

A tiny Toyota 86 raced across a rug on the living room floor. It approached a toy automobile track full of zig-zags, U-turns, loop-d-loops and other life-threatening hazards that the Road Safety Authority (RSA) simply would not tolerate. But Zak liked a challenge, and Nawa's ten-year-old son, Crosha, was happily shrieking out of the passenger seat window, saying, "Faster, Zak! Faster!"

A curl of smokestack smoke traced a loop-d-loop. The young sharkodile bleated and whooped—damn near shot out the window at the height of the loop—but Zak reeled him in round the gut. Never did the iguana's eyes leave the road or his left hand the wheel, and before he'd even lurched toward the passenger side he slighted to the left of the track, so as to give him space to sharply veer right when he jerked the wheel and saved Crosha. Oblivious to peril, Crosha giggled back onto his seat. So Zak chuckled, fixed both hands on the wheel, and pumped the gas. A blur of metal and motorized sound bounced from the end of the track, in its dust a beeping sign that said "0:59:56 - New Record!"

All this was going on at Nawa's feet. The eleven-foot, six-hundred pound musclegut shark reclined on the couch. One of his hands operated a remote (thumb pressing on repeat, T.V. screen getting *hmmphs* out of him cuz nothing good was on), and the other one had a juicy salmon. He bit a chunk off and chewed. Reflections of channels flashed and cycled in his eyes. Nowhere else but on the T.V. screen was his mind. Watching T.V. served as a destresser before a wrestling match; later today, he'd be up against some panda in spandex. But Nawa had even tuned *that* information out. For all he knew, Zak and Crosha were still drifting around the hedges of the backyard.

*"That was incredible!"* Crosha exclaimed.

Zakano glanced at him and smiled. His tail happily twitched.

The young sharkodile dipped out of the window, looking over his shoulder at his preoccupied dad. He frowned. "I just wish my dad saw it."

“We’ll show him,” Zak assured him. “There’s a ramp that faces the couch. I wanna show you something cool, too, okay?”

Crosha went motionless, then bounced in his seat. “Yeah!”

Zak swerved. Who knows why the whip windmilled three times before guttering forward; all we know is Crosha’s dad missed it, too, and should’ve been watching his son have a good time instead of cartoons and sports.

The tiny Toyota 86 slightly cleaved until the couch ramp was straight ahead. Then Zak said, “Watch this,” and hammered the middle armrest. It flipped up, and a big red button appeared. He punched the button.

Plane wings folded out of the car, and the great old whir of a car-wash resounded from turbo-boosting barrels dropping from its hips. Blue fires belched from both, speed and sound climaxing together.

Then “Here we go,” Zak said. Crosha gasped, clung to the handhold on the car door and giddily shook.

The world outside the windows became a bright smear. Except for the front one, whose windshield wipers had automatically buzzed on and were working their asses off to wipe away the warpspeed fog.

The ramp grew and grew. Then the car arced upward with speed. The iguana and sharkodile screamed in joy.

Nawa’s legs and then belly fell below the windshield. Replacing it was a glass frame of Nawa slowly bringing the salmon to his opening mouth. First Zak and Crosha were elated to know the car flew high enough for Nawa to see. But their triumph peaked the same time the car did. Not only was Nawa not looking at them (but at cartoons!); the car’s front bumper dipped toward the tongue.

“Dad! Dad!” cried Crosha.

Beating the salmon to the mouth, the car bounced off a patch of tastebuds, bound toward the gigantic uvula and abyss. Terrifying jolts jumped through the car’s metallic frame, and the car jerked and jived. Downpours of drool buffeted the windshield. A terrain of tastebuds rumbled the wheels. Even as Crosha screamed, Zak stayed in control. He steered the Toyota around. It was slipping, but he slammed the big red button again. The turbo boosters exploded. The car ricocheted forward.

But then something pummeled it hard. The world went black and everything smelled like fish, and when Zak’s ears stopped ringing and sight returned he saw Crosha unconscious in the passenger’s; saw chunks of salmon falling all round the Toyota. And it was falling too. Gravity had stuck Zak’s head to the seat; and stories of esophagus, gooey, sticky esophagus were cascading upward from every window. Some do-or-die state-of-conscious snatched a hold of Zak and all round him sound and sensation went silent and numb, and his foot caked the gas pedal, and somewhere, somewhere far away, there was a murmur of gas blazing . . .

