to want to leave her peanut paradise. I remembered that carrot-on-a-stick trick where you dangle a carrot in front of a horse to get him to go forward to try and get it. But I was smart enough to know it wouldn't work with Apará since her trunk could reach farther than my stick would. I walked around surveying the scene and taking an inventory of my assets. I learned how to do that from television. I was hoping something would inspire a brilliant plan to free the festival of their four-legged intruder.

Brilliance had yet to strike, so I got some cotton candy and sat for a spell. That's an expression. I didn't spell anything. I started listing my options. I could push or pull or pick her up. They all sounded really hard and somewhat painful. Then it hit me like a bolt of lightning, figuratively speaking. Wheels would make pushing and pulling easier, right? That thought inspired two words: bumper cars. And air holds up planes, why

not an elephant? That thought inspired one word: parachute. Can you figure out what my plan was?

I politely borrowed the canopy that Apará had partially knocked down anyway from the peanut pyramid pavilion. I tied the four corners onto the poles of three bumper cars. I made a trail of peanuts from Apará into the two back cars. She climbed in and stood with her two front feet in the one car and her two back feet in the other. I opened the door to the exit and then climbed into the first car. I stepped on the gas, which is an expression too, especially since it's an electric car and doesn't have any gas in it. I hurled my car toward the exit and pulled Apará behind me. I would have loved to have seen the look on her face, but I'm a serious driver and kept my eye on the road, which is another figure of speech. I wasn't on the street but in the middle of the peanut festival.

Just as I had hoped, we had built up enough momentum (I learned that word in school) that we made it to the hill and started rolling down toward the moon bounce. One bump later and we were airborne. We landed on the air-filled castle and bounced up high. The parachute caught us and I demonstrated to Apará how to blow hot air into our parachute. She started blowing through her trunk, sending hot air into the parachute, and it lifted us up. I knew that hot air rises. I learned that from my dad when I complained about how hot my bedroom was.

So there we were, flying. We had made it over the fence when lightning struck, literally, that wasn't an expression. The hail storm must have been following me because it found me again. The hail knocked down our parachute and us with it. The metal rods on the back of the bumper cars must have looked pretty attractive to the lightning because it kept striking the one on the back of my car. I figure it must have had the highest pole. It was just what I needed. The electricity in the lightning powered up my car which propelled down the road at lightning speed, pun intended. My car was still tied onto Apará's cars, and the lightning was enough power for us all.

At first I forgot that I was supposed to be getting Apará to the circus. It was so cool getting to drive a car so fast and on a real road too, but it didn't take long before I realized I had to figure out where I was going, or I was going to crash. I started turning right and then left at each

chance I got. I figured at least that way I wouldn't go in a circle. The sun was a bit behind me, so I figured I was heading eastish. I learned that the sun sets in the west from my grandfather. The problem was that it didn't mean anything to me that I was heading east.

I was going too fast to think too much. Then I saw my school, turns out that I had gone in a circle. I was back where I had begun my summer vacation. The storm blew on ahead of us and the lightening stopped and so did we without our energizer. We rolled into the school parking lot. It was empty. I guess students aren't the only ones eager to head home on summer vacation. I got out of my car and encouraged Apará out of hers. A new plan flashed into my brain. I discretely picked some flowers and gave them to Apará to hold with her trunk. With her nose thus occupied I climbed onto her back and tried my hand at directing her steps, using her ears as reins. She got the message.

I knew my way home from school so that's where we went. I don't think I need to go into what my mother said when she saw me riding into the driveway on the back of an elephant. She's very understanding though, and once all of her questions were answered she escorted us to the circus. She drove slowly with her hazard lights flashing, and Apará and I followed.

At the circus we met the yeller and cackler and Apará's mom. I was invited to ride Apará in the show and my mom bought a ticket to watch. The circus was great, but I suspect the highlight was my riding Apará standing up while sucking on a lollypop.

After the circus ended and I was about to head home, the Gypsy grandmother pulled me aside and told me her secret ingredient that she added to every story to make it amazingly fascinating and wonderfully exciting and that's what I learned from the cackler – balderdash.

## **Balderdash**

senseless talk or writing; nonsense

## Lift/Thrust

Lift: An upward force that counteracts the force of gravity, produced by changing the direction and speed of a moving stream of air

Thrust: A force that increase the speed of an object

Thursday started out like any other morning-after-the-last-day-of-school. I slept until nine and didn't dress before I came downstairs, only to find all the marshmallow cereal was gone. I grumbled and grabbed the flakes. I cheered up when I saw a commercial for an F1000 remote control flyer. I wanted one and that got me thinking. I knew I wasn't going to be getting one because I don't have a job and my parents frown upon whim purchases. By the time my flakes stopped crunching and I was slurping down their soggy sweetness, I had my plan. I could build my own flyer, and if I was going to be building a plane anyway, why not build it big enough to fly with me in it?

I started out by drawing pictures of airplanes. You should always draw before you build. I learned that from the Wright brothers. They made a plane that could hold people, so I figured it was smart to imitate them. When I'm copying my older brother, my mom always says to him, "Imitation is the highest form of compliment." I'm hoping the Wright brothers feel flattered. My brother just seems to feel annoyed.

Once my drawing satisfied my snazz-o-meter, I started my scavenger hunt for building materials. I started in the basement with dad's supplies of handyman tools. He's not the handiest of men, but he has the basics—hammer, screwdriver, tape measure, and some other things I don't know what they do because I've never seen him use them. Maybe they had been presents like that sweater I have with the picture of a collie on it that my aunt thought was cute but that I keep in the darkest corner of my closet.

I carried everything outside and spread it out. I really had no idea how to turn my drawing into an actual airplane. I was thinking the Wright brothers' biographers could have shared with the rest of us a few more steps in the process. To boost my confidence I jumped around and did a few air punches. I knew my plane had to have a place for me to sit and it had to have wings. Beyond that I wasn't sure how it was going to work,

but I decided just to start building it anyway. I mean, the day before I was flying with an elephant. This couldn't be any harder, right?

