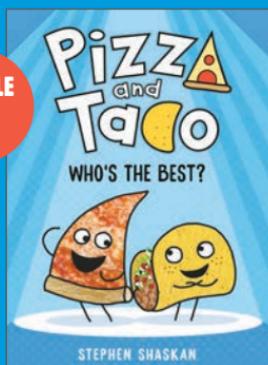


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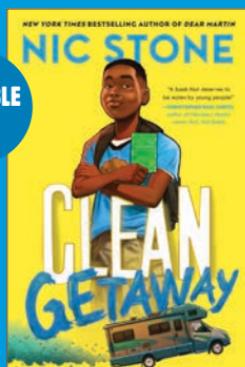
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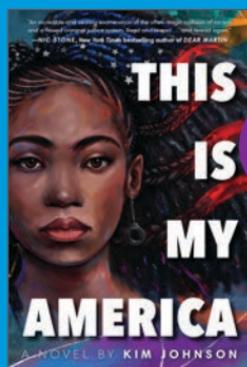
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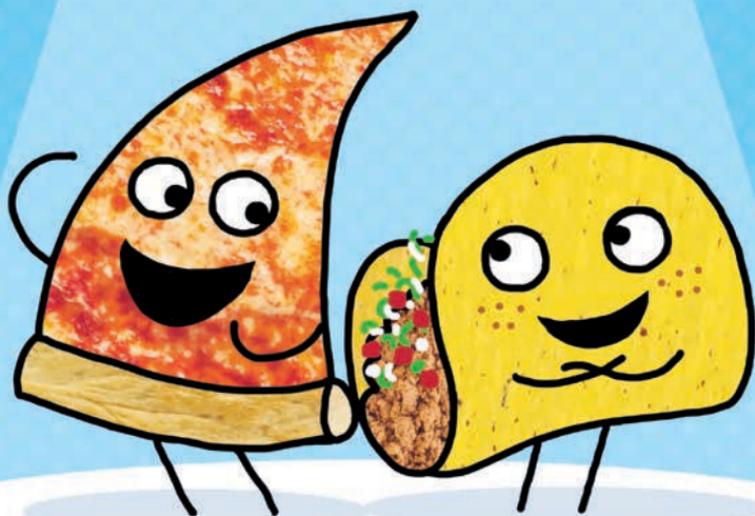
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## DIGITAL SNEAK PEAKS



# Pizza and Taco

WHO'S THE BEST?



STEPHEN SHASKAN

**SNEAK PEEK**

# To all the pizzas and tacos I've loved

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## *Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Shaskan, Stephen, author, illustrator.

Title: Pizza and Taco : who's the best? / Stephen Shaskan.

Other titles: Pizza and Taco, who is the best?

Description: First edition. | New York : Random House Children's Books,

[2020] | Audience: Ages 5–8. | Audience: Grades 2–3.

Summary: Best friends Pizza and Taco agree on nearly everything until Pizza declares  
himself the best of all, leading to debating, voting, competing, and finally defining what being  
the best really means.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019031107 (print) | LCCN 2019031108 (ebook)

ISBN 978-0-593-12330-0 (hardcover) | ISBN 978-0-593-12331-7 (library binding)

ISBN 978-0-593-12332-4 (ebook)

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Tacos—Fiction. | Contests—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.S532418 Piz 2020 (print) | LCC PZ7.S532418 (ebook) | DDC [E]—dc23

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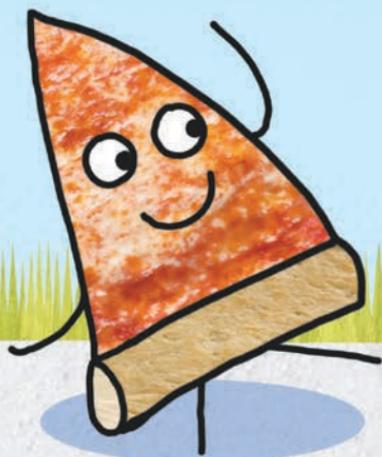
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# Pizza and Taco



WHO'S THE BEST?

