Memories on the Horse Swing

She smiled as the wind whipped gently through her hair. Her upward motion gracefully stalled before back down she went, in the opposite direction. A peaceful smile had found its way to her face, and there was no sign of it leaving any time soon. Tracey Sassafras gripped the rope tightly, happily kicked out her legs, and continued her relaxing ride on the horse-shaped tree swing.

Her uncle and brother had gone back inside, so she was left alone in the backyard with nothing to do but swing and daydream. She and her twelve-year-old twin, Blaine, had arrived at their Uncle Cecil’s doorstep only a couple of weeks ago, though it seemed like much longer than that now. They had both failed their science class in school this past year, so their concerned parents had packed them up on a bus and sent them to their uncle’s home. The plan was to make Blaine and Tracey spend the duration of their summer break studying science again.

As they stepped off the bus, the twins had resigned themselves to spending the time being bored to tears. They knew their uncle was a bit of an eccentric scientist, but they were sure that even he couldn’t make science fun. The twins were shocked to discover that Uncle Cecil had invented invisible zip lines that had the ability to whisk a person to any location on the globe at the speed of light. It was Uncle Cecil’s belief that the best way for the kids to learn science was not sitting in a classroom with their heads in a book. Instead, they should be out zipping around the globe experiencing science face-to-face. That is how he believed they would not only learn but also fall in love with science.

All one needed to make these lines work was a specially designed three-ringed carabineer. One ring was set to the desired
longitude coordinates, one ring was set to the latitude coordinates, and the third ring locked the carabineer. Through this device, the person was also kept safely connected from the harness to the invisible zip line. When Cecil had first explained all of this to them, the twins had thought their uncle had truly lost his mind. However, they had humored him, put on the harnesses, calibrated their three-ringed carabineers, and zipped across the invisible lines for themselves. As irrational as it sounded, it really did work. The twins had spent the past two weeks using the unseen lines to zip to different locations all over the planet studying scientific topics related to zoology and anatomy.

At the start of their zip-lining adventures, they had despised science with a passion. The twins had considered it to be a long list of boring facts, but as they were encountering science face-to-face, their disposition towards it was changing. These days, Blaine and Tracey not only liked science but were also learning to love it.

The only hindrance to their path of increased desire to learn science was a certain mysterious man who had no eyebrows. He had tried to derail their progress at nearly every stop. He had left them marooned out in the grasslands of Kenya among deadly predators. He had trapped them in a cobra-infested tomb in Egypt. He had helped to cut down a tree out from under them in Peru. He had sabotaged their uncle’s computer—sending the twins zipping off on the invisible zip lines to two separate countries. He had chased them using a disappearing magician’s suit and cape. Plus, Tracey was pretty sure he was the one who’d trapped her and Blaine inside a couple of virtually indestructible, sound-proof boxes, which had almost caused them to be buried alive. In fact, Tracey had her suspicions that this man was always lurking around, causing problems that she and Blaine weren’t even aware of.

Tracey shuddered on the swing as she pictured his scowling face. Her frown disappeared in a flash of joy and confidence as she remembered that the Man with No Eyebrows hadn’t stopped them...
yet! She was bound and determined to keep moving forward to
learn science, and she knew that Blaine felt the same way.

Tracey was lost in her memories when a soft thud broke
her reverie. Her focus snapped back to the present, and she looked
down at the green grass below to locate the source of the sound.
She gasped as she saw that her smartphone had fallen out of her
pocket.

“Whew,” Tracey thought. “That could’ve been bad. This
device is far too important to lose or damage now.”

The agile twelve-year-old reached out and grabbed the
phone back up into her hand as she passed by on the tire swing.
She and Blaine both had one of these, which they used for more
than just making calls, surfing the Internet, or playing games.
The smartphones were the key for guiding the Sassafras twins on
their journey. Uncle Cecil, with the help of his pet prairie dog,
had created several applications—the two most important being
the LINLOC and SCIDAT applications. LINLOC stood for
“Line Locations,” and it gave the twins the longitude and latitude
coordinates for each location that they were slated to travel to. This
application also listed the scientific topics they would be studying
and the name of a local science experts who would help facilitate their learning.