I had a cardboard box for my seat. I used duck tape to attach foam wings. I had this great huge packing foam from my mom's new freezer. The old one had a door that didn't like to shut, so it defrosted more than it froze. But don't feel bad because she got a new freezer, and I got wings that were light as a feather. Well, not exactly, that's just an expression, but they were really light. Finally, I duck taped my big brother's skateboard onto the box to give it wheels. My drawing had wheels. Real airplanes had wheels. I had to use it; it was a necessity. I couldn't worry that my brother threatened me with punishment of death if I ever used it.

That was all pretty easy. Then I had to figure out how to go up. I knew that air pushed up on planes as the plane moves through it. That's called lift. I just had to figure out how to move through the air so it could lift the plane. Brilliance struck again. Nothing really hit me. (I just wanted to make sure you knew I was okay.) What was the brilliant idea? A sling shot. Now I just had to find elastic big enough to fling me, plane and all.

I asked my mom if I could clean out everyone's underwear drawer of anything holey, something with holes in it, not something used in religious ceremony. She gave me that look that means you-must-be-up-to-no-good-because-you-never-want-to-clean. I just smiled back and took off in a flash when she said okay. I didn't flash like a bulb, just ran off really fast. I gathered up any underwear that could pass as not perfect. It wasn't gross. They were clean. And anyway, desperate times call for desperate measures. I don't know where I learned that from.

I cut the elastic band out of each pair of underwear, cut open each one so that it stretched long, and stapled them all together into one long rubber band. I tied each end onto the railing on both sides of the porch steps. I was about eight feet off the ground, but I was hoping that lift would take me higher. I walked backward across our porch stretching the elastic with me. I had to sit backwards in the plane's box seat in order to stretch the elastic behind the box. I let go with a snap and off I went. I slid across the porch floor and then sledded down the porch steps. At the bottom of the steps I tipped and the back of my head hit the ground with a thud. I stared at the clouds and knew I had just learned an invaluable

lesson: lift has to be greater than weight if you don't want to end up with a headache.

The sling shot hadn't worked exactly as I had hoped. Airplanes have lift because they cut through the air with their wings at high speeds. I needed better thrust, a better way to move forward faster. I decided to work on a car to perfect the forward thrust before trying to build another plane.

I dismantled my plane into its various parts and went back to the drawing board. I didn't really have a board, but I did draw a new design. I colored a lightning bolt onto the side of the car for a special touch, a memento. I learned from my grandma to remember the good times, and riding in a lightening-powered bumper car had been a blast, of the non-explosive kind. On the other side I wrote, "Thrust or Bust."

I took things wings off my box seat, thought of my brother and took off the skateboard, and then set off looking for a new set of wheels. I made a mental checklist of what counted as a wheel. It had to be round and big and strong enough to hold the weight of my box seat and I.

Round wasn't as easy to find as I had thought. Flower pots and cups had round edges, but they weren't the same round everywhere and couldn't roll forward. That was a problem if I expected to get anywhere. Lamp shades were too flimsy, light bulbs too fragile. I needed thin, round and strong. I sat down and chewed on my pencil while I thought it over. And that was my answer. My pencil. Thin. Round. Strong, well, strong enough. I thought about rolling on that hail and figured that I could roll on pencils just as well.

I went in search of *the lost pencil*. You know, that pencil you had a minute ago and now you can't find. I found three pencils in the couch, four under my bed, five in my backpack along with some jelly beans, though I don't remember having jelly beans. I found a pencil on my dad's desk and a full seventeen in my brother's room. I found six in our backyard which I had used to, well, never mind, that's another story. Thirty-six, an even number, so I could lay them side by side in two long rows under my box seat. As I rolled over them and they came out the

back, I would pick them up and place them in front of my box. In the meantime I just taped them together two by two into eighteen long pencils.

Then I had one last problem. Or so I thought. Thrust. I had to have something that pushed me forward. What did regular cars use? Gas. Motor. I wasn't sure how they worked together. But I knew a little something about gas. Don't laugh. I mean carbon dioxide, CO<sub>2</sub>. It's the stuff we breathe out. But it is also the stuff made when you build a volcano for science class and mix vinegar and baking soda. It's also what bubbles up in yeasty bread.

I raided the kitchen and got all the baking soda and yeast and vinegar and lemon juice I could find. I figured I could make gas and point it away from me. The gas would shoot one way and it should shoot me the other. I learned that from reading the book on rockets my friend got me for my birthday. I needed to get the gas in one place so it could shoot out some hole instead of just escaping into the sky. I grabbed a balloon that I had found under my bed along with some of those pencils. I duck taped a little box with a hole in it to my seat and set the balloon inside and filled it with the baking soda and yeast. I pulled the end of the balloon out the hole.

I grabbed up my box-seat and headed out to the street. In the driveway I almost broke my neck, literally, when I stepped on my brother's skateboard and my foot slipped right out from under me. I had a nasty bruise the next day, I won't mention where, but my spine stayed intact, and I decided that a skateboard's wheels were much better than a pencil conveyor belt. No harm, no foul, as they say. I'd just use the pencils some other way. There has to be another use for eighteen foot-long pencils, right?

In the middle of the road, I prepared for take off. I placed the box on the skateboard and climbed in. I had poured what was left of the vinegar and lemon juice into one empty water bottle. I stretched the lip of the balloon over the lip of the bottle. I tipped in the liquid and quick pulled out the bottle like a mouse stealing cheese from a trap.

