

# BRAIN SOUP

by Johanna Dames

**TOBY STOOD UP** next to his desk.

He wore a purple shirt that showed his tummy when he raised his arms. His face was ruddy and always looked like he had just rushed to wherever he was. He wiped his hands on his shorts and said, “Hi, I’m Toby.”

Everyone said, “Hi, Toby.”

His face matched Ms. Wilson’s red pen.

“Toby, why don’t you come up to the front of the classroom?” Ms. Wilson perched on the corner of her desk.

Toby stood still for a moment and then inched his way to the front of the class. He was new to the school, and the class watched him expectantly.

“Toby, what would you like to share about your summer?” Ms. Wilson crossed her ankles and tapped her shoes together. Her shoes were the color of potato chips.

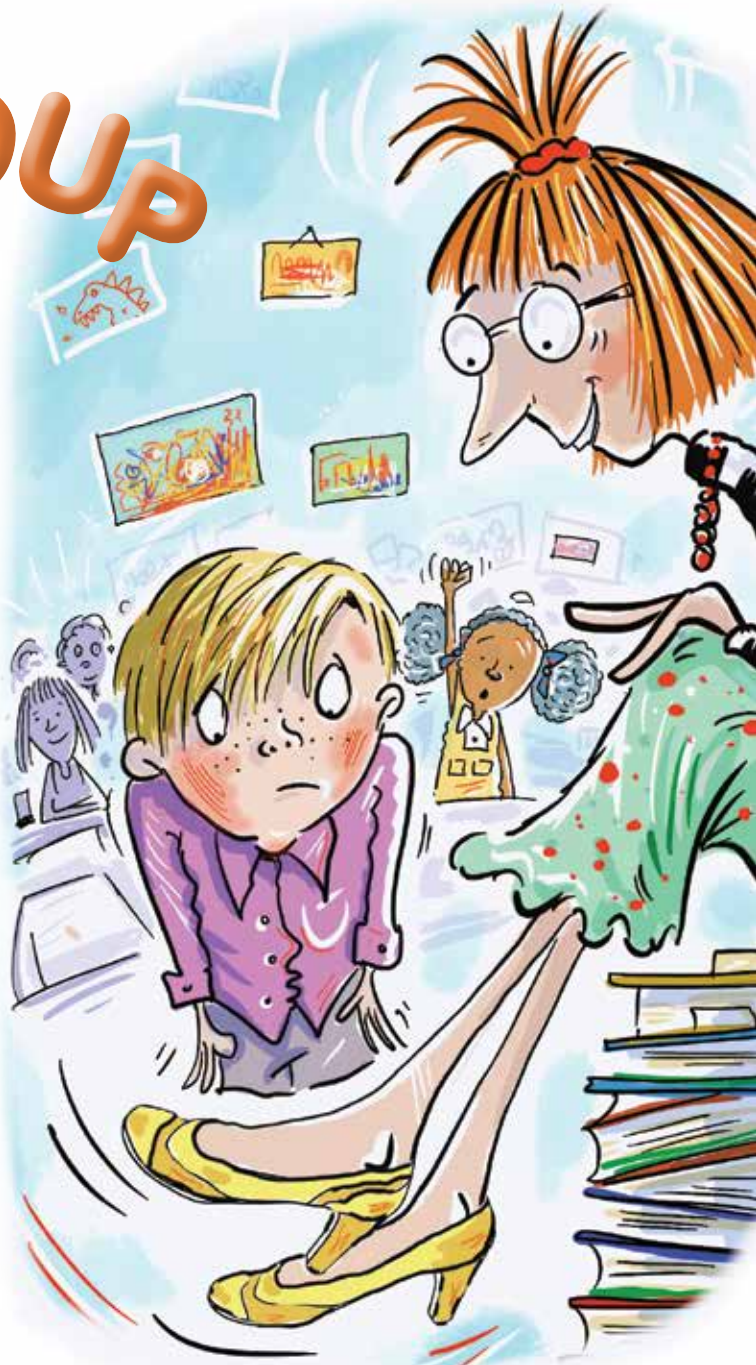
Toby swallowed. “Well, my summer was . . . unbelievable.”

“Unbelievable? Why is that, Toby?” Ms. Wilson crossed her arms over her knee.

“I don’t think anyone will believe me. It’s too weird.”

