

CHAPTER 1

When is it My Time to Fly?

They call me Levy the Brainiac. It's because in my head there are always ideas brewing and wheels turning. What I don't tell anyone is that the two halves of my brain are always fighting to be heard. He holds his head with his hands. Even now when everything is quiet in the school Science lab, those voices have a fact, opinion, or concern that have to be aired.

You're almost done. No one is here to bug you. So stay focused.

There goes my logical side.

Don't burn yourself out. You need to eat something and take a break sometime. You've been at this for days.

And my emotions always have to jump in. He sighs. There are times I wish I was a computer or a robot, no an android. That way I wouldn't have emotions getting in the way.

Right.

Really? You need me, too.

Sometimes I feel like a referee or some sort of moderator inside my own head. Levy rubs his temples in slow circles. He breathes slowly through his nose. That's the part that worries me having a brain like mine. I wonder if I'm the only one who has this problem?

He turns his attention back to his work. The NIA are going to flip when they see this. He adjusts the carburetor for the tenth time and rubs his hands briskly. I have never spent this much time on any of my inventions. This has to be the one.

There is a scratching at the huge Science lab's glass window. The oak tree outside is tapping on the glass. The wind is whipping up and a shower of fall leaves slide along the glass. Then they disappear in a whirlwind of oranges, reds, and browns.

It breaks Levy from his intense focus. He spends so much time in his head with his constant thoughts and ideas, that the world outside can easily fade away. *The wind is changing. I wonder if that means for me too?* He lays out various sizes of screwdrivers. His fingers pluck the smallest flat head.

This is not a normal Science fair. The real dudes will be here. The National Inventors of America! The judges and hosts in Washington are inventors from around the world. They also represent big companies looking for the next great idea.

Levy glances at the flyer at his elbow. *Who would have thought our little nothing town of Remick would have been chosen for this? Then again, who would have guessed someone would build this Bill Gates Charter here, too? I guess this might a chance for underdogs like me to get their chance. I hope I don't blow it.*

He holds the circular frame of his prototype engine. Levy adjusts a set of dime-sized gears. *They're going to award a grant to get the winner's invention built and marketed.*

Levy's finger nudges the gear and watches the belt's progress. *The wheels of opportunity are lining up for me. This could be my chance. I can't screw this up.* He takes a breath. *Think clear. Use smart words. Keep smiling.*

His eyes fall on the invitation sticking out of his faded denim backpack. Today was the day everyone from schools across the county checked in their projects. *Tomorrow at 9 am, Friday, was when the real magic began.*

His finger traced the embossed lettering on the form. He carefully put it back for safe keeping. *It's weird because they decided to hold this NIA competition in late fall. I'm used to the spring with when it comes to Science fairs.* That caught Levy off guard, so he's scrambling to get his invention done before Thanksgiving break. *This isn't more than a science fair. This is real recognition for something the world can really use.*

Bill Gates pulled some strings to get the NIA to come to this charter school. He is, after all, Bill Gates. This is a STEM charter school, but wow, this is a big deal. Everyone in this group was nominated by someone at his or her school. I guess someone here is rooting for me. That made him smile; then it quickly turned to a thoughtful frown.

No pressure to win this at all. Right. With all this push to go green and find alternative energy, I hope they see why the Fizz-E-Drive is what the country is looking for. I just don't want a prize or a grant, I want this baby to get into people's hands.

He closes his eyes and imagines what that day might be like.

The judges gather around and Levy's cheeks are sore from smiling so much. "You actually built an engine that runs off the sugar in soda.... soda pop?" The head judge asks in awe.

"The sugar and the carbon dioxide." Levy reminds them.

All the other members of the National Inventors swarm around his entry.

The head judge shakes his head. "It looks so small and fragile." He is the judge-that strangely resembles Bill Nye the Science Guy right down to the red bow tie. "Why is that?"

Levy clears his throat. "I tried to create an engine that would use mostly recycled parts. They are inexpensive to replace and highly economical on fuel."

The judge raises an eyebrow.

"It can be part of a electric hybrid or even solar charged engine and can be part of a self-charging power system."

The judge leans into the mechanism. "Is your engine round or is that just the intake system?"

Levy lifts the engine up for them to examine. "No, it's round. I figure it might be something we might see in the future. I have a thing for spherical...things."

The bow tie judge makes a few quick notes on his phone. "Why did you design the more heavy-duty cage for your engine..." He examines his notes "The *Fizz-E-Drive*, correct?"

"Yes that's what I call it."

"Why the cage?"

