

No Big Deal . . . *Really*

*T*rust is easily found but not so easily kept. And once lost, it can be nearly impossible to regain. Some time ago, a scientist—an inventor—discovered this truth the hard way. He found the trust he freely gave to others was put to the test . . . and then shattered when they destroyed his life.



“‘Blowing chunks’ is *not* something we talk about at the breakfast table, Matt.”

Thirteen-year-old Matt Calahan shrugged. “I didn’t bring it up, Mom, you did.”

Penny Calahan looked into the stainless steel toaster and adjusted her straight black hair. “Well, anyway, I don’t think Gill has anything to be nervous about. He’s very talented, and he’ll do fine.”

Matt nodded and took another bite of Raisin Bran. After swallowing, he said, “Actually, Gill isn’t nervous about acting in his commercial. He’s nervous because

he hates the cookies he's promoting. He says whenever he eats them, they make him bl—"

Matt's mother turned and peered down at him.

"Er . . . make him not feel well."

"Well, I'm sure Gill is glad he has friends like you and Lamar and Alfonzo to help him through it. When I was your age, I never had close friends I could trust like you do. Wish I had."

Matt took a few more bites. "Yeah, we were thinking about going to the youth group's winter banquet together. It's coming up next Friday."

"You want to go to a *what?*"

Matt had tried to bring it up casually, but his mother saw through him as if he were made of glass. He focused on his Raisin Bran. Maybe she would calm down if he didn't look at her. The bran flakes slowly soaked up the milk in his spoon.

"A winter banquet," Matt repeated to his mother, who was now slicing a grapefruit. "That's all."

Matt's father, smelling of musky cologne, entered the room. "What's the hot topic?"

"Gill puking during his commercial," Matt said.

His mother shot him a disapproving look. "Matt wants to go on a date," she announced.

Matt dropped his spoon into his breakfast bowl with a clank. "It's *not* a date," he protested. "It's a youth function."

"It's not a date, Penny," Matt's father said to his wife. Then to Matt, "What is it? Like a social event?"

Matt let out a breath of relief. Finally, someone understood. "Yes, a social event." He pulled his fingers through his black hair.

Mr. Calahan winked. He opted for a seat across from Matt, sat down, and leaned in. "Hey, if you need some social pointers, just ask your dad."

"Oh, yeah," Matt's mom said with a smile. "Your dad's the hippest guy on the construction site."

Mr. Calahan sat up straight. "Now, now. I carried my own weight in my day. I was quite a Casanova."

Penny Calahan set down her grapefruit. "You were a Casanova at age thirteen?"

"In my own right, yes . . ."

"In your dreams, maybe."

Matt's parents chuckled. Matt figured it was an inside joke.

"Hey," Matt's dad said, "all I'm saying is that life is a book, and sometimes you need help plotting a chapter or two." Then to Matt, "You're a writer. You understand what I mean, don't you, Ace?"

Matt shrugged.

Mr. Calahan twisted his lip and tapped on the table. "Speaking of social events, I saw Lamar's mom at the mall last night." Then he punched, "With a *sharp*-looking guy."



Matt cringed. Lamar would be less than thrilled. He knew his mom had started seeing some guy, but he never wanted to talk about it. This was the first guy she'd dated since Lamar's father's death, right before Lamar was born. "Hmm," Matt mumbled.

"Well, I say good for her," Matt's mom cheered. "It's been way too long."

"Lamar's not too happy about it," Matt interjected. A piercing ring filled the room.

Mr. Calahan reached for his belt and pulled off a cellular phone. "Sorry," he said, "I thought I had it on vibrate."

"You got a new phone?" Matt asked. He thought his dad had thrown away his cell phone for good since it interrupted their family time too much . . . but now he realized *that* may have been too much to expect.

Mr. Calahan looked at the display and answered, then turned back to Matt for a moment. "We'll talk about it later," he said as he left the kitchen.

"All I'm saying is that this guy Lamar's mom is dating may not be Mr. Perfect, but at least he's not a complete loser," said Mrs. Calahan.

