

Fletcher Doolittle
& his
Dubious Day Planner

Chapter 1

What to do About Those Annoying Phone Calls

Voice Log (restricted access)

Doolittle F: 00001

08 May (Sun)

Bio-encrypted: 18:06:22 hrs

At my house it's okay to make up things when you talk on the phone.

Not that we would make up anything if we talked to you, of course. We would be perfectly straight with you unless you called at suppertime trying to get us to buy land in some part of the world that has more alligators than people. Or wanted to sell Grandfather a place to be buried in after he dies. As far as Grandfather is concerned, anybody who tries something like that is automatically a crook.

"Imagine," he mutters after he's gotten those people so confused they're wondering if they might not already be dead and buried themselves, "trying to sell *me* a place to be buried when any fool can tell that's the one thing I'm never going to need as long as I live." Then he blows a triple ring of cigar smoke to show what he thinks of

crooks like that. Most people can't blow triple smoke rings from their cigars, but if there is one thing Grandfather is an expert on, it's smoke.

Sometimes, when strangers call on the phone, Grandfather pretends to be one of those machines that makes you say numbers if you want to talk to the person you are calling, only it's a machine that's hard of hearing: "If you wish to speak to the person you are calling," Grandfather tells them, "say the number ONE. If you want to speak to the grandfather of the house, say the number TWO. If you want to speak to Fletcher (that's me) say the number THREE. If you want to speak to Lewis, (that's my little brother) say the number FOUR. For all other calls, hang up and wait for one of our Personal Service Specialists to assist you."

Then, no matter what number the stranger says, Grandfather tells him "I'm sorry. I did not understand that. Please say the number louder."

After Grandfather gets tired of listening to whoever-it-is yell into the phone, he says, "I'm sorry, I am still unable to understand you. Your call is important to me. Please wait and someone will assist you shortly. Current estimated wait time is . . . click . . . three days . . . fourteen hours and . . . beep . . . twenty-seven minutes. Remember, your call is important to me." Then he starts singing tunes from the Barney-the-Purple-Dinosaur show to give the stranger something to listen to while he waits. It would be better if Grandfather knew how to sing, but what the hey? You make do with what you've got.

I know there's a list you can sign up on where strangers have to stop calling you to sell things, but Grandfather is too much of a people person to ever put his name on

something like that. You'd think the people who call would have a list of their own, but they don't seem to. They just keep calling.

And, as for junk mail, our house is on more junk-mail mailing lists than . . . well, it's hard to imagine who could be on more junk-mail mailing lists than we are, because Grandfather actually answers the junk mail. Which is how he keeps getting on more and more lists. It's just that he doesn't mention he's Grandfather Doolittle. He says he's Dondo Ernst, or somebody.

Then when the catalogs and stuff start to show up for Dondo, Grandfather files a change-of-address card with the post office and all the Dondo Ernst stuff gets forwarded to some place like Kabalastan which, if you know the first thing about geography, you already know is a very expensive place to forward mail to, and the junk-mail companies have to pay for it because they have printed right on the envelopes, **PLEASE FORWARD**. There are lots of stories like that about Grandfather, and plenty of them are true.

What's not true is that, every time somebody shows up at the door trying to sell something, Grandfather turns into a smoke demon and disappears in a cloud of devil smoke. He only does that if the something the people are trying to sell is god. Those people should know better than come to our house. Grandfather knows way more about god than they do.

But he is always polite with them, and nods his head as if he agrees with whatever they are trying to tell him. Then, when they get to the part about where he is supposed to join up with them, he bellows, "*Join* your religion? Why I am the head of the whole outfit." *That's* when he disappears in the puff of devil smoke.

If anybody is still around after that, Grandfather cackles from out of the smoke, and calls them My Children, and invites them into his chamber to share a bit of . . . well, it's not clear exactly what Grandfather is offering to share with them, because nobody ever stuck around long enough to hear that part.

The reason Grandfather knows more about god than any of the people who show up at the door is because he has a better religion library. It's made out of all the books and magazines and papers and things that fall out of their pockets when those people take off down the street.