A tiny girl in the front row raised her hand with such enthusiasm, it looked like she punched the air. “Oh, Ms. Wilson, mine was unbelievable, too!” Her hair bubbled out of two navy blue hair bows clipped above her ears.

Ms. Wilson didn’t even bat an eye. “We are listening to Toby now, Jenny. Please wait for your turn. Now, Toby, don’t feel shy. Tell us about your summer. It sounds very exciting.”



Illustrated by Leo Broadley

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**RUDDY** MEANS REDDISH,  
BUT NOT BRIGHT  
RED, LIKE A CERTAIN  
FABULOUS BUG I KNOW!



I BET TOBY IS  
EMBARRASSED BECAUSE  
HE’S NEW AND EVERYBUGGY  
IS STARING AT HIM. (SIGH)

Toby swallowed. “It didn’t start very exciting. But it turned out that way. It started with a recipe.”

With this statement, Toby lost half of the class’s attention. Three pairs of eyes wandered to the window. One student laid her head down on her arm, and another started rubbing his fingernail with his brand-new pencil eraser.

The lack of attention actually seemed to help Toby’s confidence. He said, “My mom wanted to send her recipe for vegetable soup to a magazine. So I was helping her type it.

She is a finger-pecking typer, and it takes her so long.” A few kids nodded in understanding. They had also been employed to be their parents’ secretaries.

Toby continued, his voice slightly stronger. “When I was typing, the soup sounded so good, I asked my mom if she could make it.”

Ms. Wilson pushed her glasses up. “What are the ingredients?”

Toby hesitated, deep in thought. “I think they were something like tomatoes, zucchini, peas, beans, spygetta, and alphabet noodles.”

Ms. Wilson wrinkled her forehead. “Spy-getta? Do you mean spaghetti, Toby?”

“Nope. Spygetta. Like the vegetable.”

“H’m, how interesting. I’ve never heard of that vegetable. Isn’t that interesting, class? We can learn about a new vegetable.”

None of Toby’s classmates appeared to be very interested in a new kind of vegetable. One kid even swiveled his body to get a better view of the window.

“Spygetta. That’s what my mom calls it, anyway. It was growing in our garden when we moved in. I thought everyone’s heard of it.” Toby paused. “It’s orange and kind of looks like cauliflower or . . . maybe like a brain?”

This caught everyone’s attention. Even the boy erasing his fingernails looked up.

“You eat brain soup?”



IS SPYGETTA  
A REAL  
VEGETABLE?



IT'S REAL IN  
THIS STORY.



“Huh? Oh, I guess. Sure. But the craziest thing about this vegetable soup isn’t the spelling practice or the spygetta. It’s what it does to you after you eat it.”

Not one pair of eyes looked out the window, at the clock, or at the inside of their eyelids. All eyes were now locked on Toby.

“When I ate the soup, I spelled out the word *sleep*—I had a lot of *e*’s. Then I ate the word. Then guess what happened?” As Toby spoke, the kids hung on every word, and he grew more excited.

“What? What happened?” Aaron asked, his fingers gripping his desk.

“I fell asleep. Right into

the soup. I mean, full-on face plant. When I woke up, I had a piece of corn in my nose!”

“What? No way!” A few kids laughed.

“Yes!” Toby began pacing in front of the class, almost like a stand-up comedian on stage. “I was out for a good twenty minutes. I couldn’t believe it, but I was still a little scared of the soup. So I put the rest of it in the fridge for the next day.”

Ms. Wilson rested her head in her hand, her elbow pointed into her thigh, and stared intently at Toby.

“Did you eat it again, Toby?” Jenny wiggled in her seat.

“Like a zombie!”

“Zombies?” The last voice was the weakest. The owner of the voice was a tall boy with the color currently draining from his face. The index card taped to the front of his desk read “AARON” in all capitals.

Toby smiled. “I never thought about it like that. I guess it is like brain soup. Anyway, my mom made the soup for me. She doesn’t eat it with noodles, so she just put them on the side for me. I like when she does that—then I can spell words in my soup.”

Ms. Wilson smiled. “That is very educational soup, Toby.”

TOBY’S SOUP WOULD BE  
SAFE WITH UGLY BIRD.



YEAH, HE  
CAN’T SPELL.

“Did I eat it again?” He paused for dramatic effect. “Of course, I did!”