"I guess," Matt concurred, stuffing a bite of soggy flakes into his mouth. Mrs. Calahan took a seat at the table and popped a bite of grapefruit into her mouth. Matt forced himself to get back to the initial

subject—the banquet. “Mom, you don’t have to be nervous. You can trust me. You said it yourself. Gill should be happy to have trustworthy friends.”

“It’s not just a matter of trust. It’s a matter of responsibility, too.”

“I’m responsible.”

Stan Calahan returned to the kitchen, reclipping his cell phone to his leather belt. As he pulled a bagel and a cream cheese container out of the refrigerator, Mrs. Calahan asked, “Honey, who rushed the trash to the curb last Wednesday afternoon?”

“I did,” he replied.

“Whose responsibility was it?”

“Mom, it’s not the same,” Matt protested.

“It’s *exactly* the same.” She held her saw-toothed grapefruit spoon in the air. “Taking out the trash is your responsibility every Tuesday and Friday night. And you know what? For the next month, I’m going to deduct ten percent from your allowance for every trash day you forget to put out the trash.”

“*What?* What does this have to do with the winter banquet?”

“It has to do with responsibility. You’re getting older, and I want you to learn responsibility.”

“*Mom*, you can trust me.”

“Who are you going with?” she asked.



"The guys," Matt quickly responded.

"But aren't you each taking someone? A girl?"

Matt leaned back and folded his arms across his chest. "Yeah, that's the way it works, Mom."

"That's a date, Matt. You're not old enough."

"It's not a date. It's a youth function. Ask

Pastor Ruhlen."

"He's going to be there?"

"He's the one setting it up. It's the 2:52 Youth Group Winter Banquet."

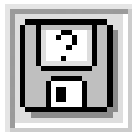
"Oh. Well. Then I suppose . . ."

Mr. Calahan, now halfway through his bagel, asked, "So who are you going to take, Ace?"

Matt felt his heart speed up like a race car as his dad pushed on the pedal. His mind drifted to Isabel Zarza, who lived across the street, with the midnight black hair that flowed down her back like a waterfall and the voice that dripped like newly spun honey. He shrugged. "I haven't asked anyone yet."

"Well, who—"

Matt looked at his watch and shot up. "I gotta go—don't wanna be late for school!" He quickly put his dishes in the dishwasher and opened the counter under the sink. He pulled out the trash bag, exited through the garage, and dumped it in the old, tin trashcan on his way out. He made a mental note to



drag it out to the curb after school. The trash truck never came until after school anyway.

Ten percent, he thought. Man, I'm gonna go broke before the end of the week.



The Enisburg Junior High lunchroom was a greasy, green-speckled, tile-floored spectacle that made any new student wonder what he was doing with his life. During lunchtime, it was especially lively, a growing roar of students with different views on life. Tables separated the jocks from the computer geeks and the hard-rockers from the math club. Matt and his three best friends, Lamar, Gill, and Alfonzo, sat at their own table, two spots away from the center of the room, where the theater students discussed their dramatic lives.

As usual, Matt sat beside Lamar Whitmore, the "spiritual one," as they called him because he was the most vocal about spiritual matters. Across from Lamar sat the newest member of their group, Alfonzo Zarza. Quite the athlete, he had moved in across the street from Matt and easily fit in with the others. Redheaded "Gill" Gillespie sat next to Alfonzo and opposite Matt, where he frequently told jokes the entire lunch period. But not today.

"I'm so nervous about my upcoming commercial!" he exclaimed for the third time.

"What's to be nervous about?" Lamar asked. "You know you're going to do great and become famous. At least that's what you keep telling us."

"You know *exactly* why I'm so nervous," Gill shot back. "And it's not just because the ad manager has such crazy ideas."

"What is it then?" Alfonzo questioned, egging him on, as though he didn't know.

"It's that the commercial is for Pooka Dookas!" Gill nearly shouted. "And I *hate* those cookies!"

Matt sympathized with Gill. The animal-shaped cookies with bright green jelly stuffed inside were downright ill tasting.