A giant chunk of salmon nailed the car’s front bumper. The car turned into the bottle of a spin-the-bottle game.

An alien sphincter spat the car out, *schaw-took*. Plunging amid a hail of stinky pieces of Omega-3, it spun and spun. It splashed into an ocean of gurgling fluids.

The ocean did not shudder in the slightest but began to bubble and boil. Rotten domes of films of grease expanded to the size of igloos then belched themselves to death. Scatters of offspring of these domes proliferated the radius.

The offspring sounded more gurgly, more gassy, and more loud when they belched. And there was an authority of probiotics who watched these offspring burp from a dock along the coast and grew worried the upsetter (alien/intruder/whatever you might call it) was destabilizing the stomach acids. So

they assigned their most adept microbes to sail to the upsetter; to try to negotiate and reach a settlement. Pink probiotic lifeboats sailed off, circling the worrisome jacuzzi spot. In these boats writhed blue probiotics; and one of them, who we'll call Main Blue for the sake of our color-obsessed culture, said "Cast your lines!" to everyone of every boat. So everyone produced microbial fishing-poles and cast the fishing-lines where they mattered. "Pull!" ordered Main Blue. Everyone obeyed wholeheartedly. Then amid the spokes of fishing-line emerged a monstrous, metallic, acid-cascading extraterrestrial reminding everyone of the remote the belly's owner had once eaten accidentally. Everyone saw this and felt sick in the stomach. They yearned to let their poles go, but Main Blue barked: "*WHY YOU! YOU COWARDS! I OUGHTA FEED YOU TO A SACCYLOCOCCUS, YOU LAME-OS!*" Of course, when insulted probiotics are more productive. So the crews of every boat merged their crew-mates together, shapeshifting into powerful, hairy beasts wielding multiple poles a piece. They thrashed and reeled. The car rose to the waist level of the hairy beasts, suspended in the center of the taut lines by hooks.

Zak saw the microbes and grimaced. They looked like blue versions of the *saccylococcus* that had tried to devour him in "Voyage Through the Humongous Bull's Body" (*Endosome Adventures Issue #1*). The iguana shook the unconscious sharkodile to wake him and warn him, but he was out in Wonderland.

Main Blue called to the E.T.: "Greetings, upsetter! We do not want beef with you. We simply want to make a settlement with you. The settlement is that you shall go away and we shall stay as we are, here happily."

To Zak that sounded like "Urrorrlgubrrlwlbrlorlluuborgbubor," except more scary. So you can see why he went "AHH!" and drew his laser gun. Bright flashes and piercing sounds stung the perimeter. Beams of light buffeted the hairy beasts' chests. But they only sponged up the energy and assimilated it into their bodies, transforming into bigger, more hairy behemoths. They roared with their breaths of sour yogurt fogging white, shifting hues and growing fur so as to look like moldy globs of grape jelly. The iguana went "AHH" again. He stabbed a button on the

console labeled “In Case of Fishing Lines.” The wings of the car grew teeth then flapped vigorously. The fishing-lines tore away like floss. The turbo boosters hummed anxiously. Then with a bang, the Toyota 86 burst into the next millennia (just figuratively).

Nawa noticed sometime around the Pepsi and the stairlift commercial his stomach was murmuring and rumbling. Not murmuring like a productive individual or even a troubled one, but like a stomach full of lit ravers at a rather lit rave. Not rumbling like a hungry tummy, but like a conveyor belt on its last month, because you know how C.E.O.s are, always trying to save money and never replacing anything until the government comes in and says “This is a safety hazard!” I digress.

The sharkodile put the remote and the tailfin of the salmon aside. He caressed his belly. A commotion swelled up inside, and he felt himself slightly bloat, and groaned. He belched so loud, the couch he was on drove to the wall on its back legs. Slam, and the picture frame thwacked the back of his skull a good one. Suddenly goofy, he barked, “Head on! Apply directly to the forehead!” That commercial had been on a few commercials ago.