Levy waves a hand. "It's to protect the engine during start up. The soda does pack a punch and it tends to shake. So, I made sure it doesn't blast into space."

The judges all stare.

"It's a joke." Levy smiles.

They all look at each other and smile back. That's when the judges all begin talking like a cage full of excited birds.

"How did you get the right combination of gasses and sugars?"

“Did you build this from scratch or did you modify an existing motor?”

“How many miles will you get with this fuel mixture?”

“Can any flavor of soda power the engine?”

“Is the fuel still drinkable, if you got thirsty?”

All the judges look at the twenty-something female judge.

She pushes back her glasses. “What?” She looks around at the other older judges. “It’s just all this talk of soda made me thirsty.”

The judges barrage the boy with one question after the other.

However, Levy is anticipating, even yearning for the numerous questions. He’s able to answer them all with precision and clarity.

The judges take furious notes and all beam with broad toothy smiles.

“This is it, people.” The bow tie judge announces. “We’ve found our next great inventor! You can tell the other applicants to try again next year. Our winner this year is Mr. Levy Roarke.”

There’s a roar of applause that echoes off the walls.

“You and your family pack your bags.” The head judge shakes Levy’s hand vigorously. “You are going to meet the president.” Then the judge whispers in his ear, “I hope you are ready for fame and fortune, Mr. Roarke.”

Levy lets a smile warm his face. “Yeah. This will be my golden ticket to getting my name in the history books. Maybe this will get my family out of the hole we’ve dug ourselves into? It’s all on me to do this.”

He opens his eyes. The boy at the next lab station snickers.

I said that out loud, didn’t I? They caught you daydreaming again, dork. Get back to work.

The girl next to him whispers something and they shake their heads.

Levy closes his mouth and is thankful the other students ignore him as usual. *It isn’t a full lab class, but I like working alone. One more person is one person too many when he gets into my work. You never know who could steal your ideas.*

Levy looks back over his shoulder to see whose eyes are on him. *I know what you’re all thinking. Good old Brainiac is just blabbing away. He organizes his tools by size. Just ignore the nerd and his mad scientist ideas.*

Levy slips off his safety glasses and rubs a line of sweat out of his eye. “Aye, it burns.” He looks up at the science lab clock. “I have a half hour to get this finished.” Levy mutters to himself and squints to make sure it really says 2:25 pm. “How did lab go by so fast?”

He sets down his needle nose pliers and listens. Levy stares at the huge clock on the wall. *Tick, tock. Gees, it never stops. Double time, Brainiac. Snap out of it.*

Slipping his safety glasses back, he reinforces the engine mounts. *I wish we didn't have clocks. We could get so much more done without them. That's one invention I wish some brain case didn't create.*

He smirks. *That's a funny thing for an inventor to complain about.* When the pressure is on, Levy often finds that retreating into his head becomes the best escape. It keeps him focused.

I have this really weird creeping thought that there's a clock out there with my name on it. Tick, tock. I am so afraid that time will run out for me. I'm only twelve. Why am I such a stress-case?

Levy gazes out the large glass panels that made up one wall of Science 401. The afternoon sun provides all the lighting they need to complete their projects. Even though it's late in the year, November is still nice in California.

It's hard to believe Thanksgiving is just around the corner. I'm thankful for this view at least. I wish we had more days like this, but it's supposed to change this week.

His teacher had gone green and never used the indoor lights during this period. Levy loves the organization of each test tube, beaker, and ignited Bunsen Burner. *They say nature is beautiful, but so is technology. Look at the colors and smell the odors. Green and red liquids bubbling, the blue flame of a burner, the scent of chemicals cooking, ah.*

He holds his thumping chest. *Clean freak heaven.* Levy sighs. *Organization is the key, Grandpa use to say.* Levy lets his hand rest on the cold metal seat. His fingers caress the shiny nuts and bolts that hold it together. The hard ashwood legs of the table and the black laminate surface of his station, put him in the inventing mood with each touch.

Levy looks down at his fingers. These were his eyes, ears, and expression. *They call it being tactile, learning by touch. Yeah, how else can we know all there is to know? You have to love the feel of things. Rough, hot, cold, dry, wet...*

He opens his hands palms and wiggles his fingers. Levy rubs his fingers together in concentric circles. It gives him focus and clarity when things get a bit confusing or something has gotten his undivided attention.

Yeah, Heaven. He looks around at the other twenty seventh and eight grade honor students. *I don't care how weird that makes me. I only wish that Chandler or Raul had this class. They are the only ones that get my nerdiness.*

The Einstein clock breaks his thoughts.
He drums his fingers. *Tick, tock.*
The clock's minute hand moves.
Whodeedoo. He closes his eyes.