STEPHEN SHASKAN



A STEPPING STONE BOOK™

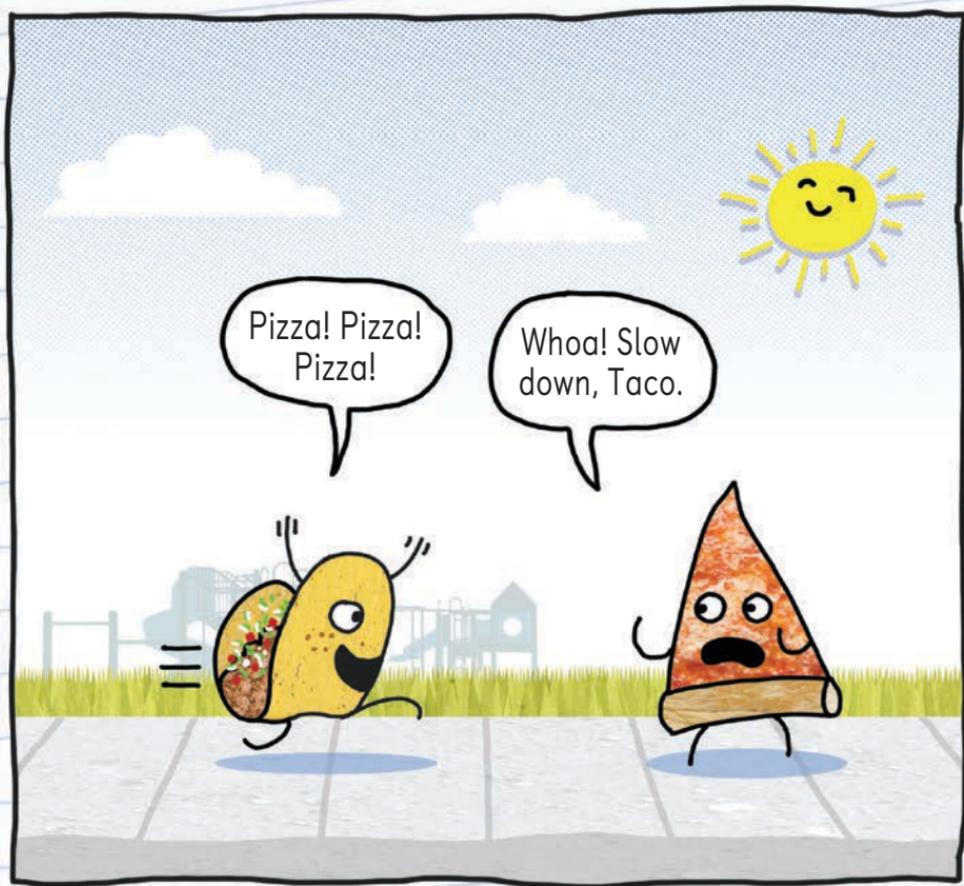
Random House  New York

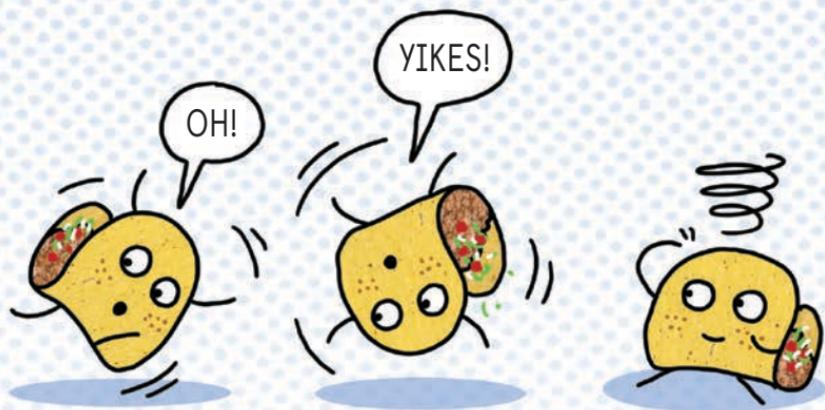
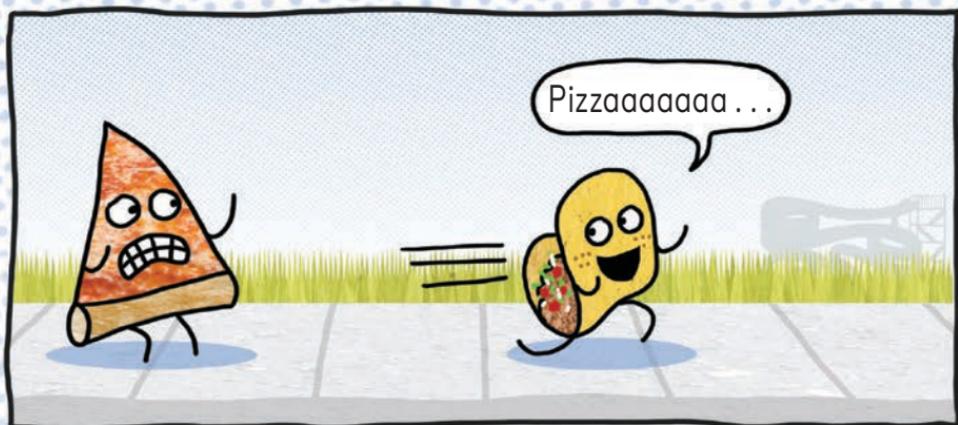
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# Chapter 1

## PIZZA and TACO

### Are Best Friends







Why?  
What's up?