The other app, SCIDAT, stood for “Scientific Data.” This is where the twins recorded all of the information they were collecting. At each location, they would enter the data they had learned into their phones and then send it back to Uncle Cecil. This was a very important step because if they didn’t send in the scientific information correctly, they wouldn’t be able to open up the LINLOC app and go to their next location. Which meant that in order to progress, Blaine and Tracey had to first gather the correct scientific facts.

At first, the need to get it right had put a lot of pressure on the twins. Now, after successfully zipping their way through zoology and anatomy, recording data was second nature to them. Their devices were also equipped with an archive app, a microscope app, and high-resolution cameras. All of these tools enabled the twins to send images to Uncle Cecil of the subjects that they encountered.

Tracey closed her eyes, sighed peacefully, and continued swinging happily back and forth in the cool shade cast by the tree. She let her mind wander, thinking less about how things worked and more about all of the adventures she and Blaine had been on in the last couple of weeks. The tire swing moved gracefully back and forth through the afternoon calm. She was imagining she was back in Italy, riding in a motorcycle side car through the beautiful Venetian countryside when she was interrupted by a familiar voice, “Tracey, I’ve got a glass of lemonade here!”

She opened her eyes and looked toward the back porch of the house where she saw her twin brother, Blaine. He was standing there holding a big glass full of ice-cold lemonade. “Could this day get any more relaxing?” Tracey thought to herself. “First my own quiet and peaceful turn on the tire swing, and now my brother is bringing me a glass of lemonade.”
Tracey quickly hopped off the tire swing and skipped towards the back porch. She reached out to grab the awaiting glass of lemony refreshment, but just as she did, Blaine jerked the glass away. He put it up to his own mouth and drank the icy cold glass in one long gulp. Tracey’s joy turned to disgust as she crossed her arms and stood silently in front of her brother with a scowl on her face. Blaine reached up and wiped his mouth and then let out a long satisfied sigh. A half-smile half-smirk formed on his face as he stood there looking at Tracey, obviously enjoying that he had fooled her.

“I said, ‘I’ve got a glass of lemonade here,’ not ‘I’ve got a glass of lemonade here for you.’” Blaine grinned with a cocky squint of the eyes.

Tracey reached up and flicked her brother in the ear. “That wasn’t very nice, meanie.”

“Oh, I was just kidding. I poured a glass for you, too. It’s inside on the kitchen table.”

Tracey joined Blaine in laughing as they went inside. While she gulped down her own glass of lemonade, Blaine said, “The Prez is ready to give us his presentation.”

Tracey nodded, knowing exactly what her brother meant. She finished the last few drops of lemonade and then followed Blaine down to the basement. Upon their arrival, they were greeted with a shout of elation from their uncle.

“Howdy hootie hello! You two super-azing Sassa-ma-fras twins!” Cecil ran over to them with outstretched arms and a crazy headful of red hair sticking out every which way. He grabbed them by the shoulders and led them over to his computer desk excitedly.

“These two science whiz-kids have now successfully completed zoology and anatomy!” Cecil announced as if he...
was before a large crowd. Then, he held his hands up to his ears like the non-existent crowd he had just announced to had not cheered loudly enough. He looked toward two plastic mannequins standing near the desk.

“Did you hear that, Socrates? Did you catch what I said, Aristotle? I said these two fanteriffic kids have successfully completed zoology AND anatomy!” Socrates and Aristotle, the mannequins, remained still and silent at the repeating of this wonderful news. The twins recalled how Socrates and Aristotle had started out as simple plastic skeletons. As they had proceeded through learning about anatomy, their uncle had added pieces to them until they had precisely represented a complete Homo sapiens. He had done this to show off all of the anatomy knowledge that the twins had acquired.

Cecil bounded over to the two mannequins and grabbed their arms. He made them move like they were clapping and made sounds like they were cheering for Blaine and Tracey. Over the past couple of weeks, both twins had become accustomed to their uncle’s off-the-wall antics.

“And now that you two wonder twins have successfully completed anatomy and zoology, we will move next to the photosynthtastic subject of botany!”

Cecil raised both arms straight up into the air, with his fingers spread. “But first,” he declared, leaving only one of his index fingers raised, “the President will give his presentation on anatomy.”

The President that he was referring to was none other than his lab assistant, President Lincoln, the prairie dog extraordinaire. Lincoln was up on the desk with the computer mouse next to his paw, ready to give his presentation. Though they had seen evidence after evidence of his brilliance, the Sassafras twins still weren’t exactly sure how a prairie dog had accomplished any of the feats for which Cecil gave him credit. For that matter, they did not even
know how to communicate with him. However, here he was, once again impressing them with his abilities.