So it was lucky for everybody I was the one who answered the phone the afternoon the lady from the SunLite Scientific Corporation called and wanted to give me a free electronic day planner if I'd just tell her about the kind of stuff we use around the house.

The thing about day planners is, they are almost as useful as calendars. Only they're a lot more trouble and cost about six-hundred times as much. Not that I have all that much use for a calendar, either.

I mean, what does a seventh-grader need his days planned for? All I do is go to school and come home and go back to school. Mrs Hardkase takes care of the planning. Math test on Tuesday. Spelling quiz on Thursday. Homework more nights than there are in the week, it seems like. It's not like I have to schedule any secret missions, or anything. But when that lady offered me a free day planner just to answer some questions, I figured why not?

Lewis and about two-hundred of his best buddies in the fourth grade have day planners. They use them to keep their social lives straight and I thought if the lady gave

me a day planner, it might look like I had a social life, too. Grandfather says, "If you want to start doing something, the best way is to look like you're already doing it," and I thought flashing a day planner at school might be just the ticket to kick my social life into gear. Especially with Maggie Magruder.

And here's the cool part. The day planner the lady wanted to give me came with a secret password where I could record things nobody else can listen to, which is why I'm getting this all down while I can still remember what happened, in case I'm hauled away in the middle of the night by the National Surveillance Authority.

I mean, it would be nice to have my side of the story about how I got hold of a DAY PLANNER, SERIES AA (SECRET) MODEL 1422 WITH TEMPORAL ALIGNMENT FEATURE somewhere, even if it's just in the day planner. Not that that would make any difference to the National Surveillance Authority. Nobody carried away in the middle of the night by them is ever seen again, regardless of whose fault something is.

Another thing that would have been nice would be if the Medusa Corporation had put an instruction manual in the box with this thing. An instruction manual was *supposed* to be in the box. Only what it turned out to be is a little slip of paper with a picture of a man digging a hole, and the words:

INSTRUCTION MANUAL UNDER CONSTRUCTION

Please send us your name and address and we will forward you an instruction manual as soon as one becomes available.

Like I'm going to do *that*? Maybe Heironymus Bodkin will send them his name and address, if they want to mail one of their instruction manuals to Kabalastan. Or Shredni Bohong. Or Dondo Ernst. But not yours truly, no thank you very much.

Meanwhile, how hard could it be to use any kind of day planner? I mean, it wasn't any trouble figuring out how get this thing to record what I'm saying now. It's just that I don't see how I'm supposed to actually plan a day on it.

But before I can figure that out, I've got to go down to supper. The last thing I need is for Grandfather to come upstairs and find me with a top-secret day planner I'm not supposed to have.

Chapter 2

Flogging Dead Horse Beer

Voice Log (restricted access)

Doolittle F: 00002

08 May (Sun)

Bio-encrypted: 21:22:03 hrs

Okay, Grandfather thinks I'm doing spelling, so he won't be checking on me for a while.

Back to the lady on the phone. When she said she'd give me a day planner if I'd answer a few questions about what kind of stuff we use around the house, she'd gotten the right kid. Just because it's okay to make up things on the phone, doesn't mean we have to. Grandfather says that's the fun thing about being a human. You get to use your own judgment. If the lady had questions, I had answers.

The first question was, was I between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five? Lucky for her I turned out to be twenty-four. I mean, SunLite Scientific didn't want to get their answers from some seventh-grader who should have been doing his homework instead of talking to strangers. If that had happened, the answers wouldn't have been any good and the lady would have wasted the phone call. So I did the right thing and told her I was twenty-four. Then she asked me about beer.

I've tasted beer, of course. What seventh-grader hasn't? Only I can't see why anybody would ever drink the stuff. Me, I prefer the raw taste of pure caffeine – which is why I am a Nitro-Cola sort of kid. But if the lady wanted answers about beer well, then, it only seemed polite to give her answers about beer. I mean, it wouldn't have been right for me not to answer just because I don't know anything about beer except that it tastes a lot like warmed-over weasel spit.