I'm sure I must have produced some carbon dioxide gas, but I'm not sure how much because my big brother had been watching and waiting

for his moment. He yelled like a madman, or maybe he yelled because he is a madman, and came charging at me. Maybe he was a little upset over my taking his skateboard. Maybe I should have tried the pencils first. He barreled into the box and started pushing me down the street at top speed, which was pretty fast, even for my brother. When he couldn't keep up any longer, he let me go, and I was flying down the street, figuratively speaking.

I ducked and crossed my arms over my head like they teach you to do on an airplane in case of an emergency landing. I was sure this was an emergency. I heard the crackling of branches and I fell out of the box. I had crash landed in a neighbor's blackberry bush. My left arm and left cheek were dyed purple from smooshing the berries. Lying there, I took a mental note of the lesson I learned. Thrust is good, but brakes are better.

I was stained beyond washing up, so when I got home, I just wiped my arm and cheek. The chunks and juice were gone, but I was stained. I guess I might have looked nice if I were glass. I parked the car in the garage, which means I threw it in the back along with the skateboard. Then I went back inside to regroup, as they say, even though there was just one of me.

I wasn't going to get up by going fast forward. Air might hold up an airplane, but I couldn't get going fast enough to get that kind of lift. If lift wasn't going to get me up, I needed a push upward. I decided to mull over my options for skyward thrust over a drink. I went to the fridge and poured myself a cup of lemonade. I topped it off with my favorite straw, the curly kind that's see-through and you can watch the lemonade go round and round before it disappears between your lips. I was sipping away and realized that I had my inspiration right in front of me. My curly straw!

I abandoned my lemonade and raced down the basement stairs, leaping off the fourth to the bottom step and landing with a crash at the bottom. I dug through the shelves until I found it. The pogo stick. Silver and blue in all its springy glory, I picked it up and dusted off a cobweb. Guess it had been awhile since I had bounced around on that thing. The pogo--thrust in a stick. If that didn't give me a push upward, what would?

I ran out to the yard and started bouncing. It was just like riding a bike, not that it had wheels or anything, but I hadn't forgotten how to balance and make it go. Boing! Boing! I bounced higher and higher. And then it happened. I landed on a tree stump and then from there I landed on the picnic table in our back yard and then from there on top of our shed and then from there on top of our neighbor's house. I started boinging from house to house and sometimes tree house in between. At first I was a little concerned getting so high and not knowing how to get down other than falling, but then I remembered I was on vacation, so I just stuck one hand in the air and swung it around like I was holding a lasso and riding a bucking bull instead of pogo stick.

The buildings started getting taller and taller and I realized that I was going into the city. That's when I heard a plane buzzing past. It was a small plane, a flying billboard. It was carrying a banner advertising some new kind of fizzy drink. The banner read, "Drink nothing but the best! Drink" and then it had a picture of the drink's logo. I can't tell you what it was or what it looked like because even though I got a close look at the plane and banner, I was really too close to see the end of it. And, well, not many people got a good look at the end of the banner because it fell off. Oh, okay, I confess. I ripped it off. It was an accident though!

I was bouncing, boinging along. I was at the top of a large building by then, higher and higher, like I said. The plane was passing close. And it was an instinct really. I boinged up by the banner and just grabbed on. The pogo stick crashed down on the roof of the building. I figured I would leave it there as a thank you, a thanks-for-letting-me-bounce-on-your-building gift.

When I grabbed onto the banner, the plane lost its balance and aimed up and then down, and I was struggling to just hang on. In the struggle, the banner ripped. I scrambled and managed to hang onto the front of the banner that was still attached to the plane. The pilot was shocked, of course, and headed right away to make an emergency landing. On the way to the airport, he inadvertently adverted to the following message: Drink nothing.

By the time we landed, the news crews had gathered. Did you see me on the evening news? If not, maybe you heard about it. Turns out that

word had been spreading that the water supply was poisoned. As my feet hit the ground, Lisa Maloney from Channel 7 pointed the microphone at me and asked, “Why are you telling people not to drink anything? Is it true the city’s water supply has been poisoned?”

I had no idea what she was talking about. I certainly didn’t take the time to read the sign after it ripped; I was streaming through the air and holding on for dear life! She took my head shake to mean “no comment” and informed her viewing audience at home. Then she pointed the microphone at me again and said, “Did you have a reaction to drinking water?” Again I had no idea what she was talking about. She instructed the cameraman to zoom in on my face as she described the discoloration.

It dawned on me that she was talking about my blackberry stained cheek. I interrupted (I know that’s rude, but she was saying it was a possible reaction to poisoned water) and told her it was just a blackberry stain. She stared at me like I was crazy. She then ignored me and interviewed the pilot. The story began to unfold. Lisa is quick on her feet and asked me to drink a glass of water in front of the viewing audience at home to show them the water really was safe to drink. I drank the whole cup without stopping for air. I wonder if there is a record for that?

Lisa gave me a ride home in Channel 7’s news van. That was a first for me. After the initial thrill of it wore off, though, it was just like riding in a car. Riding an elephant is more fun over all. Did you see me on the news? Would I even ask if this were all balderdash?

## **Obstreperous**

Noisy and difficult to control

The next day our next-door neighbor Mrs. Carp stopped by to drop off some tomatoes from her garden. I heard her mention me. She called me obstreperous, ob-strep-er-ous! My very own neighbor calling me names. I'll tell you what happened and you tell me if I'm obstreperous.

When I woke up in the morning, the bruise I had gotten from my pre-car accident was still sore—I won't say where, so I chose a different creative outlet to explore. A safer outlet. As I was chomping my cereal, I envisioned myself on a big stage with flashing lights and ten thousand screaming fans. What was I doing up on stage? Don't worry, not singing. That's not going to happen. I was playing the drums. By the time I had slurped the last of my chocolate-colored milk from my bowl, I had a plan, a really good, not-at-all obstreperous plan. I was going to build a drum set.