The Prez moved the mouse, and a picture of the prairie dog came up on the big screen on the wall behind the computer desk. This is what their uncle called the “tracking screen.” It usually had a world map illuminated on it with two little green dots that represented the twins. When they moved from location to location around the globe, he used this map to monitor their progress. This screen was also where he received and read all of the scientific data they sent in. He could also view the pictures they sent in with the data.

Cecil read aloud the text that was printed over the image of the smiling prairie dog, “President Lincoln’s ever so brief presentation on anatomy: A review of the systems of the human body and their functions.”

The prairie dog tapped the mouse again as Cecil continued. “First, we have the Integumentary System which covers and protects the body.” Pictures of skin, sweat glands, hair, and fingernails all came up on the screen, and the twins smiled. They had taken those while they were in the United Arab Emirates participating in a one-hundred mile horse race across the Arabian Desert called the Wind Tower 100.

“Next is the skeletal system,” read Cecil. “This is the system that supports the body, protects organs, and permits movement.” Now Blaine and Tracey saw pictures they’d taken of the skeletal system from when they were in Ethiopia looking for the Seven Monk Tomb and the lost Ark of the Covenant. Blaine nodded and smiled. That had been a good adventure and a fulfilling science learning experience.

“Then we have the muscular system which moves the body and helps to support it,” Cecil shared. This time, the twins saw pictures they had found using the archive application on their phones. They remembered that when it wasn’t possible to take
actual photographs, they could skim through the archive app to pick the appropriate pictures.

“And then there is the nervous system which controls the body and allows a person to think and feel.” There were more wonderful pictures from the archives on the phone.

“Fifth is the endocrine system which releases hormones that control many of the body’s processes,” Cecil continued. This time, pictures flashed up on the screen from the microscope application on the twins’ smartphones. What a crazy leg that had been. They had been chased all over an underground lab by crazed robot squirrels. At least they had gotten the chance to see Summer Beach again. She was one of the twins’ all-time favorite local experts!

“The circulatory system is next,” Cecil read. “It is the system that carries materials to and from cells throughout the body.” The twins were enjoying this review. It made them feel satisfied at all they had learned on their journey through anatomy. They could also tell how proud their uncle was of them, and even President Lincoln beamed with pride and admiration.

He clicked on the computer’s mouse again as Cecil read for him. “The next system is the respiratory system which delivers oxygen into the bloodstream.” More archive images flashed across the screen.

“The eighth system to review is the digestive system. It is the system that breaks down the food so that the body can use the nutrients inside. After that, we have the urinary system which removes waste materials from the body.” Cecil paused, and Tracey shivered as she remembered what had happened to her and Blaine while studying these two systems. She wouldn’t wish being trapped and buried alive in a box even on her worst enemy.

“Last but not least, we have the immune system,” Cecil stated jubilantly. “This is the system that defends the body against disease.” Pictures from the twins’ time in Bangkok, Thailand, came
up on the screen.

Blaine looked at his sister as he said, “An apple a day keeps the doctor away. . .”

“. . . that’s what they say, anyway,” Tracey finished, chuckling.

President Lincoln clicked the mouse one last time, bringing up the last picture. It was an image of him, together with Socrates and Aristotle, all smiling and holding up peace signs for the camera.

“Well, whippety whoppety whoo!” Cecil exclaimed. “That’s a wrap for anatomy. Up next—botany, the study of plants. But before we talk about that, let’s all take a walk together!”

Next Up — The Study of Plants

Wicked confidence coursed through his veins. He finally had a plan that would bring those Sassafras twins to ruin! By bringing those pesky twins to an end, he would crush all that his arch-enemy loved and cared about. He would in effect ruin Cecil Sassafras.

Long, long ago, Cecil had wronged him in a way that had left a deep and lasting mark. Some may say that what Cecil had done was an accident, but that is not how he saw it. It was no accident. It had happened because Cecil was absent-minded and googy-eyed. Now, because of that man’s absent-mindedness, he had to live with the repercussions.

Over the years since the accident, he had let bitterness and revenge become his driving forces. After all the effort he had put into getting back at Cecil, things were finally about to pay off.