Now, don't try asking how I know what weasel spit tastes like. Or how that particular batch happened to get warmed over. I am *not* going to go there except to say that, some day, Lewis will pay for that big time. But I will tell you that the stuff doesn't taste much different from beer.

Luckily for the lady, Grandfather has a nice beer library right next to all the god books, so it wasn't like I was going to have to make stuff up. Grandfather has been studying beer for years as part of his smokescreen experiments. It has something to do with the foam, I think. Anyway, when the lady wanted to know what kind of beer I drank, I could tell her just by grabbing down a book. Unfortunately, the book grabbed was *Surprising Beer Facts*.

Did I mention that Grandfather is a famous smokescreen scientist? At least, he would be famous if anybody had ever heard of him, which they haven't because smokescreen scientists are secret. I mean, can you name a single smokescreen scientist in the whole history of the world? But the army has plenty of smokescreens, right? I rest my case.

Grandfather says he became interested in smoke when he was in the second grade. It was from the cigars. "My uncle Albert was the only grownup I ever knew who

encouraged me to smoke,” Grandfather says. “If only more grownups were like Uncle Albert, the world would be a better place. A boy needs encouragement, Fletcher. That’s why I try to encourage you and Lewis.” Anyway, he’s been whipping up smokescreens in our kitchen for years.

Sometimes, they leak out into the neighborhood and there’ve been complaints. So, now, we’re the only town in the whole state with its own set of anti-smokescreen laws. You can look them up if you don’t believe me.

Of course, the times they don’t leak out are worse. I mean, can you imagine anything more annoying than having a smokescreen trapped inside the house with you? Especially when it’s the extra-sticky kind Grandfather has been working on so it won’t blow away when you need it. I think he’s pretty close to having the formula for that because, after the last time a smokescreen got loose in the house, everything’s been covered with this sort of gray stuff that looks like dried foam and makes it hard to tell which book is which. Which is how come I grabbed down a copy of *Surprising Beer facts* when the lady called.

I mean, by the time I opened it up and saw what I’d grabbed, it was too late. The lady was already asking questions, and most twenty-four-year-old beer drinkers would probably know right off the tops of their heads what beer they drink. It’s not the kind of thing you fumble around about. So I didn’t have much choice but to tell the lady whatever it was the book had fallen open to.

The thing about *Surprising Beer Facts* is, it’s good for winning bets about stuff you wouldn’t have guessed before you looked them up. But it’s not real great at making

whatever you drinking sound like your standard, wholesome, American beverage, if you get what I mean.

Did you know that the Ancient Russians made beer out of dead horses? The lady on the phone didn't, either. But with page 2,138 of *Surprising Beer Facts* open in front of me, I knew more than enough about how the Ancient Russians turned dead horses into beer, and the lady didn't have any choice but to mark it down.

I think the people at SunLite Scientific hadn't been expecting that answer because, when she read through the list of answers people might give her, it wasn't there. Which made her put down the phone and go look for something to write "Ancient-Russian-dead-horse beer" on.

It must have been crowded where she was calling from, because I could all sorts of other people talking on the phone. Then I heard a man ask, Where should we put this carton of day planners?

"Oh, you mean the LAZE-E-DAZE's?" another man said. "Just put them in that empty cubicle over there." Then there was this scraping sound close by, like somebody was sliding a carton onto the lady's desk.

"I don't think these are the LAZE-E-DAZE's," the first man said. "The carton seems a lot heavier than . . ."

"Let me look," the second man interrupted. Then there was a kind of rustling like somebody might be opening the carton.

"These aren't LAZE-E-DAZE's," one of the men gave a low whistle. "They're Model 1422's with something called a temporal alignment feature, whatever that is."

“These . . .” the second voice man, “aren’t even from SunLite Scientific. They’re from . . .” The second man spoke very slowly and very carefully like he was afraid to even say the name. “They . . . are . . . from the . . . Medusa . . . Corporation.”