The Toyota had been gunning for the exit of the stomach, stirring up a storm, tornado and monsoon as it went (just figuratively). Then the stomach championed a monstrous sound. Stomach walls blew vehemently. A dense fog of fishy gas rose from the acid ocean. Then like a great hand the fog drew back and pimpslapped the Toyota into a whole ‘nother trajectory. “Holy moly!” Zak cried. The car spun, and wakened by the cacophony, Crosha cried, “Zak! What did you do?”

Well, Crosha may as well have been deaf, for when Zak responded, the most indecent slurping sound a body could’ve produced suffocated every other sound that wanted a say. All went dark and damp on the windows. Crosha and Zak felt the car being churned and tugged through a passage that kind of thumped like a heart and had walls lined with bloated veins. Green and yellow and blue microbes occasionally splattered on the window, making Crosha go “AHH!” And the

windshield wipers just smeared them about, as critics of Picasso would say he did with paints.

Lagging behind our two heroes, Main Blue, the lifeboats and the moldy grape behemoths were being levitated by a dense layer of burp fog toward the top of the stomach, somewhere in the fog's middle layers separated by density of its elements (or his or hers; we shall not assume the fog's gender, for this story was written in the 21st century). We zoom in and see Main Blue arguing with the unruly metamorphosed probiotics.

“LACKTARDS!” he said. “I cannot believe you let them get away! And look, now they have gone and upset the stomach. Alas, we cannot hurt or harm them in any way; can only try to convince them to go away, for harming upsetters is not ethical.”

But due to absorbing the laser beam energy and undergoing a transformation which had turned them wicked and cruel, the moldy grape behemoths said the metal extraterrestrial should be devoured and consumed. The Main Blue was outraged and disagreed with scorn. So the hairy grape behemoths licked their lips and pounced on him and ate him. There was a disgusting purple belch of a red haze. When the haze cleared, what remained was a single red organism that'd look to Zak and Crosha like an insectoid, a centipede the size of a home. The centipede roared like a dragon then sniffed the burp fog. Uncovering the scent of Zak and Crosha, the centipede-dragon burrowed into a wall of flesh. “Now we'll do it my way,” it proclaimed, and laughed.

At last the Toyota wriggled—or, was wriggled—out of the passage into a chamber of eternal winds. The winds grabbed the front bumper and threw the vehicle into a blender of torrents. With the winds thrashing the car's interior left and right and upside-down, Zak and Crosha were whipped all about (which is why you should always fasten your seatbelt, regardless of if the popo is closeby). Their brains were scrambling inside their skulls, so the best solution Crosha could come up with to end their suffering was to say “Make it stop!” when he should have said “Let's put

on our seatbelts!” But, having his brain equally scrambled, Zakano agreed, and in between being slapped from the front to the back window, he cranked down the knob on the A.C. Well, the thrashing quakes thrashed the two into one another, and Crosha with a purple lump on his head said, “It didn’t work!” And Zak agreed.

He thought he saw a crucial something on the side of the chamber but couldn’t double-check until the blender tossed the Toyota back that way. Well, wouldn’t you know! Fixed to a control panel guarded by a couple of blood cells at the top of a zigzagging staircase was a lever labeled “ON/OFF.” Zak yearned to reach it, and so he planned as precisely as someone having their brains blended could: he undid a window when the thrashing quakes threw him that way, then when the thrashing quakes flung him toward Crosha he timed a jump off his forehead, springing out of the window.

But having forgotten to time his jump for a good *landing*, Zak said “AHH!” and fell to-ward his death. The end of his life came closer and closer, a depressing bog of black. But as he plunged, he hovered toward the flights of zigzagging stairs too. Finally—close enough!—he grabbed the metal exoskeleton holding the stairs up, and a long *screeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeech* of his claws went scraping and sparking for good lord who knows how many stories downward. And by the time he got a solid grasp, his legs flapped from the bottom of the metal exoskeleton, which simply ended, phantom-like. Zak looked down and gulped. His hands smoldered, and though he yearned to let go, he remembered he had to escape this place to return Crosha to the outside world. Inspired by this thought, he swung himself into the interior of the stairs and onto the platform at the stairs’ bottom.