Over the past couple of weeks, he had failed miserably in so many ways at trying to stop those twins from learning. They had proven to be much more resilient than he had thought possible, but now he had the Dark Cape. More importantly
though, he now knew how to use it. He had placed hidden cameras equipped with microphones all over Cecil’s house. He had seen and heard the twins sit down to recap their adventures. In the process, they had told their uncle exactly how the Dark Cape worked, and he had heard every word of it.

The suit was originally designed by a magician named Phil Earp. It was as black as midnight, and included gloves, a masked helmet, and a huge cape. Phil’s gimmick was to use the suit to make things disappear. He would start with small items and work his way up to bigger items, but his grandest trick was when he made himself disappear. Phil had done this by attaching something he called a “vanish string” to the inside of the cape. Simply give it a tug, and, voilà, you disappeared. To reappear, you just pull the string again.

He had stolen the Dark Cape from Phil once before while in Sydney, Australia. He had tried to use it against the twins, but at that time, he had not known about the vanish string. He had made a real mess of his sabotage attempt, but that was then, and this was now.
He tightened the muscles of his hairless brow and grinned with menace. He looked at his computer monitor and tapped it to illuminate images of rooms in Cecil’s house at 1104 N. Pecan Street. His adversary’s dwelling was a mere two doors down from his own place. He was glad to see that his hidden cameras were still working. He glanced over his shoulder and saw his harness and three-ringed carabiner lying on the floor. Wherever those twins zipped off to next, he would be there.

He stood up from his seat and slowly slipped the magic suit on. He pulled the gloves on tight, fastened the masked helmet down securely, grabbed the long flowing cape with his hands, and pulled it dramatically up around himself. Then, at the top of his lungs, shouting to no one in particular, he exclaimed, “I am the Dark Cape!”

The Sassafras twins stood on the front porch of their uncle’s house looking at some dried-up and dead potted plants. “I really should’ve remembered to water those,” Cecil mused as he scratched his head.

The twins were sure to stand clear of the trap door they knew was in the floor of the front porch, as they encouraged their uncle. Blaine said, “Oh, that’s okay, Uncle Cecil. At least that big tree in your backyard with the tire swing is nice and healthy.”

“It sure is.” Cecil smiled. “And it’s not the only plant in this neighborhood that’s looking good! Come with me, you two. Let’s take our botany introduction on the road. I want you to meet some of the neighbors and see their...um...much healthier plants!”

Blaine and Tracey followed their exuberant uncle as he skipped down the front porch steps and made his way up
Cecil talked as he walked, using his hands to communicate just about as much as he used his mouth.

“As I said before, botany is the study of plants. You two will learn every blooming thing there is to know about all kinds of different plants, including mosses, ferns, conifers, flowers, and more! The plant kingdom spans all the way from the world’s largest living tree, the Giant Sequoia, to this little tiny weed poking up right here through the crack in the sidewalk.” Cecil bent over as he stopped to point at a small green sprout protruding from between two pieces of concrete.

He looked back at each twin and whispered as if what he was about to say was top secret, “Actually, there are plants even smaller than that.”

Cecil stood upright and continued walking down Pecan Street. “Algae and fungi are not part of the plant kingdom, but you will be studying them on this leg as well,” he informed the twins as he waved happily to an older woman sitting on her porch at 1106.

She waved back with a smile on her face. “Hello there, Cecil,” she called.

“Hello, Mrs. Pascapali! How are you on this fine day?” Cecil asked.

“Doin’ right wonderful. Is this the niece and nephew that you talk so much about?” the neighbor responded.

“It sure is, Mrs. Pascapali. This is Train and Blaisy!” The twins rolled their eyes as their uncle messed up their names once again.

“Well, isn’t that nice,” drawled Mrs. Pascapali as she waved to the twins.

The twelve-year-olds waved back as they followed behind their uncle. Cecil pointed out and named the Japanese Maple tree and the geraniums that Mrs. Pascapali had in her front yard.
As they moved onto 1108 N. Pecan Street, Cecil mentioned, “The guy that lives here tends to be a recluse. None of us in the neighborhood see him very much, but you two are not going to believe what he has in his yard!” Cecil clapped his hands in delight.

The twins looked beyond their uncle into the man’s yard, but they didn’t see anything out of the ordinary. “What?” they asked simultaneously. “What is so special in his yard?”

