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# **STEWART'S INCREDIBLE MACHINE**

## **Upcoming Book**

*Stewart's Unbelievable Adventure*

# STEWART'S INCREDIBLE MACHINE

Richard Sotiros



*Stewart's Incredible Machine*

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3 W O M B A T S  
P U B L I S H I N G

Lakewood, Colorado

[www.3WombatsPublishing.com](http://www.3WombatsPublishing.com)

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Book design by YellowStudios,  
[www.YellowStudiosOnline.com](http://www.YellowStudiosOnline.com)

ISBN: 978-1-7328456-0-2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018913776

First Edition

Printed in the United States of America

*This book is dedicated to those who have suffered at the hands of bullies. The power to overcome the pain and find joy in life is within you. Always believe in yourself and never give up.*





## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Lauren Harvey and Blake Christiansen for your valuable editing contributions. Thank you to my family for their input after reading various drafts of the story as well as their continuous encouragement. To my childhood teachers, words cannot fully express my appreciation for all that you did for me. A big shout-out to Tim Dyer whose effort in writing *Wavemaker* inspired me to finally sit down and write this story. And thank you to my wonderful wife Polly, and children Haley and Christopher, for all of the joy you bring to my life.



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# 01

## RADIO SILENCE

**SEATED AT THE DESK** in his bedroom, thirteen-year-old Stewart Camby's fingers darted over the keyboard with the staccato precision of an expert tap dancer. From the moment he received his first computer as a present from his parents on his fifth birthday, Stewart had spent countless hours playing games, and typing on a keyboard was as second nature to him as tying his shoe. The brightly-colored images on the monitor mesmerized him at first, and the increasing complexity of the games appealed to his keen mind. As he became more and more proficient with the games, he also learned how computers operated and how to repair them. Word of his talent spread among his classmates and he found their mothers were more than happy to pay him to fix their children's various hardware and software problems. This extra income came in handy, as

he was always buying new parts to update his computer and keep up with the constant changes in technology.

Beside his desk was a cabinet containing shortwave radio equipment, given to him by Grandpa Frank, his maternal grandfather. Grandpa Frank wanted to share his passion for shortwave radio with his grandson and taught him how to use it when Stewart visited during summer vacations. Although shortwave radio wasn't as popular as when his grandfather was a boy, there were still enough people operating the equipment and willing to communicate. Stewart's favorite memories of summer were the days he spent with Grandpa Frank on the radio and talking to people around the country and in other parts of the world. With his grandfather's encouragement, Stewart studied and passed all of the licensing exams required to make legal transmissions and became one of the youngest people ever to receive a license at the highest level.

As fun as it was to talk to other people, he realized most everyone he spoke to was a lot older and didn't have much in common with him. One night while looking at the stars, so numerous that clusters of them took on the appearance of twinkling clouds, he wondered about other life forms in the universe. With his love for outer space, he decided to put all of his efforts from then on into seeing if he could contact aliens.

Stewart reached over to the dial on his radio and adjusted the setting. His hands shifted to the keyboard and he typed in the new frequency. Peering at his monitor, he glanced at the log of dates, times, and frequencies filling the screen. He adjusted his headset and cleared his throat. "This is Starhawk Ranger of Mother Earth. Does anyone read me?" A minute went by. Silence. "This is Starhawk Ranger of Mother Earth. Does anyone read me?" Stewart ran his fingers through his light-brown hair. Another minute passed. "This is Starhawk Ranger of Mother Earth. Does anyone read me?" A crackling

noise came over his headset. Stewart pressed the headset over his ear. More crackling noise. Stewart felt his heart beating faster. "Hello! Is anyone out there?" The crackling grew louder and louder. The crackling stopped.

"Alaska Twenty-Two do you read me?" uttered a faint voice.

"No!" Stewart yelled as he threw off his headset and covered his head as he slumped in his chair.

"Honey, breakfast is ready!" a pleasant, female voice shouted from just outside his partially closed door.

Startled, he jumped out of his chair. "Mom!" blurted Stewart. "Don't do that!"