Up he ran. Shouldering and knocking over blood cells before they could ensnare him, “oof, oof,” he heard behind himself, but never let up his pace as he scaled the stairs. Anyone who did ensnare him got a good taste of his laser gun. (Nawa started to wheeze and cough laser smoke, but anyone new to him would have guessed a nicotine addiction had conditioned him to do this, and that it was usual.) Leaving many stories underneath himself a collection of dead round bodies, Zak finally reached the top of the stairs, where he battled the blood cells guarding the controls.

They tried to cheapshot him, bodyslam him and slug him into the next millennia (just figuratively), but Zak wouldn't have any of it. He ducked and dived away from each attack, letting his laser go *pew pew*. Two fresh cadavers fell smoking to his feet. He reached for the "ON/OFF" lever.

Then the centipede-dragon tunneled into the chamber and bellowed: "Don't you dare touch that lever!"

Since the words of a centipede-dragon don't mean anything to English-speaking people, he may as well have said "Would you like to go to dinner with me?" or "What's the score on the Nets game?" Either way, Zak would have heard "Gruurugwugruwrwurgwuraaaowr" and gotten scared. And he did! And he was!

So startled by this bellow, Zak fell on the lever as though trying to smother a fire. His hand slipped, and pulled the lever way more "ON" than it should have ever gone.

Nawa's mouth became a vacuum. A vortex of furious winds whirled into it. The remote, the salmon, and the toy tracks all leapt inside. Putting his hands round his neck, the sharkodile coughed and hacked. His belly domed out like a small igloo.

Back in the chamber of eternal winds a.k.a. the lungs of Nawa, a terrible hurricane not even those of Florida could fuck with twirled like a psychotic dervish god. It claimed the centipede-dragon faster than a financially unstable lawyer would a bridge toll receipt on his or her taxes, and the blood cells also, but there's no simile for them, because they're just blood cells. And the gales rapped so viciously, it recalled for me some underground M.C.s of the nineties. Look here! Not there—here! See Zak desperately hanging on, flapping from the lever like a flag? If this flag stood for anything, I would guess for More Air. The lungs were kind of split on whether they liked this flag, because the left lung liked getting more air, but the right lung didn't care for it so much. They fought about it, and the fight got worse than patriotics versus Kaepernick. By and by, the lungs were duking it out,

grinding into each other. And the slightly angry hurricane became a purely angry one.

Convulsing crazily at the torso, Nawa torpedoed across the living room and into a seat at the dinner table of the kitchen, vacuuming up a box of donuts on the table. Vigorous winds pulled the box into his belly. The splash it made with the stomach acids caused an explosive quake inside; and here's what that did:

1. Swatted Zak off of the lever, making him switch “way past ON” to “just ON” when he went.
2. Thrusted the centipede-dragon forward, propelling him straight into the Toyota and allowing him to swallow it whole in one gulp.
3. Stopped Nawa's vacuum breath, giving him a chance to see his chest bloated up like an airbag from the air in his lungs, and stare at it and his stomach just as large with a stunned look. (Shortly, it began to deflate.)

Swollen at the bottom with a belly full of Toyota, the centipede-dragon belched. “HAHA! Now I've got you. And you'll turn into some nice pudge on my bottom.” He rode a highway of turbulence into a bodily tube. The sounds of Crosha shrieking faded.

This was how wicked and evil the righteous probiotic had become.

Smacked into a blood cell by the winds, Zak gasped. Not because it hurt, but because he heard Crosha and knew justice was losing. He got on top of the blood cell and demanded that it follow that centipede-dragon. The blood cell did not understand him but did not like Zak's taxi-rider tone of voice. Zak drew his laser gun, which had a way of convincing blood cells they were taxis. The blood cell obeyed. Off it went, with Zak riding like a surfer!