I dropped my bowl and spoon in the dishwasher and got clean ones out. I tapped the one on the other and thought it sounded good. I got down on my hands and knees, opened all the cabinet doors and collected all the pots and bowls that I could find in the bowels of the kitchen. Then I opened all the drawers and collected all the long-handled utensils. I also found a hidden Reese's Peanut Butter Cup. I slipped it into my pocket to celebrate with later.

Now my mom has bruises. She says it's because I left every door and drawer open in the kitchen. I was an artist in the middle of creating a masterpiece. Could I really be blamed for not paying attention to such things?

I took everything down the basement for some privacy because I wasn't that great yet, and I wasn't ready for an audience. That wasn't my fault; I just hadn't had a chance to practice. Before I could even do that, I first I had to set up my set. I experimented with combinations of each utensil on each pot and bowl. I tried plastic on plastic, metal on metal, wood on wood, plastic on metal, wood on plastic, well, you get the idea. Then I experimented with the bowls and pots on the floor, on a table,

propped up slanted like it was a trap waiting for some innocent animal to sniff inside.

When I found my ideal sound, I got everything together that I wanted and piled aside all the rest. Then I started banging. How can I become a world-famous drummer if I don't practice, and how can I practice without banging? That does not qualify as obstreperous in my book. That was music!

My mom came down rather promptly and asked me what I was doing. She was rubbing her shin and shaking her head in dismay if I correctly read her expression. I explained my future as a rock and roll hall of fame drummer and told her this was just the beginning, a drop in the bucket, that I would save up for a drum set then join a band then become world-famous, of course. She said I could take my bucket outside before I dropped anything else into it. She thinks she's so funny.

I hauled my drum set outside and set up again. Then I got an idea. Have you seen *Mary Poppins*, the movie? The tall skinny chimney sweep slash sidewalk artist slash kite salesman is also a one man band. I started thinking maybe I could play more than just the drums. The problem was I couldn't play any instruments. Drums I just had to hit. That I could do. A whistle and kazoo I could blow. Bubble wrap and water I could stomp.

I rummaged through my closet until I found my whistle and through my desk drawers until I found my kazoo. I gave each a test blow. They worked great. Then I got the bubble wrap that came with the new freezer. Then I filled a wide bowl with water and took off my shoes.

I tied the whistle and kazoo to strings and hung them around my neck. I placed the bowl of water by my right foot and the bubble wrap by my left. I started practicing stomping and blowing and banging, and, if I do say so myself, I think I was making some pretty good progress when Mrs. Carp came over with her tomatoes. That was just a ruse. She wanted a reason to come over to complain. No irony there. That's when she used the O word and when I learned that my neighbor thought I was obstreperous.

I also learned she had tickets to the circus that afternoon. I begged to go with her to visit Apará. My mother gave her a sweet smile, and she agreed to let me come with her and her grandchildren. I didn't have a ticket, but I had already been in the show and didn't need to see it. I knew it wouldn't have been as good without me and my lollipop anyway. I just wanted to visit Apará. I didn't want her to forget me. I know they say an elephant never forgets, but I didn't want to take any chances.

When the time came, I squeezed into the backseat of the car with the little Carps. We weren't far from home when Mrs. Carp pulled over and stopped the car. She got out to speak to someone about something. I don't know who it was or what they talked about. I wasn't nosey and didn't ask. I did however take the opportunity to teach the little Carps a little something about the automobile. They were smaller than me, which made me older and wiser.

I pointed out the windows, the handles, the seats, the belts, the head and arm rests. I climbed up and over into the front seat. I taught them about the glove compartment, the dashboard and how to tell if you need gas or are going to get a speeding ticket. Then I showed them the horn. Well, I demonstrated the horn. The noise made Mrs. Carp jump and return immediately to her seat, out of which I dove in a jiffy. Did you know that a jiffy is an actual measurement of a really, really, really short period of time? Honest. Google it.

Mrs. Carp smoothed her ruffled feathers; just being expressive, she's not a bird. She asked me why I was always making noise. I said that wasn't noise that was education!

I put my hand down on the seat next to me and touched something warm and sticky and slimy. It smelled like peanut butter and chocolate. It tasted like peanut butter and chocolate. That's when I remembered I had slipped a peanut butter cup in my pocket. I licked my fingers, and it still tasted good all melty.

When we got to the circus, I followed the smell to the animal tent. I saw Apará with her mother, and it made me happy that I had helped her find her way home. The ring master recognized me and stopped by to say hello. He asked if I wanted to ride in the show again. I told him I didn't

have a lollipop. He said, “Oh.” But then I told him about my band I put together, the one-man one. He was interested. He said I could play in the show if I wanted.

I agreed right away even though I didn’t have my band with me. I had to rethink the parts. I still had my kazoo and whistle around my neck, so the horn section was in place. For the percussion, I tied Apará’s feed bowl to myself with a rope around it and my waist. I found a good stick for beating it. Then I tied a bucket onto each foot and filled them with water. I couldn’t find bubble wrap.

While I was practicing, Apará and her family came over to me. They were strangely drawn to my melodies. I barely had time to practice when I was introduced. The animal’s handler tried to pull them back as I started playing and marched out, but they were just too strong, too many, and too interested in me!

First Apará slipped away and followed me. Her mother followed her. Apará’s brother followed too. Then for some reason the gorillas started following him. So instead of standing in the ring and putting on a one-man-band show, I put on a parade. I paraded in front of the elephants and gorillas, banging, sloshing and tooting.

I didn’t want to steal the show again, so I just took one more lap around the tent and headed out, followed by Apará and her mother and her brother and the gorilla family. They followed me until I stopped and they all gathered around me and pressed close. Their trainer was frantic trying to figure out what had gotten into them all. I told him they must really like my music. Music does tame the savage beast, at least that’s what someone once said. The trainer said I must make some pretty special music.