"Do what?" asked his mother, Nora, as she leaned into the room. "Please eat before your food gets cold."

"Okay." Stewart pushed back his chair and followed his mom down the stairs. His nose caught a whiff of something wonderful. Fresh and sweet, just like a bakery.

Stewart looked at Nora with a large smile. "Cinnamon rolls? Yes!" Nora smiled back at him, pleased with his reaction. Stewart dashed past Nora and into the kitchen. He saw a batch sitting on a cooling tray and went right over to them. Leaning over the tray, he closed his eyes, and slowly inhaled, the magical aroma of freshly baked cinnamon rolls causing his senses to tingle with joy.

"I could smell this forever!" proclaimed Stewart.

Nora immediately handed a plate to him as he reached for a roll. "Take this and please sit down," she ordered. "I'll get the rest of your breakfast."

Stewart made his way to the table, happily enjoying every bite of his mother's culinary masterpiece. He glanced at the empty chair at the head of the table.

"Is Dad ever going to be here for breakfast?" Stewart mumbled between bites. Nora turned from the stove with a plate filled with an omelet, bacon, and hash browns.

"He's very busy right now, Honey." She set the plate in front of Stewart, who grabbed the salt and pepper and shook them vigorously over his omelet.

"He's always busy," Stewart responded dejectedly.

Nora sighed. "I know."

While Stewart devoured the omelet, she noticed his pants were getting tight and his stomach hung over his belt, a sign to most people that he had reached the pudgy category. She liked to tell herself he was only carrying a little baby fat and that he would grow out of it, so not to worry. Although she wouldn't admit it, she had eaten a few too many of her delicious baked goodies and the pounds were adding up with her as well. Every time she began thinking about her physical shape, her thoughts quickly turned to her next baking mission. A perfect day to make chocolate chip cookies she thought to herself, which should occupy the afternoon and make one boy very, very happy.

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Nora and Stewart climbed into their new sedan, a white, luxury model. Stewart dropped his backpack full of textbooks on the floor and fastened the seat belt. Nora started the car and backed down the long driveway past the flowers, nicely pruned bushes, and lights that illuminated the driveway at night. The Cambys lived in a neighborhood of large homes with beautifully landscaped yards and numerous trees. This was the only house where Stewart had ever lived and he couldn't imagine living anywhere else.



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Across the street and down one house was a beautiful two-story brick home that had a "For Sale" sign in the front yard. An older, well-dressed lady with perfectly coiffed hair, and a couple around Nora's age, stepped out of a black car parked in the driveway and headed towards the house. The older lady took out her keys and opened the door. In a grand sweeping motion, she gestured for the couple to enter the house and followed them inside.

"It sure would be nice if the Rogers' house sold soon," said Nora, as she slightly accelerated the car. "I hope whoever buys the house has children. Don't you?"

"I guess so," was all Stewart could say. He really didn't care if the new neighbors had any children. He already had friends at school and the kid living closest to him was a fourth-grade brat named Zack, who always seemed to be riding his bicycle. Every time he saw Stewart walking down the street, Zack would pedal just close enough to remain at a safe distance, and taunt Stewart by calling him various names such as "Fatso," "Blubber Boy," or "Chubmeister." No, Stewart didn't really care if any more kids moved into the neighborhood.

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Slowing down as they approached the school on this sunny morning in mid-October, Nora pulled into the turn lane and waited in a small line of cars. The school was a fairly new brick building with stylish metal trim. It was surrounded by a green lawn and contained small, young trees planted in clusters at the ends of the yard. The sign in front of the school next to the flagpole located in the center of the property read "Thomas Jefferson Middle School." Finally, at the front of the line, Nora turned into the school parking lot and stopped. Stewart reached down for his backpack and instrument case.

Nora ran her hand through Stewart's hair and tried to push a few stubborn clumps to the side where they belonged. Stewart gently pulled his head away from the comb of mom fingers and opened the door.

"Have a nice day, sweetie," she said.

"You, too," replied Stewart, as he got out of the car and headed for the entrance. Nora watched him take a few steps, then drove out of the parking lot.