Levy, stop looking at the clock. Stay focused. Think about what you are doing. That's how accidents happen, remember?

Levy taps his head. *Right.*
The left side of his brain that saw the world in cold logic was his voice of reason. It is his nickname and his alter ego at the same time. He depended on it heavily as one would a no nonsense PE coach.

Thanks, Brainiac, for the nudge.

Time is not a toy; it's a tool. Use it wisely.

Levy gives a salute to the hidden left half of his mind. *Right, Brainiac.*

Right, I mean, correct. Levy closes his eyes. *Maybe if I talked to people more, I wouldn't be constantly carrying on these conversations in my head*

He opens his eyes again. *The Sweet Fizz-E-Drive, my old friend.* Levy looks lovingly at his latest invention. *Hm, I left off that 'sweet' part because I didn't think that sounded very scientific. But soda and tech are sweet in their own way.* The motor is just about complete, but he examines every inch to make sure. *You might look small and weak, but you have heart, just like your inventor.*

Levy recalls the various parts he had to recycle from used and discarded engine parts. *FED, you're a mixed breed just like me. Half Puerto Rican from Dad, the other half Jewish and German from Mom, that's why we understand each other, right?*

Levy looks down at the hole in his jeans. A flush of embarrassment heats his cheeks. He pokes his bare skin with one finger. Then he quietly folds the pant leg down. Levy hopes no one saw how worn his clothes were. *I love Jeans Day when we don't have to wear the Gates uniform. I hate Jeans Day because I am reminded how bad things are at home. Mom says try to make my stuff last a little bit longer.*

Levy glances up at the boy and girl texting on the latest cell phone. His old school phone with the chipped screen sits like a mute lump in his pocket. *Gaww, I forgot to charge it again. It stinks being broke. It's not the old days anymore.*

Get your mind off it, Levy. Think happy thoughts.

He pictures his Grandpa in his overalls doing the same examination to a '69 Chevelle. *Check vit your hands, eyes, nose, de vorks*, Levy replays it with Grandpa's German accent. *Give everything you do 100% and you will never fail.*

Levy had removed the engine and attached it within an enclosed metal frame. It was easier to transport and keeps the engine vibrations to a minimal.

FDSCC. FDSCC.

He did a mental mantra exercise with that acronym. Mom and Dad had taught him how to use mnemonic devices to improve his memory. He used everyday objects to jog his ideas or simply create an acronym like:

FPSCC

For Plenty of Speed Chug Chug

One more run down just to be sure.

- 1. Fuel tank full.*
- 2. Pulley system on tight.*
- 3. Spark plug clean.*
- 4. Crank tight. No Knots. Pulls smooth.*
- 5. Carburetor. Check.*

“Keep your list simple, not more than you can count on two hands or less.” He mutters one of dad's memory mantras.

He takes one more examination of the holding tank, the multiple pulley housings, and follows the fuel line. It leads to a set of pumps that are squeezed between the lower frames. Levy lets his fingers run over the sets of gears. The tiny cooling fan moves just slightly back and forth.

MMMM, new car smell. He enjoys the new rubber aroma from the belt and how it clings snugly in the grooves of the pulleys. Bubbling with pride, Levy hefts it up off the lab counter.

Dad can't say I need exercise. With a hand on each grip, he does two curls. *Yeah, that's...ouch...enough.* “Oww.”

I love the weight and the girth of it in my hands. It is surprisingly light for its size. Levy can't stop smiling. I built this myself. No one else helped me.

Levy had been studying engine designs for the past few months. He had tried to make everything as compact as possible. Looking at an engine put him in a state of awe.

His fingers wiggle in delight. *I think it was a miracle that someone even figured out how to make an engine work.* Levy considers this idea. *I think inventors had to have some Heavenly inspiration to figure out all of the intricate details.*

Levy rights the engine, setting it back on his lab station. He notices a scar on his hand and a few more hairs he hadn't noticed before. *I have Grandpa's hands, inventor's hands, that's cool.*

He sits back with folded arms. *I finally took one of my crazy dreams and did something with it. Grandpa told me that if I ever stayed the course and stuck to one idea, I'd be unstoppable.* Levy snaps his fingers. Looking around he opens his faded denim backpack. He carefully pulls out a large sealed plastic bag. With an air of great reverence he opens it, carefully removing his journal.