I thought they were probably waiting for an encore, but there are laws about how much kids and animals can work, and I didn’t want to push it. I started thinking maybe I wanted to be in parades for a living. How much money do you think you can make parading? To help the handler out, I took off my music making equipment and headed over to the refreshments. Apará and her family and the gorilla family and now a rat followed me over.

I started thinking then about how I could *stop* leading a parade, and I started thinking about flying. How could I get up, up and away from my parade? I asked the balloon man if I could hold all of his balloons and see if I could fly. I learned that from Curious George. He said sure. Wasn't he nice? I gathered up all the balloons and jumped, my thrust up to get me going, and then I landed. It turns out you need three helium balloons just to lift the amount of sugar in a can of soda pop. You would need 2000 balloons to lift me! I didn't have that many. I wasn't flying, but I felt like maybe I was jumping with ease, a little like the astronauts doing their version of the moon bounce.

It was fun pretending to bounce like the astronauts, so I ran and jumped and landed and ran and jumped and landed. Apará and family and gorilla and family and loner rat followed me. I headed toward the circus tent with leaps and bounds. I was supposed to meet Mrs. Carp after the show. The circus was ending, so I headed inside with my balloons and my parade.

Suddenly someone shrieked. I let go of the balloons because the scream startled me; it was so unexpected, so sudden, and so loud. It turns out a skunk had joined my parade. A few other women joined the shrieking and everyone else was just talking and shouting all at once. Then the balloons hit the hot lights at the top of the tent and started popping. The popping made Apará nervous and she started trumpeting. That agitated the gorillas, who started barking. Yes, barking. It was all rather, well, obstreperous. I think I was the only one who remained quiet and calm.

If I hadn't been still and calm, I might not have even noticed Apará's nose in my pocket. She reached her trunk right over and in. She brought it out all brown and sticky and slimy and it dawned on me. She, and probably all the others too, had smelled peanuts, my Reese's Peanut Butter cup. Oops.

That night when my mother was saying goodnight and I was lying in bed, I asked her if she thought I was obstreperous. My mother said that she told Mrs. Carp that a leopard can't change its spots. That means she's on my side or at least that she's given up trying to change me. I mean, you can't just take the spots off a leopard. And you can't take the

noise out of an obstreperous kid, not that I am or ever will be obstreperous. You don't think so, do you?

## **Salient/Inconspicuous**

**Salient:** most noticeable or important; prominent; conspicuous

**Inconspicuous:** not clearly visible or attracting attention; not conspicuous

I admit that I may be a bit obstreperous when my creative energy explodes out into the world. But I knew I could be inconspicuous too, and I wanted to prove it to Mrs. Carp. I planned it all out that evening and slipped my notes under my pillow for safe keeping. Unfortunately, I don't sleep very soundly and in my stirring I seemed to have drooled on my notebook. But that was okay because my mind is like a steel trap; I don't forget a thing, unless it has to do with math facts or dates in history class.

I dressed all in black. I learned from movies that spies wear black, preferably leather. I don't know why they do that because aren't they supposed to be inconspicuous? Isn't it the point that people aren't supposed to notice them? But as soon as you see them all in black with their black sunglasses on, you know they are spies. It's their most salient feature. But who am I to buck tradition? I embraced conformity and dressed in black, settling for my black sweat suit because I don't own any leather.

I put on my brother's sunglasses and my red canvas sneakers. I wasn't about to paint them black. Not for Mrs. Carp, mission or not. My mission that I chose to accept was to prove to Mrs. Carp that I can be inconspicuous. She'll have to take back calling me obstreperous.

I casually walked around our yard, stopping to smell the roses, literally. I didn't want to appear like I was in a hurry to get anywhere. When I got to the fence that separates my yard from Mrs. Carp's, I slipped between the wooden posts. That had been a breeze, a snap, easy as pie. I don't know what's so easy about pie, but it was no problem sneaking into Mrs. Carp's yard. Not that this had been my first time in her yard. I've chased many a ball into her yard. I've chased our dog into her yard. I've chased my brother into her yard. And I've been chased out plenty of times. Not that day. I was inconspicuous. No one would notice me, and I would prove that my salient feature was not obstreperousness.

I slinked and slithered over to her tool shed in the backmost part of her back yard. I slid to the ground and pulled out my notebook. I wrote down the time and location. Check point one. I did a commando roll and crawled across to the azaleas. I pressed into the bush, snapping a few branches. They were a necessary casualty so that I could hide among the pink blooms.

I logged my time and location. I learned about keeping a log from reading a biography about a navigator named Nat. Google him if you don't know him. Or just take it from me that a log is for writing down what's going on and is named after a log they threw in the water to measure a ship's speed. My speed was zero. I was stone still. Now that's a figure of speech that means something. I didn't move. I was practicing my inconspicuous skills.

I sneezed. Blew my nose and my cover. I made a dash for the shed, opened the door and ran inside. I abruptly stopped because I knocked over something that knocked over something else with a boom and bang and a thwack and a tap. I have no idea what it all was. It was pitch black in there, as black as Mrs. Carp's pupils, as black as my brother's nose hair, as black as when you are asleep on a moonless night and the electricity goes out. I don't like the dark. I couldn't hear anything except my thoughts and my panting like a dog. I was thinking whether I would rather stay in the dark or face Mrs. Carp.

Before I could decide which was worse, some light was shed on the subject and on me. Mrs. Carp stood in the open door, shaking her head. She asked me what in the world I was doing in her shed. It's redundant to ask like that because obviously whatever I was doing I was doing in this world. I wasn't out in another galaxy or something.

I didn't answer. I had to think. A spy wouldn't reveal his mission, would he? What was I doing in the shed? "I sneezed" is what I told her. That was why I was in the shed. It was the catalyst that provided the thrust to propel me toward the shed. She didn't know what to say, so I took the moment of silence as a chance to make a quick getaway. Across the yard, through the fence, in the house, up the stairs, into bed I went with record speed, not that they have that as an entry in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. But if they did, my name would be there.