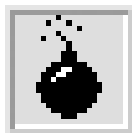
Gill continued his rant. "Do I have to remind you about how we always say 'Pooka Dookas make-a you puke-a!'? Only for me, it's *true!*" Gill turned to Matt. "Do you know when I was five—"

Matt buried his head in his hands and moaned. "Not this story again!"

"—I ate so many that I got sick while eating them! Green stuff went everywhere!"

Lamar threw down his sandwich. "We're eating!"

"Well, I did! And to this day, I can't stomach them! So what happens when it's time to



film my commercial?" He turned to Matt again and lowered his voice. "Matt, you've gotta help me with the laptop."

The laptop. Not long ago, Matt had received this dream gift for his thirteenth birthday. It was sleek, too. As a writer, Matt loved it because now he could write anytime, anywhere. But then he discovered something exciting . . . and dangerous. When he pushed a certain key on the keyboard—the one with the clock face on it—whatever was written on the screen would actually *happen*. From that day forward, Matt and his friends realized they had an awesome responsibility—as well as a dangerous tool—right at their fingertips.

"You know I won't let you down," Matt promised.

"Great!" Gill exclaimed. "And if there's ever anything I can do for you, just say the word."

Matt cut his eyes to Alfonzo and back. "Actually there is," he said thoughtfully.

"What? Anything."

"Well, you're pretty popular, Gill. How do you, you know, feel comfortable enough to . . . ask someone to go to something with you?"

"You mean go to something like the winter banquet?"

Lamar turned sideways, with his back to Matt. "Ugh. I don't wanna talk about this. My mom's

started going out with this guy and . . . ugh. I don't wanna talk about it."

"Matt, don't be nervous," Gill comforted. "We're all going. It's not like it's a big deal. It's just a youth function."

Matt stared at his friends. "So you've all asked someone?" They all looked down at their food. "C'mon! You all *are* going to ask someone, right? Because I am *not* going alone."

"You can count on us," Lamar promised, giving Matt a thumbs-up.

Gill and Alfonzo nodded their agreement.

Gill leaned forward. "Look, if you want to ask someone to the banquet, all you have to do is break the ice with a good joke."

Matt's eyebrows popped up. "A joke? Like what?"

Gill concentrated for a moment, then smiled. "Okay, so a string goes into a soda shop. He asks for a soda. The clerk grabs him by the neck and kicks him out, shouting, 'We don't serve strings here!' So the string goes back in. He says, 'All I want is a soda.' The clerk kicks him out again, shouting, 'I told ya, we don't serve strings here!' So the string, clearly upset, twists himself into a loop and then ruffles up his hair. He walks back into the soda shop and asks for the soda again. The clerk takes a long look at him and says, 'Hey, aren't you a string?' and the string

replies, 'No, I'm a frayed knot.'" He burst into laughter at that.

Matt looked at Alfonzo, who just shrugged. Lamar rubbed his temples.

"Get it?" Gill asked. "'A frayed knot?'"

"We get it," Lamar said flatly. "We get it." He turned to Matt. "Just be who you are, Matt."

"Who am I? You mean a writer? What does a writer do? Quote Shakespeare?"

"*Great idea!*" Gill said enthusiastically. "Girls love Shakespeare!"

Alfonzo shook his head. "I know just what you need to calm down, Gill."

"What?"

"I'll be right back." He squeezed out of his seat.

Matt slid out of his seat and walked beside Alfonzo.

"Hey, Alfonzo, you have any advice about asking someone out?" Matt hesitated to ask, but Alfonzo *was* Isabel's brother. He might have an insight Matt hadn't considered.

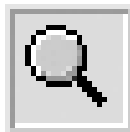
"I'm no expert," Alfonzo returned.

"I know . . . but what would you do if you were me?"

"Well, first I'd do like Lamar said. Be yourself."

"But I get all tongue-tied, my hands sweat, and I get sick to my stomach."

Alfonzo raised an eyebrow and didn't miss a beat. "Then if I were you, I'd use the laptop."



Matt looked at Alfonzo dubiously. "Really? But you know I don't like using the laptop for myself. Not for something like this."

"What could it hurt? Give yourself an edge, you know?"