He said treat your ideas like gold. He folds back a few pages that had designs, ideas, research and observations to aid in his inventions. Levy ran his finger over the early ideas for his masterpiece. *He said write down everything and something will come of it no matter how insignificant it might seem.*

Levy slides his finger to the next journal page and writes:

So, today, September 17th was an exciting and very sad day too. I wish Grandpa would've lived to see me make the Fizz-E-Drive. He would be the first to cheer if...when I won.

He draws a happy face with curly hair and one with a frown next to the elaborate designs for his invention. *Grandpa, you're here in spirit, aren't you? We inventors are not always understood. It's not easy being the first to try something. It can get very lonely.*

He held up the engine. *Done. For the most part, you are ready. A few more tweaks, but I think you are presentable. Now I can take a breather.* He puts pressure down as he writes. The anger is boiling in his heart.

It's been hard to trust anyone but myself. After Grandpa...died. He said he would be there to see me be a great inventor. Dad made the same promise but he had to get in that accident. We had no money after that. I love my dad but I don't like what he did. People promised to help me but they flaked off too. They got busy and forgot about me. Is it any wonder why I do things myself. I can't count on anyone but me. I don't trust them.

Before he knew it, Levy began to free write. Normally his journal was just chicken scratch and disjointed notes. Not today. Whether it was always his scientific mind needing some answers or his right brain expressing its frustration, he wasn't sure. The lines often got blurred in THE journal. Maybe it's another platform for his mind to process questions that he couldn't always put into words.

I am what you call a grunt on the food chain here at Bill Gates Charter. We all know the links on that chain. I am not only a Newbie, but a Class Three Nerd. Yep, I consider myself a moderate in Nerdom. Some dudes and dudettes can hide their nerdiness behind a sport or a cool instrument. Others like me can look cool but I will admit it's what I say that puts me on the radar. All I need to do is hear someone mention a sci-fi classic or superhero flick and my mouth starts yabbering.

Did I mention my mouth gets me in trouble? I can't help it but I like to use big words. I always have. No matter how hard I try to use monosyllabic words and simple conjugations, ah, uses, it just doesn't come out right. I have to hold my tongue and smile.

Levy shakes his hand to get the cramp out of his fingers.

I have to speak my mind. That's another blip on the nerd radar...hm...nerdar? So, I am working on talking like a normal middle school...dude. It's like learning a foreign language. If I am going to blend in I need to work on my normal...dialog...communication...words.

I am not a Class One Nerd because I can fit in a social situation without embarrassing myself. I know some guys who are so smart but they don't get the clue when to stop talking. That's some Brainiac's curse,

the social setting. It can be some people's Kryptonite if you know what I mean. They think everyone, even the Normies, are totally into their idea but sadly, that look of brain dead on their face is real. People don't always get that smart guy or girl.

Chandler, who has been my bud since Elementary, is a five. Yeah, he has been trying to hide his brains behind humor and coolness for years. Let's just say he has always been my social guru dude.

My other best friend, Raul, is a Normie but I think he has secret nerdly tendencies. If there was anything I could say about him is that he gets me. He just doesn't put up with my quirkiness, he actually understands me. Not too many nerds, that I personally know, can say that they have a real friend like that.

Levy looks up from his chicken scratch writing. *Good luck to anyone trying to steal my ideas. My writing is as bad as a doctor's.* He looks around his favorite place at *Gates*. The boy and girl at the next lab are so into their own project to notice his observations.

This science lab is sort of like a hideaway for nerds. We can be ourselves here, for the most part. You can have a hair-brain idea and no one thinks you're crazy. Still, we do have the Normies who need to take science for a core class. Most of the time they ignore or overlook us. But you still have to navigate around them.

Lucky me, Mr. G.Q. has given me some Normies at the next station. I think that's because I won't scare them off with any mad ideas. Threes can blend well when they need to.

Today though, I have been bubbling over with Class Two behaviors. Stress does that to me. I have never had so much trouble with an invention. It's been fighting me. I thought I wasn't going to make this deadline. Stress can elevate the Nerdatonium levels in your blood. At least that's my theory.

(Yeah, I know I make up my own words but I think the elemental building block of a nerd being Nerdatonium is pretty cool in its own way.)