I needed a new plan. An inconspicuous plan. A plan that wouldn't end with me being in Mrs. Carp's shed. Thinking it over I realized that somehow Mrs. Carp needed to know that I was there so she would know that I'm not obstreperous. If she never knew I was there, how would she know how inconspicuous I could be?

I walked down to the kitchen to get something to suck on. I think better with something in my mouth, and this paradox had me stumped. She had to not know that I was there and she had to know that I was there. I started listing my options: taking pictures of myself there, leaving a note saying I was there, doing something that she would notice and realize that I was there. I was stumped. I put a popsicle in my mouth, cherry. And there it was, my idea.

Mrs. Carp had a cherry tree. I decided I would pick her cherries for her. I could leave the basket of cherries for her and let her figure out the rest. I left on my spy clothes and slipped back over to Mrs. Carp's yard. I had to stack up some pots from the shed to reach the bottom branch. After that I had no problem climbing up. I had decided to just pick the cherries and throw them down and then I would gather them into baskets.

I started picking and dropping. Some of them just popped right off the branch and some I had to pull really hard to get them off. I guess all that rattling of the leaves attracted some attention, despite my best efforts to remain inconspicuous. A flock of crows started landing on the branches. They started eating the cherries as fast as I was picking them, okay, maybe faster than I could pick them. At first, I tried to shoo them away, but then I realized I was camouflaged in all their blackness. I figured that would help with my inconspicuous mission.

With the help of the birds, I got that tree cleared off in no time. Unfortunately, I had failed to think the whole crow thing through. While I was camouflaged, the berries were not, and the birds had found them all. There weren't any left to put in baskets, not even one. Well, there were some smooshed on the ground. Those got smooshed onto my shoes.

I decided right then was a good time to end my mission. I had been inconspicuous, and it was the birds that had eaten all the cherries not me. Acting nonchalant, I slipped back into my house and remembered to slip

off my cherry stained shoes. I raced upstairs, changed out of my spy clothes and worked at washing the cherry stains off my hands. Then I waited. Then I got bored. Then I got distracted making bubbles with dishwashing detergent and hangers.

I had the kitchen floor nice and slippery with popped bubbles when Mrs. Carp came by. She had zucchini. My mom invited her to come in and bring it into the kitchen. She hadn't known what I'd been up to. Mrs. Carp slipped and fell. She didn't get hurt, but she did get a bit slimy. She didn't mention my being obstreperous, but words like slapdash and slipshod were coming out of her mouth. It was becoming more and more salient that she was upset. She went on and on about how I ruined her cherry tree.

I trudged up to my room and logged the last data into my notebook, writing across the page, "Mission failed." I had failed to prove my salient quality was inconspicuousness, not obstreperousness. One way or another I was going to prove to this woman what a dream kid I really am. But before that day came, I was sure she would be over to see my mom with more garden gifts, just as sure as I was that her salient trait was carpininess. Is that a word?

## **Perimeter/Circumference**

Perimeter: the outermost parts or boundary of an area or object  
Circumference: the edge or region that entirely surrounds something

My mother suggested I spend the next day at home. She put it a little more strongly than that. I was forbidden to leave our yard. The good news was that I had a plan. Lying on the floor with one arm stuck under my bed trying to fish out a golf ball gone astray, I had come across my 18 foot-long pencils. I retrieved the three dozen pencils each strapped to another and headed out to the back yard. I had a most brilliant plan. I was going to dig a pool.

I knew my parents wouldn't be thrilled with half the yard missing, but I needed to make sure the pool was big enough to run and jump into while performing my famous front flip. I marked a spot by pushing one of the pencils into the ground. I ran and jumped and marked my landing spot with another pencil. I performed the feat in all directions. Having double jump distance in each direction I knew would allow for my famous front flip, flailing feet and all.

I found some string and tied it to the first pencil and then walked it around the circumference of my pool area, retying it to the first pencil when I finished my circumnavigation. It wasn't exactly round; I decided it was pool shaped. I got out a shovel and started to dig. I figured I would be finished when the pool was as deep as I am tall. I first dug carefully around the perimeter of the pool and then worked my way in, around and around, down and down.

Digging is back breaking work, and I had to take lots of breaks so that my back wouldn't break. It actually took me a few days to finish. I was so excited to finish that I ran immediately to get the hose to fill it up. It didn't take me long to realize I had a problem. A very muddy problem.

I turned off the hose and decided a cool mud bath might help me think through the problem. I splashed into my mud pit and let every bit of me sink into its gooiness. My father was the first to find me. He asked what I was doing and just nodded and turned back into the house. My

mother, when she found me, made me get out and turned the hose on me to clean me off. That was kind of fun.

I realized that I needed a plastic tarp of some sort to cover the inside of the pool to hold the water away from the dirt. I visited our across-the-street neighbor who is a painter. He said he'd give me some used tarp, meaning already covered with paint splashes, if I could tell him exactly how much I needed. I told him I could and I would, but I really had no idea how to figure out how much I needed. I didn't know how big my pool was other than two jumps wide and one me high.

The dirt I had piled up from what I had taken out of the ground was the volume of my pool. That wasn't what I needed. I needed to find the area of the floor and walls of my pool. And I needed a drink. While I was trying to refresh, recharge and relax, my mom interrupted with a chore request. Except it was more of an order. I didn't get a chance to turn it down. I had to vacuum the living room and dining room and kitchen. Back on my feet, I started cleaning the downstairs of our house.

I had the pool problem on my mind and wasn't exactly paying full attention to the job. It's not that the lights were on and nobody was home. I wasn't day dreaming; I was trying to figure out a solution to my problem. That's the reason I didn't notice right away that I was vacuuming up the Legos I had left out. I must have sucked up one too many because the vacuum bag puffed up, filled to the brim and burst open like a bag of Orville Redenbacher's best.

