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# Chicken

by Laura Hawbaker ◀ art by Nathan Hale

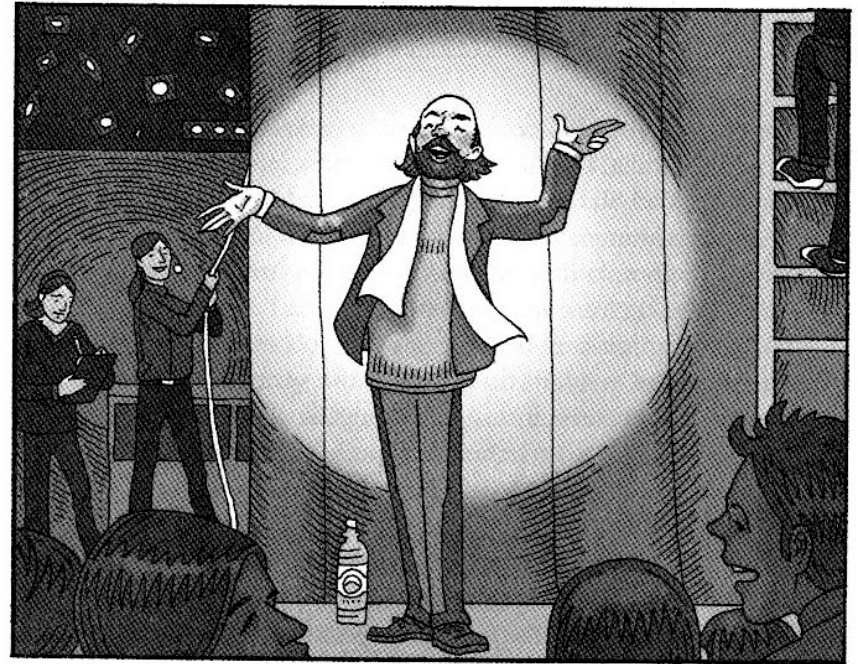
**D**ONALD DENNISON, CLAD in his preshow finery, saunters up to the stage. He holds his arms out like Jesus, pauses for a moment of dramatic tension, then announces to the twenty or so teenagers seated in the first two rows of the seven-hundred-capacity high-school auditorium: "Tonight . . . we perform."

Tonight is a special night. Tonight is the last performance of the Winter Drama. Here at Minda Valley High, there are four stage productions a year: the unimportant Fall Children's Theater, the hackneyed Christmas Comedy, the serious Winter Drama, and the highly prestigious Spring Musical. We have a hard-core theater department, backed by an even harder-core parents' association that coughs up the dough.

Dennison (who'd spent years trying to cut himself a place on Broadway) is an English teacher now. But that's only a cover; the real reason he's here at Minda Valley is to

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*Laura Hawbaker envisions "Chicken" as "the ultimate theatrical caper." She has a degree in fiction writing from Columbia College and is also an illustrator, artist, and muralist.*



dur-rect. He's got his eye on the big Spring Musical, which will be the venerable Rodgers and Hammerstein classic *The King and I*. If the Winter Drama, *Crimes*, is pulled off without a hitch, he's a shoo-in, sure to snag the title from its longtime holder (and Dennison's mortal enemy), the choir director, Mr. Jack Keller, who recently won his music department not one, but two Grammys.

Dennison begins his preshow speech. He uses big, sweeping arm movements and gallops around in his tasseled Ormands. "*Tonight* is our last night."

The actors, rapt, sit on the edge of their plush auditorium seats. Maxwell Yas, an arch-browed flamboyant whose rain-soaked tap dancing won him a standing ovation in last year's *Singin' in the Rain*, pounds his fist on the armrest and cries out, "Yeah!" Whitney Perillo, the soprano who shocked the department when, only a freshman, she stole the part of Maria in *West Side Story* from the then-reigning lead lady, Courtney Fisher. Sammy Tietz, whose tall stature

and mapleberry voice landed him roles like Elwood P. Dowd, Dracula, Dorian Gray, Biff Loman, and every romantic male lead Shakespeare ever concocted. Also, a handful of lowerclassmen who've taken bit parts in hopes of one day, in the not-so-distant future, obtaining larger roles.

We, the techies, are there, too.

We're unnoticed, because it's our job to be unnoticed. We're the set builders, the painters, the spotlight operators, the curtain pullers, the scene changers, the sound checkers, the makeup artists, the costumers, and the intermission announcers. We wear black. We're everyone you don't see.