Levy closes his journal. He reseals it in the bag and carefully puts it in the secret compartment in his worn denim backpack. He pats it lovingly. *Ah.*

Levy catches himself, excited to see the Science teacher, Mr. Quasmick, approaching. *Here is a guy who doesn't let difficulties get him down.*

Levy had heard that Mr. Quasmick was born with one side of his face slightly drooped. *That creeps out some of the students, especially some of the girls. I've seen that look when those dudettes want to go all screamy-meemy.*

Levy frowns. *There aren't many girls in this advanced Science class. He looks at the forty-something year old teacher. One lower eyelid does sag and his mouth droops slightly to one side. Big deal. He's not that scary looking.*

Levy holds his hand over his stomach. *Okay, so it does give me nervous butterflies. Once you get to know Mr. Quasmick, he is awesome. You can't judge someone by the cover.*

Levy watches his teacher reach up and rub his hairy face. *I bet that's why he grew that cool thick beard. Lucky.* He rubs the bare divot under his nose.

Levy felt sympathy for his favorite teacher, so he came up with a cool nickname for him. *For some reason he isn't a doctor like the other science teachers. So, I think the nickname fits perfectly: Mr. Guy Quasmick is Mr. G.Q.*

How many teachers have a magazine title for a nickname? Levy thought he needed the encouragement. It made Levy feel like he was doing a service for his teacher. Mr. G.Q. needs to know he is a good man and that his students appreciate him.

You're off task again.

Sorry, what did I miss?

Today is the day you present your project for review.

Right, Left.

Funny, but tomorrow they are coming. Curb your goofiness.

I won't get off task again.

Four-thirty in the multipurpose room. Space # 6. First row across from the drinking fountain. Tomorrow, at 9am the big wigs come for the final judging. That's when you get your game on.

Thanks, Brainiac. His heart pounds and he has trouble keeping his tools from slipping out of his jiggling fingers. This is a different league than the normal school science fair. I've already won that one and the County. This is the big leagues. This is the National Inventors of America. They know the real inventions from the projects parents made.

Stay focused. You are the logical choice to win. Who else has a fully functioning engine that runs off of everyday soda? But don't get too sure of yourself. Check your zipper too. You are always in a rush.

Hm. He touches his zipper to make sure. Levy knows that if he is one of the three finalists from San Diego County, he will be showing his invention to the president in Washington, D.C. I will see Washington. The Smithsonian! That's inventor's paradise. He rubs his fingers together in anticipation. Edison's inventions! Maybe I'll get discovered and go into production. Yeah, that's not pressure at all. Geez.

“You’ll be ready, right? I can check off this final assignment?”

Mr. G.Q. walks up to Levy’s lab station clicking the clip on his clipboard.

He snaps out of his internal dialog. “Green light.” Levy gives him a salute.

Mr. G.Q. quickly salutes back. He notices Levy’s uneasiness. “Is your heart in your throat, Levy?”

Levy nods his head. “It’s been pounding hard all week.” His voice cracks. He takes a hard swallow. “I’m just a...little nervous.”

“I can hear it from here.” Mr. Quasmick gives him a knuckle bump. “You’ll do great.” He waves his arms over his chest. “Just remember breathing is good, shortness of breath is bad for a growing brain.” Mr. G.Q. pats the lab counters and circles around to the other students.

Levy smiles and breathes in through his nose.

“Breathe and I will come back after I do my rounds.”

Levy taps his temple. “I’ll tell Brainiac you said that. Thanks.”

Mr. G.Q. continues doing some informal inspections before the fair committee is scheduled to arrive. Levy isn’t worried about attaching the engine to the go-cart chassis just yet.

The last bell rang. Levy sits on his stool, breathes and watches the science students exit out one door and the science fair students enter the other. In a matter of fifteen minutes, the room is filled with twenty-five guys and girls with their unique projects. They represented twenty San Diego school districts. He saw Amada and Sagan who were the other two finalists from *Bill Gates*.

Sagan gave Levy a wave as he walked into the lab.

Sagan has designed a mini-sized-accelerated garden green house. He raised tomatoes and lettuce in almost half the time. Sagan gave Levy a wink and mouthed, "Good luck, Brainiac." He's in a different category than mine. Still, he has a good shot for the grand prize.

Levy notices Amada as she set up her smoothie machine. *She got the student's vote for having the tastiest drink that supposedly improved test scores. Amada gave Levy a scowl. Levy narrows his eyebrows. They share a laugh and Levy gives her a salute. Amada's entry is a functional machine. She and I are in the same category. Amada's definitely on the radar.*

Levy spins back on his stool. He and the Fizz-E-Drive stare at each other for a few moments. *Fizz, you gotta keep it together. We're not going to have another repeat disaster. He stops and thinks about what he can do for one more added measure of protection. He snaps his finger. A makeshift net or harness, yeah. A little over the top, but I am not taking any chances.*

Reaching for his old backpack, he breaks open his secret stash of materials. He finds some wiring to tie down the engine to a thick piece of rubberized plastic.