Stewart walked a little further down the sidewalk toward the front entrance and stopped dead in his tracks. The hair on his arms stood up straight as if he had walked right into a freezer. Leaning against the wall by the door stood Raymond Burns and his two henchmen, Damon and Willie. Raymond happened to be the biggest and baddest boy in the school, with a large muscular frame, piercing eyes that could take on the look of a wild, crazed person in an instant, and an unruly mop of dark-brown hair that appeared to have never been combed. Damon and Willie were the second and third biggest and baddest boys in the school, with equally messy hair. To Stewart, Damon seemed to have far too many teeth in his head and they were always visible, as he constantly laughed at anything Raymond said to him. Willie had begun sprouting hair in patches on the lower half of his face and either didn't notice them or had sworn an oath to avoid a razor at all costs. Stewart was convinced they had all been held back at least two grades and were lying about their age. How else could they be so much larger than everyone else? Based on his always unpleasant interactions with them, he was certain they weren't very bright, supporting his theory that they were held back. He liked to think they were the human version of dinosaurs - large bodies with tiny brains. Stewart wanted to ask them if their brains were larger than a walnut or even larger than half a peanut and decided it wouldn't be a good idea if he wanted

to avoid having his underwear yanked over his head. His last atomic wedgie at the hands of Raymond was enough to last a lifetime.

Going through the main entrance would be foolish with Raymond, Damon, and Willie forming a blockade through which all students had to pass. They stuck out their legs as various boys walked by and managed to make them stumble as they entered the building. Raymond kicked one poor boy in his rear end as he tried to crawl past them after falling to the ground, causing Damon and Willie to burst into laughter. When a cute girl went by, they instantly transformed themselves into gentlemen, opening the door and bowing as the girl entered the school. They closed the doors behind her and resumed their places, ready to harass the next male student.

With little time to get to class before the bell rang, Stewart swung his head around, looking for alternative entrances. He glanced at the doors on the side of the building and walked toward them. All students were supposed to enter through the front doors, but he did not want to deal with Raymond and his gang of thugs. Getting in trouble for going through the side doors would be worth it.

Stewart reached for the door and pulled. It was locked. He headed for the other door further down the side of the building and pulled on the handle. It was also locked. Time was getting short, and Stewart realized he would have to go back to the front of the building and face Raymond. Just as he turned to go, the door opened and a janitor emerged, his arms full of boxes. Stewart instinctively grabbed the opened door and held it for the janitor.

"Thanks," said the janitor, making his way to the dumpster.

"You're welcome," replied Stewart, as he slipped inside the building, the door closing firmly behind him.

-----

Stewart rushed down the hallway as the door closed shut. He weaved through the students heading towards him as they filed into the classrooms lining the hall. Unfortunately for him, the door he used to enter the building was on the opposite side of the building from where his first class was located. He made his way through the crowd, hoping there would be enough time to get to his math class. The school had a policy of calling the parents for every absence and tardy, and he didn't want his mother to have to deal with such a call. He was proud he was a good student, which to him meant getting good grades and not being late or missing class, unless there was a good reason.

Realizing he had quite a way to go, he started walking as fast as he could. Suddenly, after a couple of steps, Stewart started sliding, feeling as if he had walked onto a floor covered with banana peels. Losing control, he flailed his arms faster than a pinwheel with exploding pop bottle rockets attached to the tips, his legs sliding every which way. Falling to his knees, he looked at the other kids, who were walking without any problems. What was going on here? Didn't this only happen to cartoon characters? He ran his hand over the floor and felt the slick surface. The janitor sure does a good job of waxing the floor, he observed. From now on, he was going to wear tennis shoes, not these darn loafers his mom thought made him look fashionable. Carefully standing on both feet, Stewart slowly began to shuffle forward at the speed of an inmate with shackles on his legs. Shuffling seemed to work and he ignored the looks from the other kids as he made steady progress. He reached the end of the hallway, turned, and entered the main hall. Reaching another hall, he turned and headed down the

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corridor that would take him to his class at the far end of that section of the building.