To Dennison, we are the peons. As he gives his magnanimous speech, we're lounging in the aisles. We're sitting over the orchestra pit, our legs dangling. We're eating Chinese in the sound booth. We're playing poker in the wings.

We're planning . . . The Prank.

☪ ☪ ☪

It all began during the run of Minda Valley's first show ever. On the last night of *Oklahoma!* some unknown techie, whose name is lost to the annals of history, cued up the sound equipment with a song that wasn't on the playlist. So when Curly announced to the world that Laurey was "his girl," what should come ringing through the speakers but that 1960s Temptations classic "My Girl."

More pranks followed, always during the closing performance. When Hänsel and Gretel were about to be tossed into the fiery mouth of the Witch's oven, what should come leaping out but two wiggly, pink-nosed bunny rabbits who hopped around the stage for the remainder of the performance. Or when Dr. Faustus reached into his cabinet and pulled out a beaker brimming with green blood.

Hence, the actors brushed up on their ad-libbing skills. The infamous techie Prank had become tradition, and it was sure to happen on the last night of every show.

And Donald Dennison, that pretentious ladder climber, would have none of it.

Just last October, he directed the Children's Theater, *Winnie-the-Pooh*, and prevented a spectacular attempt to nail Eeyore with a barrage of cream pies right before the close of the last curtain. The techies responsible were given two-day in-school suspensions. At the time Dennison directed the Christmas Comedy, *Don't Drink the Water*, he again left the final performance Prankless when, ten minutes after intermission, he discovered a plot to kidnap the bumbling key character, Walter Hollander (played, not surprisingly, by Maxwell Yas). Those tricksters were not only suspended from school for a full week, but were also banned from ever working again on the school's theatrical productions.

Now, here he is, the last night of the Winter Drama, just two and a half hours from his shoo-in shot at directing the almighty Spring Musical.

And here we are, the techies, thwarted twice in the last five months and really itchin' for some vengeance.

☪ ☪ ☪

He's blond, drives a Firebird, and orders kung pao shrimp. Code name: Crispy.

She's plump and stumpy, with six-inch heels and peeling nail polish. She orders vegetable egg rolls. Code name: Lill Street.

Then there's me. General Tsao's chicken. Code name: the Baker.

We are the players. Sworn to secrecy, bonded by our unadulterated loathing of Dennison and the very real threat of suspension and banishment from tech should we be caught. Mum's the word.

Of course, that hasn't stopped the rumors from spreading. The energy generated between three co-conspirators keeping a big secret manifests itself like static electricity,



crackling backstage and swooping around the set in the days preceding the actual Prank. Whispers that something's being planned. . . . Something, someone, something big. . . . Do you know who? . . . Do you? . . . No. . . . Would you tell me if you knew? . . . Dennison's gonna throw a fit. . . . I heard he's pushing for expulsion. . . . I heard it was the pies again. . . . I heard the pies, too. . . . Maybe the pies. . . . There's a big order of cream pies in the cafeteria. . . . I heard that word got out. . . . They put security around the pies. . . . Where are they again? . . . The cafeteria. . . . The janitor's closet. . . . The pool equipment room. . . . Who's doing it? . . . I heard it was everybody. . . . Everybody? . . . Well, everybody but us. . . . Why didn't they let us in on it? . . . 'Cause everyone knows you'll blab and I'll chicken. . . .

Of course, the rumors bled into the acting pool, and somebody spilled the beans to Dennison. So Dennison's on red alert, with eyes in the back of his head, on the lookout for anything, *anything*, out of the ordinary.



The spotlight operator leans over the railing, twenty feet above the audience. The full space of the arena lies vast before her, the stage an almighty beacon. Her view is marred only by the clunky, obliterating spotlight, which she commandeers. She's removed her headset; the last spotlight cue was at the end of act one. So now she sits back, munches on Doritos, and enjoys the best seat in the house.

Maxwell Yas, playing Mr. Harasym and wading in misery, is joined onstage by Kip Ratchett and Mrs. Harasym, a.k.a. Sammy Tietz and Whitney Perillo. Sammy wears a tuxedo and bow tie and Whitney a slinky red thing with a complete bouquet of white roses done up in her hair.

Mr. Harasym, in his drunken stupor, flails out at the oh-so-handsome yet oh-so-dastardly Kip Ratchett. Mrs. Harasym gasps, presses a deliberate hand to her half-exposed chest, and looks on helplessly as the two men brawl. The stage lights slowly bleed one by one to their red gel counterparts, casting the entire scene in increasing hues of scarlet. The music swells.