"No pressure, but my future is at stake." Levy brings his lips inches away from the Fizz-E. "Remember, buddy, you don't have permission to botch this up like my first two models. Real live people will be watching. No exploding in a rain of soda and bubbles or shaking yourself apart."

In a few minutes he weaves a metal web that holds the engine in place. Six copper bolts are the anchors for the invention. He twists coils of wire around five of them securely. *It is not the safest looking thing but I feel better that you are behind a cage...of sorts.*

They need to be flush against the frame so it won't warp or bend the engine. He glares at the 'evil' bent bolt. It fights me like it has from the beginning. We need to come to some kind of understanding, dingwitt.

He grits his teeth. "Failure is **not** an option. I have put too much blood, sweat, and...gears into you." Levy sighs. He frowns at the one tiny flaw he had hoped would disappear.

Chigger, my little nemesis, we meet again. He taps the bolt head with his wrench. The Fizz-E-Drive is perfect. The only flaw, one stupid stripped bolt. Levy taps the head of the off kilter little bolt. "In relation to this whole project, it's nothing; it's nothing. You can't break me. I won't let you." He purses his lips.

Let it go. It's fine.

Don't stress yourself out. It's good enough.

Levy's lips curl as he speaks to the bolt. "My teacher is coming back and *we* want to make a good impression. So shape up." He smacks the bolt with his wrench and it rings back nastily.

"Okay, Levy. I just made my rounds. Now I have time to talk." His teacher pulls up a stool. "There are some pretty cool projects out there."

"Hey, Mr. Quasmick." Levy wipes off his hands. Mr. Quasmick shakes his hand very firmly. Levy likes that. *It's a respect thing.*

"How is everything coming along?" Mr. G.Q. rubs his beard.

He is every inch a cool science guy to Levy. Mr. G.Q sports a white lab coat, jeans, and old sneakers. There is the familiar smell of coffee and Old Spice. *Yeah, he's got style, like his name suggests.*

Mr. G.Q. examines, with intense curiosity, the organized collaboration of wire, crude but clean circuitry, and various parts collected at the boy's station. He laughs at how each bolt, nut, wire, etc. is lined up and at attention. "Wow, you've got me beat."

"What?" Levy keeps an eye on the bolt.

Mr. G.Q. points out his organized workspace. "What did Dad use to say, 'A place for everything and everything in its place.'?" He chuckles. "You should see my office at home."

"That bad?" Levy frowns.

"Bad." Mr. G.Q. straightens his lab coat. "At least I try to keep it together in the lab."

Levy pats his station. "It helps me focus, when things are in place." He eyes a piece of wire that has become uncoiled. Levy wraps it around his pointer finger, ties it off, and places it with the other six tiny coils-all color-coded of course.

"Ah, organization."

"Good for you." Mr. G.Q. sneaks another peak at Levy's engine. "Nothing out of place here. I am impressed."

Levy set down his half-inch wrench with a long sigh. In his mind the twisted bolt glows red like a zit about to pop.

"I like the curves of your engine. It really is unique."

Bolt! Not one word out of you.

"I am ninety-nine percent done. I just need to deal with the bracing for the engine."

Mr. G.Q folds his arms. "Last little one-percent still eluding you?"

Levy nods.

"So, do you have your speech for the judges ready?"

Levy gives him a so-so wag of his hand.
“Just talk to them. Once you get going,” Mr. G.Q. motions with his hands in large waves. “It will flow out of you.”
Levy sighs.
Mr. G.Q. loosens up his lab coat and tie. “So, shoot. Tell me all about it.” He pulls up a stool and sits down.
“Okay.” Levy clears his throat. “Well, Mr. Quasmick, I have created an engine that runs on soft drinks.”
Mr. Quasmick’s head bobs back. “You’re kidding, right?” I am accustomed to kids playing pranks in my class.”
Levy has a serious look on his face.
“You’re serious?”
“Yes. I was keeping this version of my invention top secret until the Fair.”
“Awesome!”
Levy can’t keep the smile off his face.
“So, this is not the prototype engine you won the County with?”
Levy laughs. “No, that had a few issues.”
“You really built it? It’s not just the mock-up?”
“Yep!”
Mr. Quasmick gives him a side-glance. “Yourself?”
Levy looks hurt, but he knows his teacher. “I did. I don’t break rules.”
Mr. G.Q. holds up his hands. “I have to ask. Believe me, there are people who will try and win this at any cost.”
“I am very honest. I would never think of cheating.” Levy’s smile drops. *Okay, that’s not true. I didn’t have the money for most of the parts. I thought about taking apart things at home, but then I felt guilty. We are broke and it’s hard enough keeping food on the table.* Levy held his hand to his chest a moment to catch his breath. *Dad had me recycle cans and get some jobs washing cars. That hurt, but it kept me honest.*
Mr. G.Q. points his finger at Levy. “Levy Roarke would never tell a lie. That’s what I hear from everybody. Don’t worry, your reputation is still gold.”