He looked ahead and screeched to a halt, not believing his eyes. Raymond, Damon, and Willie stood in front of the door to his class and were talking to Sofie Lindstrom. With her long, blonde hair and elegant grace, Stewart believed she was the most beautiful girl to ever exist since the dawn of man. Hoping Sofie would distract Raymond, Stewart concentrated on becoming invisible so he could stroll past them undetected.

Stewart had only taken a couple of steps when, much to his horror, Sofie waved goodbye and stepped into the classroom. Raymond, Damon, and Willie turned and headed towards Stewart, who frantically tried to think of an escape. There was nowhere to go and nowhere to hide. Stewart decided his only chance would be to lower his head and avoid making eye contact as he passed by.

Spotting Stewart, Raymond walked straight towards him, while grinning slyly at Damon and Willie. Raymond pretended to stumble as he approached Stewart and slammed him forcefully into the lockers.

"Hey, watch where you're going you fat pig!" sneered Raymond. He stepped on Stewart as he walked over him and continued down the hall. Damon and Willie also stepped on Stewart and laughed at him as he lay in a crumpled heap on the floor.

Stewart gasped for air, the wind knocked out of him. He climbed to his knees and sunk back on his heels, his ribs aching as he struggled to breathe. The bell rang loudly, indicating the start of class. With a determined effort, Stewart rolled to his knees and forced himself to slowly stand on his feet. Hunched over, he made his way into his classroom while taking short, painful breaths.

Going to his assigned desk directly behind Sofie, Stewart took off his backpack and tenderly sat down. Though his chest throbbed, he was relieved that his breathing was returning to normal. He was also relieved to see that his teacher, Mr. Leiker, was busy looking at the textbook and didn't seem to notice he was slightly late to class. Stewart's friends around the room looked at him with puzzled expressions on their faces, wondering what was going on with him.

In the front row to the left was Dino Petropoulos. Dino wasn't very tall, but what he lacked in physical stature, he more than made up for with a surprising amount of confidence. His full name was Constandinos Eleftherios Petropoulos and he was immensely proud of his Spartan heritage. As early as kindergarten, Dino stubbornly refused to let teachers or anyone else mangle his first and last names. Despite the shortened version of his first name, he couldn't believe anyone could mispronounce 'Dino' and resigned himself when meeting someone new, to saying his name slowly as "Dee-no."

Behind Dino was Ethan Jenkins, who carefully wiped his glasses on his shirt. Ethan stood just a few inches below six feet and may have weighed a little over one hundred pounds after a huge dinner. He was constantly teased for being skinny, and his height only enhanced his appearance of being skinny. Having once read that stripes could alter a person's appearance, he insisted on wearing shirts with horizontal stripes, convinced it made him look shorter and thicker. His identical twin Nathan, also wearing a shirt with horizontal stripes, sat diagonally across the room in the last seat.

Mr. Leiker, like the other teachers, believed it wasn't a good idea to have the twins sit near each other for fear they had developed a superior method of communicating and would cheat, even if unintentionally. The school had three levels for certain classes, and Stewart, Dino, and the twins were in the

top level of these classes, with the twins always placed on the opposite sides of every class. Ethan and Nathan were unique in that their fingerprints were almost perfectly identical, unheard of even among identical twins. Only a top fingerprint expert could detect a difference in their fingerprints. This was a true genetic feat that had been published in medical journals and all of the teachers were aware of this fact.

Stewart unzipped his backpack and removed a textbook and spiral notebook. He placed the backpack under his seat and as he reached for his textbook, Sofie ran her hand through her hair and knocked a hair clip loose, causing it to fall onto Stewart's desk. He stared at it as if a diamond had fallen from the sky. Sofie turned around and picked up the hair clip.

"Sorry about that," she said with a smile so gorgeous, Stewart expected the room to become instantly filled with sparkling light.

Stewart opened his mouth to speak and was unable to utter a sound. Instantly, the blood in his temples pounded his head and he broke out into a small sweat. Managing a small nod, he opened his textbook and pretended to read as Sofie turned back around. Within moments, Stewart saw that his book was upside down and promptly turned it right-side up. He buried his head in the pages, hoping no one was paying attention to him.