It was the first man’s turn to whistle at that. “*Medusa*,” he said. “We’re not even supposed to *know* about Medusa.”

“The stories are true, then,” the second man answered softly. “There really *is* a Medusa Corporation.”

“Aren’t they the secret company inside SunLite Scientific that . . . ?” the first man didn’t finish the question.

The second man didn’t answer for a long time. Then, “The secret company that makes secret things nobody is supposed to *know* about.”

“The secret company that sometimes gets its shipping orders mixed up with those from SunLite Scientific.”

“So . . . what *is* a MODEL 1422, anyway?” the second man wanted to know.

“Some kind of special, top-secret, day planner, I think,” the first man answered. “It just says DAY PLANNER, SERIES AA (SECRET) MODEL 1422 WITH TEMPORAL ALIGNMENT FEATURE.”

“What could *possibly* be so top-secret about a day planner?”

“Beats me,” the first man said. “But with something from the Medusa corporation, it’s worth our jobs to open that carton.”

“*Jobs?*” the second voice said. “It’s worth our *lives*. Besides, we already *opened* the carton.”

I guess those two guys must have gotten out of there because, after that, I didn't hear them any talking, anymore. Just footsteps running away. And, then, nothing but other people talking on other phones until the lady was back.

"Oh *look*," she chirped. "Somebody left a carton of day planners in my cubicle. I guess these are the ones I'm supposed to send to the nice people who answer my questions. Now let's see. I couldn't find any forms to write Ancient Russian Deceased Horse Beer on, so I'm just going to mark you down under 'other'." Then she asked me what kind of gasoline we used.

The lady didn't say what the call was about. Those people never do but, by the time she was done, I had a pretty good idea that SunLite Scientific had some new high-tech additive that worked in beer and gasoline and drain cleaners. Thinking about that stuff made me realize that, if I was ever going to drink beer, well . . . let's just say that the deceased-horse variety doesn't sound anywhere near as bad as it had when I first found out about it in *Surprising Beer Facts*.

The last thing the lady asked before she hung up was my name, so I told her. I know, I know. Technically it says Fletcher Doolittle on my birth certificate, but shouldn't a person be able to pick his own name? Isn't that what Grandfather always says is the fun part about being a human, that you get to use your judgment? And if anybody had bothered to ask me when I was born . . . I mean, what kid would *ever* name himself Fletcher Doolittle?

"Thank you," Mr Bodkin the lady said. "In four to six weeks, you will receive your very own day planner. I will drop it in the mail on my way . . ."

Oops, gotta go.

Chapter 3

What it's like to Live in a Swarm

Voice Log (restricted access)

Doolittle F: 00003

08 May (Sun)

Bio-encrypted: 22:49:37 hrs

Well, *that* was close. Lewis and a whole bunch of fourth-graders busted into my room trying to discover a new way onto the roof and almost saw the day planner. Did I mention that Lewis goes through life in a swarm of other kids? That's because he's the victim of too much day care, Grandfather says.

When Lewis was born, he moved straight from being one of by about a hundred babies in the hospital, to being one of about two-hundred babies at the Bouncing Bundle Baby Battery. Grandfather says it left him with the idea that swimming through life in a sea of other kids is the natural way to swim through life. Whatever, when Lewis isn't surrounded by about a dozen other kids, he starts to get pale.

The fewer the kids, the paler he gets. Let the number drop to two other kids, and he gets so pale he has trouble breathing.

The only time he was ever alone he almost died. That was when he caught Rift Valley Fever off some kid from Africa who got nailed up in a box of giraffes and mailed to the zoo by mistake. When the health department found out what Lewis had, they made him stay in his room by himself for a month.

By the time they let him out, he'd turned pale as The Tomb Master in Level 3 of The Caves of Dûm, and lost about fifteen pounds, which is a lot for a kid who wasn't much taller than an umbrella, and they'd had to put him on oxygen. The doctor said that was because of the fever, but that doctor was new in town and didn't know Lewis. The fact is, Lewis just doesn't handle being alone very well. Which was good luck for the rest of us, because there were plenty of fourth-graders around yesterday when the basement caught on fire.