“What! Why?” Aaron sat up straight in his chair, his fingers still wrapped around the edge of his desk.

“Of course, he did,” Jenny said, raising her hand, but not waiting to be called on. “He had to experiment. What word did you eat next, Toby?”

“Well, let me tell you, um . . .” He paused, trying to remember the girl’s name.

“Jenny!”

“Not so loud, Jenny.” Ms. Wilson winced. “We’re not that far away from each other. Go on, Toby.” She seemed genuinely excited to find out what happened next.

“Well, let me tell you, Jenny, I was very careful about which word I was going to noodle spell this time. This time I spelled . . . *invisible*.” He said the word *invisible* in a loud whisper, pronouncing each syllable as if it were four separate words.

“What? No way!”

“Did you even have enough noodle letters for that?”

“Quiet, class. Toby, what happened after you ate *invisible*?” Ms. Wilson clasped her hands together.

“You won’t believe it.” Toby shook his head, as if he were still in disbelief.

“Did you disappear?” Jenny’s hand shot up after she asked.

“Not totally. I just turned invisible. I mean, I was still there. You just couldn’t see me. Even I couldn’t see me. Not in the mirror or anything.”

Aaron’s eyes bored into Toby. “How long did it last? Did it ever go away?”

Toby gaped back at him. “Um, yeah. I mean you can see me, right?”

“That’s true, class. We can see Toby, right?” Ms. Wilson said, and everyone nodded in response.

“Anyway, it only lasted like twenty minutes. Like when I napped in the soup.” The kids in the class giggled at that.

“Well, that was quite a story, Toby.” Ms. Wilson planted both high heels on the ground with a firm *click*.

“Ms. Wilson, I knew no one would believe me, so I brought everyone a little bit of soup.” Toby hurried back to his desk and took a thermos from his backpack.

“What?” Ms. Wilson’s eyebrows shot up, and she pressed her lips into a thin line. After a moment, she said, “Well, I don’t think we can taste it—allergies and all.” Ms. Wilson’s mouth relaxed into an apologetic smile. Most of the kids in the class protested and said they weren’t allergic to soup.

“Oh, well that’s too bad.” Toby’s shoulders slumped.

“OK, thank you anyway, Toby. You can take your seat.”

“Wait—Ms. Wilson?” Toby hovered between sitting and standing.

“What is it, Toby?”

He looked up at her, hopeful. “Are *you* allergic to anything?”

Ms. Wilson looked confused. “Me? No, not to anything I’m aware of. Why?”



WHAT NOODLE WORD  
WOULD YOU SPELL?



BASEBALL! PIZZA!

PRETTY  
PRETTY  
PONIES!



HEY! WHERE IS  
EVERYBUGGY?

MEWY HERE.

“Oh, great! Then you can try the soup. I hope you like the *spygetta!*”

And before Ms. Wilson could respond, Toby poured a reddish liquid into the thermos cap. Wispy steam rose up from the soup, and a cooked tomato smell slowly spread through the room. Toby dropped a clump of letters into the soup and waited.

“Uh, I don’t—I don’t have a spoon.” Ms. Wilson peered down at the letters swimming in the broth.

Toby shoved a spork into Ms. Wilson’s palm and waited.

The class watched, partly excited and partly nervous. Half of the kids stood up. A few of them started creeping toward the front of the room.

“What w-word did you get, Ms. Wilson?” Aaron asked in a concerned voice.

Ms. Wilson read her soup to the class. “My noodle word is . . . *forget.*”

“Ooohh,” the class said collectively.

“Go on, Ms. Wilson. It’s good. You’ll like it.” Toby rocked on his heels.

Ms. Wilson dipped the spork into the soup and pulled out the letters *f*, *o*, and *r*.

“You didn’t get the whole word, Ms. Wilson!” Jenny appeared close to Ms. Wilson’s face. “You need the whole word for it to work!”

Ms. Wilson dipped the spork again and let the *g*, *e*, and *t* swim

onto it. With a trembling hand, she drew the spork up to her mouth.

“Don’t drop any,” someone said.

“Here it goes.” The end of the spork disappeared into Ms. Wilson’s mouth.

The class was silent and frozen, waiting.

Toby leaped into action. “We have to test it. Ms. Wilson, how do you like the soup?”

Ms. Wilson stared at Toby and then looked down at the soup. “Who is Ms. Wilson?” 