The spotlight operator thinks she hears a clank behind her, but when she glances over her shoulder, all she sees are the brick wall of the auditorium and the black stairs leading to the catwalks. She returns her focus to the play.



An auditorium, particularly Minda Valley High School's auditorium, is its own world. There are the rows of plush folding seats, the stage, the heavy dark curtains, the apron, all of which are seen, are there to be seen. There are also the areas meant to be hidden, tucked into corners or cradled beneath the floor: the sound booth, the orchestra pit, the wings, the tech room where all things constructed are sawed and screwed.

And then, invisible and forgotten even by the crew, hanging high above it all, seeing it all, knowing it all, spanning it all are . . . the catwalks.

The only member of our tech crew who ever uses them is the lighting designer. They're a network of black iron and chains clinging to the underbelly of the ceiling, the floor a grate forty feet over the heads of the audience, actors, and techies alike. A mass of stark silhouettes, lit from below by smoldering stage lights, like drawbridges strung over some hellish underworld. Here and there in this eerie, hidden upper place are the glint of a discarded gel casing, a slightly visible string of red electrical tape with *Way Out* written alongside, and slick, shapeless tufts of dust.

The purpose of our catwalks is, technically, to house the lights. Tonight, the purpose of our catwalks is the Prank.

I trust Crispy can navigate his way through this labyrinth of chain, grate, and metal; he was the lighting designer for *Don't Drink the Water*. We wince with every footfall, which, no matter how soft our sneakers may be, makes the dullest of metallic thuds against the grate floor.

On stage, Mr. Harasym and Kip Ratchett's brawl grows more heated. Kip forces Harasym up against the brick wall by the scruff of his collar but is knocked away by a well-timed smash with a trash can lid. As Kip somersaults from the supposed force of the blow, Harasym lunges and claws at his enemy's tuxedo, pinching at the bow tie. Kip wedges his knee up against Harasym's chest and kicks him backward, then leaps to his feet and smacks punches left and right. Their timing is a little off: Harasym's head whips to the side a second after Kip's "punch" theoretically falls. The speakers boom out slapping effects, and wind howls behind melodramatic music.

On stage right, Mrs. Harasym creeps over to a trash can and dips her lovely little manicured hand in. She pretends to root through the garbage.

Forty feet up, I feel panicky, petrified giggles ready to erupt. I clutch Crispy's shoulder, and he looks back at me;

there's a white, wet glimmer against his eyeballs. We continue onward, snaking left and right, grazing rusted nails that prick our clothes, tiptoeing toward the walkway that hangs directly over the lip of the stage.

I peer down through the grating at my feet and try to pick out Dennison's bulbous head from the crowd. He'll have saved himself a good seat, centered and near the stage, perhaps in the first row. If any high jinks should happen, he just has to leap over the orchestra pit and go pounding into the wings after the perpetrators, no seconds lost.

There he is; his suede jacket catches the stage lights and shimmers like glitter. Though I can't see his face, I can see his hands, clenched on his lap, probably white tipped and trembling. So close, so close . . . the act is nearly over, the curtain call is just a climax away. . . . The Spring Musical is within his grasp. . . .

Whitney's hand, inside the trash can, gently flicks the switch built into it. A moment later, a colored light bulb, hidden inside, blinks on. The effect on stage is a sudden burst of weak purple light that silhouettes Mrs. Harasym and burns over her now lavender hand as it emerges with the gun. The audience's focus shifts from the fight to her.

I watch Dennison's hands unclench. Aside from the upcoming gunshot, he believes that the purple light is the last big techie cue for Prankdom. Like everyone else in that auditorium, he's overlooked the catwalks.

Crispy and I reach our checkpoint and sink to our knees on oiled joints. I unzip my backpack and, like Mrs. Harasym so far below, dip my hand inside, feeling for the secret hidden within. I pull it out: the essential prop.

Crispy smiles and gestures toward the stage.

I reach through the metal bars, arm extended into the abyss, the prop clutched in my hands, dangling high, high, high over the actors' heads.



I'm the one who's concocted this Prank; it is only right that I finish it.

Calling out, "Kip!" Mrs. Harasym drops the gun to the floor and kicks it across the stage. It audibly clatters against the wood slats of the stage floor.

Mr. Harasym is quick. A lightning foot comes out and kicks the gun away, beneath the fire escape. The men both lunge, arms flailing, but in the end it is Harasym, not the dastardly Kip Ratchett, who proves the victor. Harasym grabs a chunk of Kip's hair and, with a forceful backward snap, bashes his head against the fire escape. Kip Ratchett is reduced to a crumpled mass of black polyester, bow tie askew.