They tunneled into the bodily tube after the galumphing centipede-dragon. Both parties squelched into the top of the stomach. They went falling toward the stomach acid ocean full of various things Nawa had eaten: remote, tailfin, toy tracks, donuts. The centipede-dragon landed on a donut and hissed and burned like the Wicked Witch of the West. Quickly, it sprang into the acids to cool itself. Zak noticed this odd reaction to the donut. Landing his mount on the donut, he ripped a chunk of it off and he took his laser and he recalibrated it then stuffed the chunk of donut into the plasma compartment. Then he said “Hiyah!” and clapped the blood cell’s butt, and the blood cell unwillingly rode into the sea of acids. It was considerate of Zak (thank goodness, because Zak wasn’t so considerate of Zak), and wrapped itself around him as a stomach acid resistant encasing.

Together, they chased after the centipede-dragon, delving deeper into the acid ocean. And on their journey they met all sorts of bacteria of various shapes and sizes and ethnicities. And the acids got so thick and dark, Zak couldn’t see, but reckoned his taxi-driver was legit, so it’d be okay. And then slimy flesh ate over his acid-resistant encasing with a rude squelch. And he fell down this long, bloated noodle you and I call the *large intestine*. He saw the centipede-dragon falling too, below him, but the centipede-dragon was falling faster due to some learned physicist’s law. Believing physics should not get in the way of saving his friend, Zak got out his laser and shoved it through the encasing then was like “pew pew!” or, rather, the laser was. And hearing the sound, the centipede-dragon rolled to face him and opened its mouth as wide as it could: based on its earlier encounter with the thing that went “pew pew,” it believed that it was going to get a sweet treat, and grow bigger and stronger, and, it even dreamed, become the size of a lung. Well, it *did* get its sweet treat, swallowing the fire of pieces of donuts. But here’s where we pretend we’re working on our microbiology majors and pay heed to a fact about probiotics: they hate sweets. As Beowulf and Grendel were predestined, probiotics and actual sweets were predestined: to hate each other. So, then, of course, what a probiotic believes to be “sweet” is rather far off the mark from what is truly sweet. And swallowing truly sweet things fucked it over more than anticipated.

Moments after the creature gulped the pieces of donuts, smoking blisters swelled and expanded on its gelatinous red form, rippling its hairy rolls of fat. It hissed and contorted in pain, reminding us of moldy lava.

Zak's laser did not stop saying "pew pew," but the creature soon out-fell him and faded into black.

When Zak landed in a pit of the large intestines, Zak's taxi-driver encasing absorbed the shock. He thanked the blood cell for being considerate then paid it one quarter and patted its head. It scowled then hopped away into the darker trenches of the intestines, where it'd find a phone booth to call its friends and ask for a ride back to the lungs.

Zak started after the escaping centipede. "Hey you!" he cried. "Quit that! Come back here!" And all the while Crosha was like "Zak! Help!" with muffled burbles, and Zak was like "Here I come!"

Zak approached the monstrous probiotic, and some deep dread hit him. *You know, he's too strong. The main thing to worry about will be getting Crosha and I safe and out of Nawa, not killing this thing.* "Crosha!" he called. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes!"

"Alright. Go into the driver's seat, press the big red button, then stomp your foot on the gas as hard as you can."

"Wait? I'm not old enough to drive . . ."

"CROSHA!"

"Alright alright!"

Zak prayed his plan would work. He charged at the centipede-dragon, dodging a thick gout of yogurt breath. He vaulted onto the creature's back. It roared and reared and, like a bronco, bucked, trying to get to Zak. But he held on, waiting to hear the turbo boosters fire up. Then BOOM! BOOM! The centipede-dragon shimmered, as though full of rocket fuel, and then it rocketed up and up! All three of them screamed on a rocket-fueled race through the large intestines. Here and there, Zak shouted "left" or "right" so Crosha could steer them out of a wreck. Soon they'd be free! Free from Nawa!

Then Zak noticed something that made him wish he were dreaming. The centipede-dragon was growing.

As the rocket fuel powered out of the turbo boosters, he realized, it powered into the centipede-dragon. "Oh no!" Zak said. "We're letting a monster out into the outside world!"

The Toyota sped on, regardless of the monster growing heavier. Worried by this, Zak yelled, "Take your foot off the pedal, Crosha!" But alas, the turbo boosters were very legit, and legit turbo boosters had some great noise cancellation: better noise cancellation than Bose® headphones. Ahead of the red monster, a light appeared at the end of a fleshy tunnel, growing larger, larger . . .