I would do anything to win this but to cheat, never.

What if they like Sagan’s project better? What would you do then?

We’re not going there, Brainiac.

Weirder things have happened. You know how bad your luck has been.

Zip it.

Mr. G.Q and Levy share a smile. He waves for Levy to finish. "It's really simple." Levy goes into great detail explaining the inner workings of his design. He does so after pleading with Mr. Quasmick not to tell anyone.

I may not cheat, but people are ready to steal the next greatest invention. That's another reason why I am mad at Time. What if I wait too long? Someone else might say it was his or her idea? I have had it happen twice already. Someone took my idea and gave me the shaft. That's when this not trusting people started. I am not taking any chances with the FED. Too much is riding on this.

Mr. Quasmick looks at his newest sixth grade student in the light of being a prodigy. "So, Levy, this engine, what did you nickname it again?"

"This third model's full name is the Sweet Fizz-E-Drive."

Mr. Quasmick thoughtfully wrinkles his lips. "Clever." He makes silly expressions under his shaggy beard. "So it's *sweet* in more ways than one?"

"Right."

"This little guy runs on a mixture of sodas?" Mr. G.Q. asks. "Not soda water, but root beer, cola, stuff like that?"

Levy held up a finger. "Correct, but, more specifically, on the sugar and carbon dioxide in soda."

"Cool."

"Sweet, right?"

"Sounds like our junior high before the State came in and gave them some other healthier drink choices." He snickers. Mr. Quasmick had a funny habit of twirling the ends of his mustache and stroking his beard when he begins thinking. That's when a student knew his brain was processing.

Levy chuckles. "It's all because we couldn't go on vacation last year."

"Go on," Mr. Quasmick replies. He brings his fingers to his lips.

"We couldn't see old friends in Oregon because the gas prices were so high. My dad said we had to stay home for the summer."

"That's what caused you to start on all of this? That makes sense."

"I had heard that there were all kinds of alternatives to gasoline out there," Levy continues. "Did you know that gas in Brazil is only six cents a gallon?"

“I did hear that on the radio. They use a lot of ethanol, don’t they?”

“Yes, it’s refined from corn or sugar cane.” Levy taps a can of soda he has nearby. “It’s sugar based. So is this stuff.”

“You’re thinking. You’re always thinking.”

“I figure, why reinvent the wheel. Learn from what others have done. Mr. Quasmick twirls and strokes.

Levy rolls on. “Soda is cheap. Have you ever noticed how many people never finish a soda? A lot of it gets wasted.”

They both look at the cans sitting around the room.

“Corn has to be refined and turned into sugar. This stuff is already in liquid form and needs less fermentation time.” *Tick, tock, save time on the clock.*

“So, is that why I’ve seen you recycling cans in the cafeteria?”

Levy wags his finger at his teacher. “Exactly! My buddies give me a hard time for lugging this around.” Levy opens his backpack. He pulls out a water bladder from his dad’s old camel bag. Instead of water it held a thick dark liquid.

“I recycle what’s on the inside and my buddy, Raul, recycles the rest.” Levy shakes the bag, stirring up the bubbles.

“Levy? Is that what I think it is?” Mr. G.Q. pokes the bag making it gurgle. “Okay, that’s just about every kind of soda on the planet in there.”

“Yep, it’s recycled soda.” Levy shakes the bag. It gurgles back.

“The lid is tight?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good. The powers that be already give me an earful for letting you guys bring snacks in the lab.”

“Hello.” Levy points at himself. “Ah, Neat freak. Of course I keep it clean. It’s kind of sticky and gross, but it does have a kick to it.” He watches the bubbles flow and merge.

Mr. G.Q. crinkles his face.

“Not for drinking though.”

“Wow! No, I really...wow...I am excited about this, Levy.”

“My mom shakes her head at all my containers of brewing soda. I remind her it’s all for research.”

“I’m sure she’s relieved.”

“Ha, it’s like how the Native Americans used every part of the buffalo.”