“He has three Sassafras albidum!” Cecil exclaimed with bright eyes.

Blaine and Tracey looked clueless, so Cecil explained, “Sassafras albidum is the scientific term for Sassafras tree! See the three different types of leaves on each of the trees? There are three-lobed leaves, two-lobed leaves, and no-lobed elliptical leaves all on the very same branch! This tree doesn’t just give us our name. It can also be used to dye fabric yellow. It was also used to flavor tea and root beer, but nowadays we know that it can cause cancer, so we stick to enjoying the Sassafras tree with our other senses. Take a big whiff. That amazing smell is the essential oils from the Sassafras tree, which is used in perfumes and soaps. Isn’t that awesterrifffic?!?”

Blaine and Tracey stared in wonder at the trio of trees they saw in the yard. So that was what a Sassafras tree looked like; it was truly beautiful! They hoped they could meet the man who lived here before they left at the end of the summer and talk with him about his gorgeous trees.

Cecil looked both ways before he started to cross the street. “Over on the other side of the street lives Old Man Grusher,” the twins heard their uncle say as they followed him across the road. “He has quite a wide variety of interesting plants in his front yard, but there is always something I forget about his house. What was it? I think it was really important... but I just can’t ever seem to remember... maybe it was... DOG! Beware of dog!”
Just as Cecil said this part of his sentence, Blaine and Tracey turned to see a curly-haired black miniature poodle bound off the front porch and rush right toward them, furiously barking all the way. At the sight of the dog, Uncle Cecil raised his hands above his head, screamed like a choking chicken, and began running toward home. Blaine and Tracey instantly recalled that their eccentric uncle was, for some strange reason, afraid of dogs. He could barely even stand to be around a puppy without starting to shake in fear.

The twins didn’t scream though because it was only one little dog. Instead, they turned to follow their blubbering uncle as they kept one eye on the approaching pooch. It was right behind the twins in a flash, but instead of biting them, it ran right past them and went for Cecil. The little barking dog jumped up and chomped onto Cecil’s white lab coat as it flapped in the breeze behind him. The dog managed to rip a piece of it off, but it obviously wasn’t enough to satisfy Old Man Grusher’s mini-poodle. He spit it out, caught up with the scientist once more, and nipped at his bunny slippers. At this new threat, Cecil tried for all he was worth to get home without losing any more of his clothing. By now, both Blaine and Tracey were laughing uncontrollably. It was quite a sight to behold.

Somehow, Cecil managed to get in his front door without the black dog snatching any more of his attire. He rushed forward, slamming the door as he passed, thus preventing the miniature pooch from entering the house. The twins reached the door soon after, and Old Man Grusher’s dog gave them a passing glance as it turned and trotted back home.

They opened the door and walked inside to find a trembling but relieved uncle. He plopped down on a living room couch, exhausted from his epic battle with the much-feared pooch. Cecil took a deep breath before managing a crooked smile as he squeaked out, “Now you see why I chose a prairie dog, not a typical dog, to be my lab assistant.”
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The twelve-year-olds smiled and laughed.

“I’d planned on giving you two a much more in-depth introduction to botany with a longer tour through the neighborhood,” the red-haired scientist bounced back. “But instead, how about you Sassafrases just go check out botany for yourselves! Are you ready to zip?”

Blaine and Tracey looked at each other with bright excitement. “Yes!” they responded in enthusiastic unison.

Immediately, the twins got their smartphones out and opened up the LINLOC applications. Cecil smiled as he watched his niece and nephew. He was overjoyed by their enthusiasm regarding their summer science adventures.

“Well, what does it say?” he asked. “What is the location for your first leg of botany?”

“Peru!” Blaine exclaimed. “We are going back to Peru!”

“Our topics for study are epiphytes, ferns, tropical shrubs, and fungi,” Tracey added. “Look, our local expert isn’t Alvaro Manihuari this time—it’s Arrio!”

“Arrio?” Blaine asked. “Wasn’t he Alvaro’s Peruvian friend?”

“Yes,” Tracey confirmed. “He’s the native who helped save us from Ortiz and the illegal loggers. It’s strange, though. I don’t think he ever spoke one word to us the entire time we were around him.”

Blaine smiled. “We’re headed back to Peru, starting another scientific subject with a local expert who doesn’t talk. This is going to be interesting.”