A plume of smoke filled the air like Hiroshima, without the death and destruction. I coughed and sneezed out some dust and decided I needed some clean air. I fled the scene like a criminal and found a shady hiding place at the side of the house.

I still had not solved my problem, and I knew it was only a matter of time before I had the new chore of cleaning up after my first chore. I had been stumped before, but I was super stumped then and didn't know where to turn. Just then I saw one of the painters in the driveway, an employee of my neighbor, he was unloading the van after one of his jobs. I figured I could learn from him how he knew how much tarp he would

need for a job. I ran over and put the question to him. He explained they knew the measurements of the room and used those.

I thanked him and ran back home. I had my next step. I needed measurements. I found my dad's tape measure and grabbed my log journal. I couldn't find a pencil or pen so I pulled up one of the pool boundary markers. I drew the shape of the pool in my notebook. I carefully marked and numbered each pencil location. Then I started to measure from pencil to pencil. I labeled each distance on my drawing. Then I jumped in and measured from top to bottom.

I had completed my next step and was again stumped as to what I was supposed to do next when my mom discovered the aftermath of my nuclear detonation, and I had to go back and vacuum up my vacuuming accident. When I was finished, I asked my mom how I was supposed to find the area of a pool shape. That's when I learned from her a valuable life lesson. She said, "Use what you know." That sounded simple enough because I already knew what I already know. It wouldn't require learning anything new or practicing or anything.

I chewed on the end of my foot-long pencil and stared at my pool diagram, trying to decide what it was I already knew. I had all the measurements for around the pool. I could add those all up and find the perimeter. But I needed the area of the bottom of the pool and the walls of the pool. I knew how to find the area of triangles, circles and rectangles, so I used what I knew. I drew triangles, circles and rectangles onto my paper filling in all the space between my pencil markers. Then I got all confused because I didn't know the real sizes of those shapes. Then I thought if I was going to have to figure out a scale to figure out the size of my pool, I would rather do it without doing math. So I got a new idea.

I climbed out onto the roof of the porch by going out my bedroom window. I held my hand up to block the pool from my sight. I went back and ran across the street and found my painter neighbor. I told him I knew how much tarp I needed. He asked how much and I told him two me's and as much as my hand covers from the top of my porch. He looked at me like I was crazy. He shook his head and fetched me a large tarp all folded up and told me I could try it to see if it was enough.

I hammered the pencils like spikes through the tarp to hold it in place. It was just the right size, two me's and a handful. My mom would say that two me's would be more than a handful. She thinks she's so funny. I drove in the last pencil, my golden spike, yellow number two. I had a pool.

I immediately filled the pool up with water and did at least forty-seven front flip flops into the water. Then I didn't know what else to do in my pool and started thinking about what else I could do. I started reminiscing about the day I spent with Apara. It was a lot of fun having a pet. I already knew that my parents would say no to any pet plea I presented. I knew I was never going to have my own pet until I owned my own home. That was too far into the future, so I knew I had to take matters into my own hands; if I wanted a pet, I was going to have to make one.

The next morning I convinced my mom to drop me off at the circus grounds. It wouldn't be long before the circus moved on, and I wanted to remember Apara. I wanted to keep her for myself. I was going to build an elephant robot. I talked to Apara's trainer and asked if Apara could spend the day with me. I told him I wanted to spend some time with her before they took off for their next city. He agreed and I rode her back to my house. Riding on an elephant has got to be one of the worst ways to try and be inconspicuous.

Once we got to my house, I set about taking measurements. I wanted my robot as life like as possible which meant life size as well. I measured her height and length and the circumference of her midsection. I even got her trunk measurement. My robot had to have a trunk; it's what is most salient on an elephant. She laid herself down for a nap while I went searching for parts to build my robot. I always think better with something in my mouth, so I headed for the fridge. It was that simple.

I started dumping everything out of the fridge. I know what you are thinking, but I wasn't completely thoughtless. I took all of the things from the freezer and moved them to my mom's new big freezer. It wouldn't have mattered anyway because once I got the refrigerator outside to start building my robot, Apara found her way inside (don't ask how she got in there) and ate up everything I had left out. She would have gotten the frozen foods before they spoiled.

When I realized what had happened, we made a hasty retreat. I trotted her off, but like I said, it's hard to be inconspicuous when you are with an elephant, and all I wanted to do was hide. At least I wasn't being obstreperous. Apara and I made our way to the local bowling alley. I thought it would be a good way to spend an hour before we headed back to the circus.

We rented a lane and they let Apara bowl without specially approved shoes. The owner decided it would probably be good publicity to have an elephant at his bowling alley. I'm sure it was because she had her picture taken a bunch of times, like I said, you can't be inconspicuous with an elephant. I bowled first to show Apara how it's done. Then she wrapped her trunk around the circumference of the ball and then let it fly like she was doing tricks with a yoyo.

She made a strike on her first attempt. I was so surprised I spit out my soda, which I wasn't supposed to have brought down to the bowling area with me, but I hadn't seen the sign until after I had bought it. I quickly looked around to see if anyone had seen. They were all too distracted by the elephant with the perfect bowling score. It was becoming salient that although an elephant may not be able to be inconspicuous, being near an elephant getting all of the attention can help you be just that.

My eyes scanned the perimeter of the room looking for a towel or rag or something to dry up my mess before I got in trouble. I spotted a wet/dry vac that had been left out near an "employees only" closet. I plugged it in and tried to roll it inconspicuously over to our lane. I was so glad I always pick the one on the end. I flicked the switch and it started sucking up the spill and immediately Apara became curious and started nosing around, literally. She stuck her nose right into the hose.