Now, I don't want to say the fire department isn't doing its job. As far as I can tell, there haven't been any other complaints about them not showing up at fires. And that time we had the raccoon emergency in the dining room, they came right out, and two of the firemen even won medals for bravery. I know, because the mayor made a speech about it on television.

What happened yesterday is, somebody left a welding torch running and the fire department wouldn't come and put out the fire because, well, as the chief put it, "where there's smoke, there isn't always fire. Especially when the Doolittle house is involved." I guess he'd been called too many times by neighbors who saw smoke pouring out of our place. But he should have come this time. This time, the basement really was on fire. So it was just good luck Lewis had all those friends over.

By the time they found the welding torch, it had welded a hole through the concrete wall and set fire to a pile of old lumber on the other side, and the flames were creeping up on the box where we keep the oily rags. Lewis ran in and turned off the welding torch and a bunch of kids dragged the lumber outside, while a few more fourth-graders moved the oily rags to safety, and everything except the basement wall was saved. No thanks to the fire department, I might add.

Now I know you're going to ask the same thing the fire chief asked when he wouldn't come out, and that's, How can you tell it's the basement burning down and not just smokescreen smoke? And when you can answer me that, you can call back, Sonny Boy.

The problem is, I couldn't answer that. Not because I don't know the answer. Of course I know the answer, it's just that it's against the law for me to tell it to anybody because it's a secret government answer.

That's Grandfather's one rule – other than the thing about not swallowing avocado seeds – that we *never* say anything about smokescreens to anybody outside the house because, as far as anybody outside the house knows, not only is Grandfather not inventing smokescreens, he's not even a smokescreen scientist and, furthermore, there's no such things as smokescreens. Especially in a good neighborhood like the one we live in.

Nothing unusual about that. That's what the government always says about somebody doing important smokescreen work. The only problem is, it's hard to keep something like an escaped smokescreen secret when it leaks out the windows, so the neighbors are all pretty sure what's going on in our kitchen, anyway.

Still, knowing Grandfather is doing smokescreens is way different from knowing what he's doing *with* smokescreens, and that's when I have to be very careful not to tell the fire chief, "We know the house is burning down because the smoke doesn't smell like lilacs, You old fool." Not that I ever actually called the fire chief, You old fool. But that's only because the government won't let me. But I would if I could. He called me Sonny Boy, didn't he?

Figuring out how to make smokescreens smell like lilacs is what made Grandfather a famous smokescreen scientist. Okay, okay. I know you haven't thought a lot about how smokescreens smell. That's Grandfather's job. But ask yourself, who do we use smokescreens on? We use them on our own soldiers, that's who. So the enemy can't see them. But when the enemy can't see them, they can't see each other, either. Or anything else.

I mean, just imagine a whole army of people with rockets and hand grenades and heaven-knows-what-other-kinds-of-things that blow up, all running around trying not to bump into each other in the smoke. They shouldn't have to put up with the smell of burning on top of everything else.

"There were complaints, you know." Grandfather took a thoughtful pull on his cigar when he said the thing about complaints. "Many, many complaints. Making smokescreens smell good was very important" Thinking things through like that, that's the difference between an amateur who hasn't given the matter much thought, and a famous scientist who's spent his life trying to make things better for smokescreen users.

Anyway, once the fire in the basement was out, all those kids went back to doing whatever it was they were doing so, no matter what room you went into, there were

three or four ten-year-olds playing video games or rummaging through cabinets searching for something to eat, or adjusting the wheels on their skateboards, or playing with Corporal Clusterbomb Action Figures if they happened to be Kelly Kolodje.

Just walking through the house I felt like Snow White in that Whistle-While-You-Work movie. Only in our house there aren't seven dwarfs, but twenty-three, or eighteen, or thirty-nine depending on how many had drifted in or gone home since the last time you waded through.

Time to wrap this up for a while. Grandfather will be coming up to check my spelling words and I've got to act like I've at least been looking at them.