For a while, Nawa had had a bothersome itch in his buttock. He got up, and getting up quickly gave him the heebie-jeebies of the rectum and he moaned a little. "Ho!" Nawa's butt started to vibrate. "WOAH! Hey there! EXCUSE YOU!" Nawa whipped around, sighing in relief to see that no fart cloud had escaped his buttock. But neither did he feel one coming. This troubled him, since he'd always believed it had to be one or the other with tingles in one's buttock.

Both of his buttocks rumbled suddenly, sweeping him to the floor on his dome-shaped belly. Out from his butt erupted a giant red centipede-dragon the size of a puppy-dog and plopped onto the kitchen floor. The first thing it did in the outside world was open the fridge and devour the container labeled "GREEK

YOGURT.” It belched so monstrosly, not just the kitchen but the living room shook; and it swelled to the size of a Nawa-sized panda bear. “BIGGER!” It roared in its alien language. It blasted its yogurt breath all about.

Zak had been ejected onto the kitchen floor. He ducked behind a leg of the kitchen table, quivering in fear. He peeked around the corner and gulped. “No . . . not Crosha’s dad!”

Nawa got up and saw the panda bear sized centipede-dragon. Unpleased with it breathing its yogurt breath all about, he said: “Now, wait just a sec! You must be that panda I’m scheduled to wrestle at three! Wanted to catch me off guard, eh? Well I’ll show you.”

Both panda(?) and sharkodile got into a fearsome stance. They exchanged menacing death leers then assaulted each other. The panda(?) knocked the sharkodile to the tiles, but the sharkodile windmilled on top and quickly got it in a bear-hug (very fitting, you see, if you think of his opponent, but not so fitting if you think of how genetically distant panda bears are from true bears). Wheezing, the panda(?) burped its last yogurt breath. It tapped out. Then Nawa licked his lips and hefted the panda(?) high, stuffing the entire panda(?) into his mouth.

Nawa’s stomach expanded to the size of a beach ball. He smoothed his hands over it then let loose a loud, dairy-smelling “BRAAAAAAARRRRRRWRRRP!” The kitchen thundered. Groaning, Nawa felt a bit too healthy. He raided the fridge, freezer and pantry of cake, ice cream and cookies, and engorged himself. Sugar bloated his belly even bigger. Inside (you could hear it outside too, but outside it was just gurgles), the probiotic began to burn like the Wicked Witch of the West and scream, shrinking to the size of a microbe. It returned to the benevolent blue shade.

Nawa’s tummy lived happily ever after.

When the Toyota was freed from the confines of the microbe, it flew up and up and out of Nawa's maw!

Zak cried. It was a joyful cry. Just think, if you got a ten-year-old killed inside his own dad, would you be able to sleep at night?

"Crosha!"

"Zakano!"

Smoke trailed from Nawa to Zak from the Toyota. The vehicle skidded across the tile floor, landing with a sprinkling of sparks. There the Toyota 86 lay: slimy, sizzling, yet in mint condition. Were the vehicle in any mintier a condition, otolaryngologists in some faraway laboratory would have long had it under a microscope to study it and find a cure for halitosis. The door popped open. Out fell Crosha. He lay limp and looked legitly dead, but he was just playing and Zak figured so. The young sharkodile perked back up to his feet and hugged the iguana.

"Thank goodness you're okay." Closing his eyes, Zak rocked the kid side to side.

"I'll be fine."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

They let go. Together they turned and watched Crosha's dad plod out of the room, rubbing his round gut.

"Gee, I really showed that guy, for trying to skirmish me before the match. That was a real doozie! If only Crosha saw it . . . I just wish Crosha saw it . . . Proud of that kid." The voice faded into the living room.

Crosha turned to Zak and smiled. Their smiles turned to laughs.

“I’m proud of you too, dad,” said Crosha.

Even though they couldn’t read each other’s mind, he and his dad both decided: when they saw each other again, they’d both say hug each other and say they were proud. Sometimes just letting your loved ones know you love them can be a comforting thing. So turn off the T.V. every now and then and tell them so.