“I haven’t heard that before.”

Mr. G.Q. mimed shooting a bow and arrow. “They never wasted anything. When they killed a buffalo they were very efficient.”

“Got it.” Levy unscrews the lid and carefully begins filling up the reservoir on top of the engine. He primes the pump by depressing a soft plastic bubble three times. Levy takes one more look at the Fizz-E before he speaks.

“I was going to save this for the presentation after school but do you want to see it work?”

Mr. Quasmick nods his head. He has the look of a kid in a candy store.

Levy closes his eyes and takes a deep breath.

“Oh yeah! Crank it up, Levy! This is exciting!!” He jabs in a half-joking manner. “If this works, soda companies’ stock will be a hot item. I wonder which one I should invest in?”

He’s as bad as I am with new inventions. He’s still a kid at heart.

Mr. G.Q. has his face in his hands. “I heard about an electric car that also runs on gas. It gets 1,000 miles on a tank.”

I just hope the judges act the same way when they see this. “I heard that too.” Levy pats the engine. “I build the FED small and light so it can be part of a hybrid car.”

“If this works, how about making a motorhome that runs for miles and miles on this stuff?”

“That’s something to think about.” Levy puts the lid on, wipes off the container and cleans up the bench.

“My wife and I want to retire in a few years. We could drive it across country and advertise for you.”

Levy grins. “One step at a time.” He claps his hands together and rubs them expectantly. *I just need it to actually run and then we are in business.* Looking at the housing, he gives the stubborn bolt the stink eye. He says a quick silent prayer.

One more try. Don’t embarrass me.

“Ready when you are, Boss.”

I like the sound of that. Boss. “Just one more adjustment, Mr. G.Q...eh I mean,” Levy catches himself. “Sorry, Mr. Quasmick, then, we’re ready.” Levy feels his cheeks flush red. “I want the soda to heat up before I start.”

Mr. Quasmick pats his shoulder and gives him a wink. “Good, that will give me a minute to check on a couple more late projects.

Levy nods.

Mr. Quasmick shoots him two thumbs up, as he goes to the next station. “What is this?” Mr. G.Q. asks the next inventor.

Levy pulls out his wrench. He carefully braces his arm on the table, clenches his teeth, and slips the wrench on the bolt. "Alright, you stubborn thing." Levy squeezes and strains. "You will turn and cooperate not bend and snap." With a wave of his hand, he does his best Jedi mind control bit.

"Now, you darn pig-headed bolt, tighten!"

It is at that moment that Amada looks up from a cup of her smoothie. Her eyes widen as if she knew something is about to happen.

"I...got...this."

Amada shakes her head.

Levy grips the wrench in his right hand, locks on the bolt and puts his left hand on the frame. He grips so tightly that he can feel the blood pulsating in his hand and wrist. Levy gives the bolt an exasperated final twist. The bolt snaps off at the head and spins off.

CRACK!

"Holy!"

The bolt thuds into his eyebrow.

"MY EYE!"

He grabs the burning sensation over his right eye.

"AYE!"

Like a chain reaction, the connecting wires and pieces break off, violently. A number of tight copper wires snap!

PING! PAANG PING!

Levy tries to move his arm out of the way but he is a millisecond too slow. He turns abruptly in pain. A trio of lightning fast wires slash his left forearm like a wild cat's razor nails.

"You...stupid...!" Levy cries out. He throws his wrench and puts his hand on his eyebrow. *It hurts!* But, more than anything, he is angry. "I give up, you worthless piece of junk! I am FED up with you! Why am I wasting my time on you?"

It's just a minor thing. Calm yourself down. You know what happens when you get angry.

Levy pushes back that warning alarm. In rage he kicks his bag and loose pieces on the floor. Levy's eyes are aflame. Everything burns blazing red. Even his breath feels like raging smoke.

"How many stinking hours have I wasted on you?" Levy looks at the Fizz-E through a red boiling rage. It seems to stare back with two gear-like eyes begging for a second chance. Levy's claw-like fingers clasp the metal frame.

Think before you do this.

“It’s too late for puppy dog eyes!” He growls. “Can you see the red in my eyes? Whew! Boy, you are in for a world of hurt!” At that moment, for that one moment, he does see red. He focuses his pent up rage on the shivering metal invention.

“YEAAAAAAHHHH!”

You are going to regret it.

If he had enough upper body strength, Levy would tear his invention in half. No such luck. So, amidst gasps and screams from the other student inventors, which seemed worlds away, he lifts his pleading metallic victim above his head.