Mr. Leiker, a thin man who wore a clip-on tie with a vest every day, stood up from his desk and cleared his throat as he looked at the class. "Open your books to chapter three." Everyone in the class followed his instructions and as Stewart thumbed through the pages, Sofie reached back, pulled her hair, and tossed it behind the seat, barely touching the edge of Stewart's desk. He stared at her blonde locks cascading over her shoulders and immediately became unaware of everything else around him. Mr. Leiker's voice sounded like he was talk-

ing underwater and frankly, Stewart didn't care what he was talking about. All he could think about was Sofie's hair. And Helen of Troy. Did Helen have long, golden hair like Sofie? And blue eyes? She must have, or how else could her face have launched a thousand ships? If Helen's face could launch a thousand ships, how many could Sofie's face launch? One thousand? One thousand five-hundred? This was a great question, he reasoned, because Sofie was Scandinavian and the Vikings had been just as fierce as the ancient Greeks. The Vikings definitely would have sent at least a thousand ships.

----

Stewart stood in a line with other boys, wearing the standard school gym shirt and shorts. The boys were lined up in alphabetical order based on last names, making it easier for the teacher to take attendance. What made it horrible for him was that Raymond, who he was still angry with for slamming him into the lockers, was right next to him near the front of the line. Why couldn't Raymond's last name have been Zyzinski? He would then be standing at the end of the line, far away from Stewart, who always had to be ready for Raymond and his sneaky elbow to the ribs or finger flick to the back of the ears when the teacher wasn't looking.

Not only did he have Raymond standing next to him, P.E. was the class he dreaded most. He was not athletic and knew that no matter how hard he tried, he would not get an A. His parents understood that P.E. would be the only time when he didn't get the highest grades and wanted him to try his best and certainly not fail. Last year, Mr. Pike, the P.E. teacher, told him he couldn't believe someone could be so nonathletic and that the best grade he would ever get in his class would be a C. Minus.



Mr. Pike strolled out of the locker room holding a clipboard and carrying a bag of footballs. His hair was cut in a version of a modern mullet, short on the sides and longer in the back. The gold chain he wore around his neck stood out due to his perpetual tan. His shirt was tight and barely contained his thick barrel chest and arms bulging with muscles. Mr. Pike was definitely proud of his looks as he strutted towards the boys. When he reached them, he stopped, set down the bag, and began reading last names from the clipboard. Each boy answered "Here," as his name was read. Stewart always felt like Mr. Pike's inflection changed when his name was read, almost like spitting out the word "Camby" or turning it into two words like "Cam Bee." Mr. Pike finished taking attendance and gestured to the door. "Everybody outside! Two laps, then go to the middle of the football field." The boys sprinted for the door with Stewart behind the group. Picking up the bag of balls, Mr. Pike glanced at his watch as he followed them outside.

With Raymond leading the way, the boys eagerly ran to the track surrounding the football field. Following the boys, Mr. Pike looked over at the teacher's parking lot just outside of the gym door. He stopped to admire his brand new, gleaming red truck. To avoid anyone parking close to him, Mr. Pike always parked in the middle of two spaces furthest away from the other cars. Nothing made him angrier than someone parking too close and hitting his vehicle when they opened their doors.

Mr. Pike arrived at the track and stepped onto it as a group of boys approached, forcing them to swerve to avoid hitting him. He could have waited for the group to pass by, but this way, he could show them all he was clearly in charge. What was amazing is that he did this all the time without really thinking about it, as if constantly putting people in uncomfortable situations was normal behavior. He stepped onto the football field inside of the track oval, dropped the bag of balls,

and watched the boys run around the track. Raymond was in a group of six boys leading the way. The usual six boys, observed Mr. Pike. Those boys were leaner with better natural endurance and he knew the hulking Raymond would not be able to stay with them on the last lap despite Raymond's fighting spirit that made him hate losing anything to anybody. He loved Raymond's competitive spirit, which Mr. Pike believed would come in handy when Raymond went to high school the next year. He considered Raymond to be a beast at linebacker, the same position he played in college. Raymond would get the best coaching, because he, Tony Pike, was the linebacker's coach at West Lakewood high school. He was going to see to it that Raymond would go further than he did, barring any injuries.