The music screeches, the lights strobe horror colors, and through the blur of action and sound, Mr. Harasym points the gun at his beautiful wife. The safety, amplified and echoing, clicks off. Seven heart-stopping seconds.

Then, the lights abruptly stop flickering, held on a deep blue, and the music's single violin continues while the rest of the orchestra dies away. Mr. Harasym, an expression of despair and defeat writ across his lined and harrowed face, tightens his grip on the trigger.

He raises his arm and, accompanied by a communal exhale of relief from the audience, shoots the gun into the air.

And, just then, a rubber chicken comes flopping down.



There is a moment—flickering, succinct, brief—as the audience takes it in.

This is followed by a gush of hilarity, a volcanic eruption. Tears and guffaws, snickers and hoots, cackles and snortles, everything in between. Some aghast. Others mortified. Most hilarified.

On stage, Maxwell Yas looks fish faced. Whitney Perillo runs into the wings. Sammy Tietz, who's supposed to be unconscious, rolls with laughter. Other heads, one by one, pop out from behind the curtains.

In the center of the front apron, the yellow rubber assailant rests peacefully.

A few feet away, Dennison detonates. He explodes to his feet. Knees pumping, arms cutting air, back hunched, he tears down the red aisle. In seconds, he storms through the door to the catwalks, roaring.

Crispy and I meet each other's gaze.

Nod. Nod. Break out.



Lill Street peeks around the red curtain and looks out at the audience, who are staring at the catwalks forty feet above their heads. The auditorium echoes with the pitter-patter of two pairs of sneakered feet trying very discreetly, but very quickly, to run like hell.

Meanwhile, a clanking, stomping set of shoes pounds in pursuit, accompanied by some Grendel-like snorts of rage, and the catwalks quiver against their supports.

With panther agility (particularly in those heels of hers), Lill Street whips off her headset, pops up from her milk-crate seat, and bolts through the wings, pushing aside stunned actors and whooping crew, behind the sets, to stage left, where she crashes through the tech-room door. She weaves through the equipment, kicks loose screws, jumps over pyramids of paint cans, and clangs up the wrought-iron

stairs near the load/unload dock. The stairs lead up to a door—a door at the top of the tech room, near the ceiling—that leads to the backmost caverns of the catwalks.

That door is always locked.

With her backstage manager's keys pinging in her hand, she thrusts one of the keys home, gives it a brutal twist. Wrong key. She tries the next. Wrong again. The pounding feet behind the door grow louder, coming closer! Another key. Right! The door screams open on hinges never used. She hisses, "Guys! Over here!"

More clanging and frazzled breathing, the not-so-distant howls of a director who's temporarily insane—and Crispy and I are through the door. It slams—no time to lock it again—and we're down the stairs and dashing through the tech room. All three of us are safely back in the wings.



Dennison bursts through the tech-room door, chest heaving, fists clenched—a raging, seething, bursting bomb of wrath. His eye sockets are opaque, solid black. His mouth is a pinch. Little arteries of white fury etch over his chin and spread to the throbbing blue vein bulging from his neck.

He plants himself, a cement god, in the wings. He rotates his head, scrutinizing the face of every black-clad person in sight.

Crispy and I are cross-legged and seven feet to his right, a pot of pretzels and fortune cookies spilled between us, holding five cards each and giving him the biggest baby eyes we've got. The black clothes hide the sweat streaks under our arms. A line of invisible perspiration dribbles over Crispy's temples, but his gelled hair camouflages it. I'm sneaking in little breaths, squeezing my lungs, because all I really want is a few exhausted gasps of sweet, cool oxygen. Surely, in this cold-death silence, Dennison can hear the mammoth beating of my heart against my ribs.



I feel his eyes scorching into mine. Will he see the ploy? Do I look too guilty? Too innocent? Too naive? I know what he's thinking: It *has* to be her. She's the one. She came up with the whole scheme. She wrangled in her compadres, planned the execution, finished the job. It was her. Right there. *That girl*, with the three pair of sixes in her hand.

He moves on to Crispy, who's poker-faced. Dennison doesn't call the bluff and passes us by to inspect the curtain puller. We know Lill Street has a face of lead. We don't risk smiles or thumbs-up.

In the coming weeks, there will no doubt be an investigation. There will be bribes and promises of rewards. Dennison will sift for the ratters, the squealers, which he won't find.

And people will talk about it. Other techies will try to top it. The rubber chicken, rescued from the stage by the makeup girl, will be trophied in the tech room for all time.

We, the nameless, have our place in the annals. 🐝