And now, I know you are going to think this is outright balderdash, but I've learned from scientists that our bodies are seventy-five percent water, so elephants probably are similar, and well, the wet dry vac must have been really powerful because it started sucking the water right out of her. The wet dry vac was dehydrating Apara, like that appliance they sell on tv. She started shrinking and shriveling like a grape turning into a raisin or a plum turning into a prune. I know elephants are always

wrinkly, but this wasn't just came-out-of-the-suitcase wrinkly; this was balled up aluminum foil wrinkly.

I didn't do anything at first, I was too shocked. Wouldn't you be? But then the distressed look on her face knocked the sense into me, even though she just looked and didn't bop me upside my head or anything. I lunged for the vacuum and flicked the switch the other way, from suck to thrust. I was so relieved when she started blowing up again, and I'm pretty sure she got a little more than just water in her. She let out a big burp and I could smell my soda on her breath.

I thought that maybe it was a good time to make an exit. I took Apará back home, and we splashed into the pool to wash off our sticky feet from the soda. When we got out of the pool (Apará was quite nimble at getting out actually—must be all the circus training), we stopped inside so I could look up on the computer where Apará was traveling next.

Apará watched me Google her name and the circus, and I found her itinerary. I opened up Google Earth and started plotting a tour of the circus stops. Apará, it turns out, is a computer genius. She nudged me out of the way and started marking the tour herself. She knew her states and cities and was remarkably nimble at pressing the keys. I made a mental note to tell the ringmaster of her special talent. I was sure it would make a spectacular act for the show. I would bet the farm on it, not that I have a farm.

## Precipitous

dangerously high or steep; (of a change to a worse situation)  
sudden and dramatic

The ring master was pleased to hear of my discovery of Apará's hidden talent. He invited me to go on the road with the show. They were leaving the next day. I, of course, said I would have to ask my parents. I, of course, knew they would say no. There was no way I was going to run away with the circus. That would be cliché and I'm full of surprises. Cliché isn't my style.

I promised Apará I would follow the show's travels online, and we agreed to send emails. I can't tell you her email address. You can't be too careful with privacy concerns these days. I talked to my parents that night, however, and they agreed I could ride with Apará to the next town. My grandma lived there, and I could spend the night, and they would come and get me the next day.

Just for fun I packed a bandana with some snacks and some clean clothes and tied it to a stick like I was someone who ran away with the circus. The ringmaster was thrilled to see me and agreed to let me ride in Apará's car in the caravan. I don't mean that Apará was driving a car. Our bumper car driving days were over. I mean she was being pulled in this boxcar type thing, like a horse trailer.

At first it was great fun being in there with Apará. Then I realized just how much she smelled like an animal. Skunks weren't the only stinky animals. If skunks were bad because the odor stuck with you, Apará might as well have been a skunk because I was stuck with her and her smell.

I knew it was only about an hour's drive, but I couldn't take it any longer, and I hung my head out the top of the half door. (She wasn't closed in all the way. Animals have to breathe just like people do.) I know that sticking your head out of the window of a moving vehicle is not a smart thing to do. I learned that from the car makers who keep the backseat windows from rolling all the way down. I knew it was a bad idea, but I was desperate. I was even more desperate when precipitously my shirt got caught on a passing sign and I got pulled from the car. Oops.

The circus caravan kept on going without me. With each passing moment it was becoming more and more salient that no one noticed me, hanging out to dry on a speed limit sign. Too many other things to notice I guess. I was still hanging there when the last of the caravan drove out of sight. I realized too late that a bit of obstreperousness maybe could have helped my situation.

So there I was. Alone. Dangling from my precipitous location, I scanned the perimeter. It was barren. Empty. I repeat. I was alone. It was just me and the grasshoppers. I didn't even have my bandana knapsack. I was penniless. I didn't have any food. I didn't have anyone to help me. This precipitous turn of events had me all tied up in knots, figuratively speaking. I wasn't tied to the sign; I was hanging from it by my shirt.

I learned from the lady on the exercise videos to take deep breaths, so that's what I did. I breathed deeply. I guess the extra strain as my lungs expanded was more than my shirt could bare and it ripped. Now I looked as penniless as I was. Unfortunately, it didn't rip enough to release me.

I couldn't think of what to do, so I started thinking of new ways to create lift and thrust. I still had yet to create a real, flying machine. It seems I must have gotten lost in thought because cars started coming down the previously empty road. I started flailing my arms and yelling that I needed to get to the circus. I was being as not inconspicuous as I possibly could. I guess that means I was being conspicuous.

It turns out, though, that my conspicuous obstreperous act had people thinking I was a living sign for the circus. They thought I was an advertisement, pointing the way to the rings of excitement, laughter, peanuts, and cotton candy. People honked and waved, but they didn't stop.

I gave up shouting about the circus. Someone stopped. I guess I finally looked like someone who needed help. When the person got out of the car, I realized it was Mrs. Carp. I was jumping for joy to see her. I wasn't really. Not that I could have jumped even if I weren't being sarcastic.

Mrs. Carp stood below me shaking her head. She didn't look surprised. She took me to the circus. She mentioned I smelled like I

belonged there. I think the circus is full of wonderful smells, like the aforementioned peanuts and cotton candy, so I took it as a compliment.

I had trouble finding my grandma since I was so late. I decided to throw caution to the wind and climbed up onto the fence to see better. I didn't throw anything from there; I actually stepped out onto the top of a blue baseball cap. It was a little wobbly, so I stepped onto a brown cowboy hat. I stepped from hat to hat to hair to hat to hair to hair, you get the idea. I actually didn't see my grandma until after I heard her. In fact I happened to step on her head. Somehow she knew it was me. She called my name and I jumped down. She was surprised to see me. Well, she was surprised by how I looked. She bought me a circus t-shirt, so it turned out to be a pretty great day, and I have a memento to remember it by.