The boys reached the lunchroom vending machine.

"Are you sure?" Matt asked as Alfonzo slipped fifty cents into the machine and pushed C16. Inside, a lever released, and a bag of Pooka Dookas dropped down like a can of soda.

"That's just what I'd do," Alfonzo said. "So who are you asking anyway?"

Matt looked at Alfonzo for a long moment and then shrugged.

The boys returned to their friends, and Alfonzo tossed the bag of Pooka Dookas into the center of the lunch table. Gill stared at them, looking as hopeless as a mouse in a snake cage.

"Try it," Alfonzo coaxed Gill. "You said you haven't eaten one since you were five. Maybe it's not as bad as you remember."

"It *is* as bad as I remember," Gill protested. "Besides, Matt's going to help me with the laptop!"

"Actually, Alfonzo has a point," Matt said. "Maybe you don't need the laptop. It would sure make things easier if you can just swallow one. C'mon, give it a shot."

Gill stared at the bag for another thirty seconds, and then in a swift motion, he reached out, tore it open, and shoved a Pooka Dooka in his mouth. But he didn't chew. He just sat there, face soured, staring straight ahead.

"What's up with pucker face?" demanded a loud, deep voice.

Matt turned around to see Hulk Hooligan, the school's biggest and meanest bully, standing behind him. Matt rolled his eyes.

"Nothing," Lamar responded.

Hulk nodded. "Yeah, I guess he always looks kinda like dat." Then to Lamar, "Hey, just wanted ya to know, I'm still comin' up with a way to repay ya."

Lamar waved his hands. "Please don't." Just a few weeks ago, Lamar had rescued Hulk from an exploding cabin—and ever since then, the big lug was determined to find a worthy way to pay Lamar back.

"No, I'm gonna repay ya. How 'bout I buy ya lunch? Buncha guys around here would love to gimme deir lunch money."

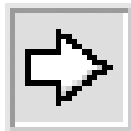
"No, really," Lamar insisted. "I already ate."

"Or I could show ya how to start a car without da keys. Would ya like dat?"

**Alfonzo
tossed the
bag of Pooka
Dookas into
the center of
the lunch
table.**

Lamar grimaced. "No . . . thanks for the offer, though. Really, you don't have to—"

"I got it! I could—" Suddenly Hulk's head snapped back as an airborne projectile smacked him right in the face. "Aaaaaaaaaauuuuuuuuuuggggghhh!" he cried, stumbling back and nearly crushing a student on another bench.



Matt's eyes opened wide as he spun to Gill, whose mouth was empty and gaping.

Hulk stood up and stomped the floor like King Kong on a bad-hair day. The lunchroom table quaked. As he wiped his face, green goo and vanilla cookie spread to his hand.

"I couldn't hold it in anymore!" Gill shouted. "It was too gross! It just came out!"

Then it started.

The laughter.

It started with a guffaw from a drama student. And soon the entire lunchroom was belly laughing at Hulk, standing there with soggy, gooey, green gunk on his face.

Gill started shaking as Hulk balled up his mammoth fist.

"It was an accident!" Gill insisted.

"Dat was no accident!" Hulk fired back.

"It was! I couldn't hold it in!"

Hulk stepped forward, leaning over Matt, who was sure he'd just seen Gill for the last time. Then

Hulk froze. Across the room, Vice Principal Carter exited his office and stood still as a statue, his hands on his hips, staring at Hulk.

Hulk seemed to rethink his actions. He pointed a meaty finger at Gill. "Gillespie, you're gonna pay for dis. Your face is mush."

"No!" Gill pleaded. "I have to be perfect for my commercial!"

"Well, you'd better watch yer back, 'cuz before yer commercial, I'm breakin' yer nose—and *you'll* become da laughin' stock."

And King Hulk stomped off, shaking tables in his wake.

Alfonzo let out a slight chuckle, and Gill looked at him wide-eyed. "It's not funny! He's going to kill me!"

"Been there, done that," Matt said.

"Matt, you've got to help me!" Gill cried.

Matt shook his head. "Don't worry. We'll take care of it. We'll think of something. I promise."