In Mr. Pike's first game of his senior season in college, he burst through a gap in the line and grabbed the running back behind the line of scrimmage for a large loss, only to have a group of linemen fall back on his leg. He heard popping all around his knee as his leg twisted awkwardly beneath him and felt an unfamiliar wave of intense pain. The team doctors hovered over him and while they assessed his injury, all he could think of was that his career was over. Despite working like a man possessed while rehabbing his knee, he never regained his speed and agility, and wasn't able to return to a level that might have resulted in an invitation to try out for a professional team. With his dreams of playing professional football crushed, he finished getting his degree in physical education and got the job at this middle school. It's a start he decided and after a few years, he would look for an opening at a high school, preferably West Lakewood, which had a very good football program and whose coaches he had already worked with for a couple of seasons. Yes, a high school position would be a step up not only in pay, he would be teaching

kids that signed up for the course because they wanted to, not because they had to, such as in middle school.

The school district insisted that physical education was mandatory through eighth grade. Mr. Pike's conclusion about this policy was that the school district must not care if the student's health deteriorated after eighth grade. In a way, the policy was all right with him. He didn't want to teach nonathletic kids, especially the kind like that worthless Stewart Camby who might be the only student in the school without a fiber of athleticism in his body. Even those dopey, skinny Jenkins twins in the next class could at least run in the middle of the pack. Not Stewart Camby. As the boys finished their laps and gathered around him, he ordered them to stretch while he waited for Stewart to finish, one more lap to go. Seeing Stewart chug around the track always made him irritable. Mr. Pike hated being at the mercy of waiting for Stewart and he didn't want to give Stewart a break by making him run one lap less than the others. Why couldn't this kid lay off of the doughnuts and pizza?

"Listen up. Put on the flags," shouted Mr. Pike as he dumped footballs out of the bag. "Same teams as last class." Each boy fastened a belt of two red flags around their waists and headed towards various ends of the field. With large classes, Mr. Pike had to divide the boys into four teams and play sideways on half of the field. He wanted to get the boys moving because once they started standing around, they became more restless by the second and harder to control. Mr. Pike glanced at his watch as Stewart, his face bright red and gasping for breath, finally approached the finish line.

"Camby, people in a coma run faster than you!" barked Mr. Pike, pointing at his watch. "Put on your flag and find your team. Hurry up, the class is half over." Stewart quickly put on his flag and jogged to the closest team. As he joined the hud-

dle, he realized it was the wrong team. He looked around the field, saw his team and headed over to them. Mr. Pike put his hand on his forehead as he watched Stewart run around the field. High school has got to be better than this.

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Mr. Pike reclined in his chair in his office. He watched the last of the boys file out of the locker room after getting dressed. Stepping out of his office, he quickly strolled past the bay of lockers. All of the boys had left the locker room. Hustling back to his office, he closed the door and pulled a cell phone out of his pocket as he sat down. He punched in a number and waited as the phone rang. A raspy voice answered.

“Yeah?” said the voice.

“It’s T-Rex,” said Mr. Pike.

“Who do you got?” said the voice.

“I’ll take Denver, New York, Dallas, and San Francisco,” replied Mr. Pike. “No change,” Mr. Pike continued and ended the call, slipping his cell phone back in his pocket. He felt good about his picks, for he was on quite a roll this football season. He was on such a roll in fact, that he no longer felt nervous about the amount of his bet for each game. Who knew football like he did? His recent streak was so good that it bought him that shiny red truck in the parking lot. If he kept this up, he figured he might not have to worry about getting a job at the high school. He would be able to support himself betting on games. A couple thousand dollars a week during football season would be a good living, especially if it meant not having to yell at soft kids like Stewart Camby.