You're my  
best friend!



You're MY  
best friend!



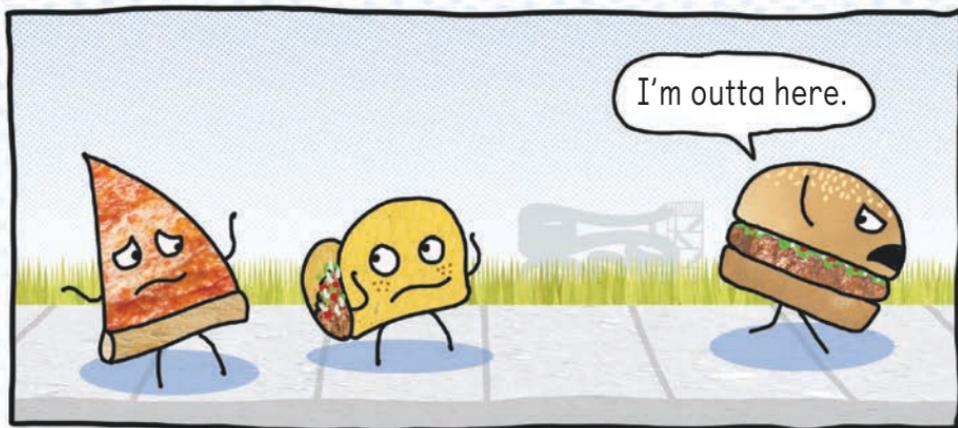
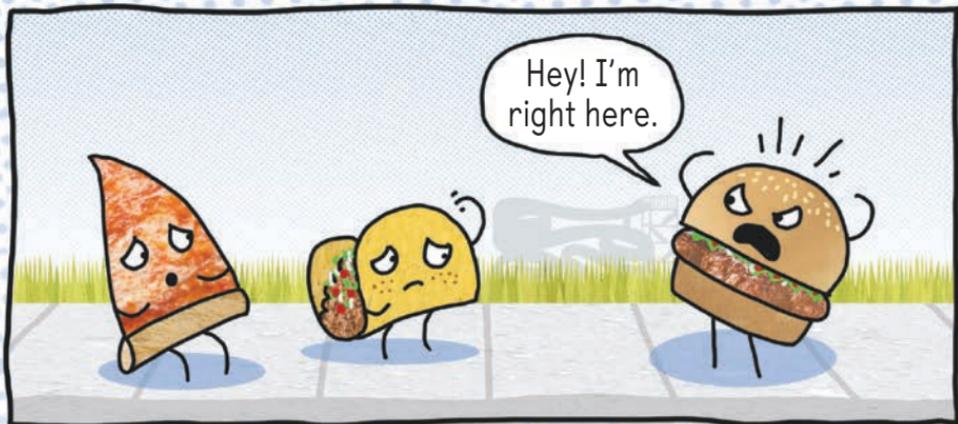
BEST BESTIES!!!

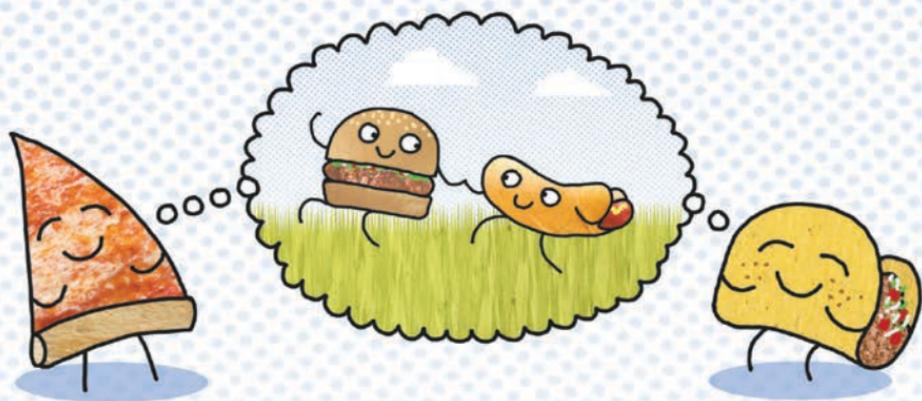
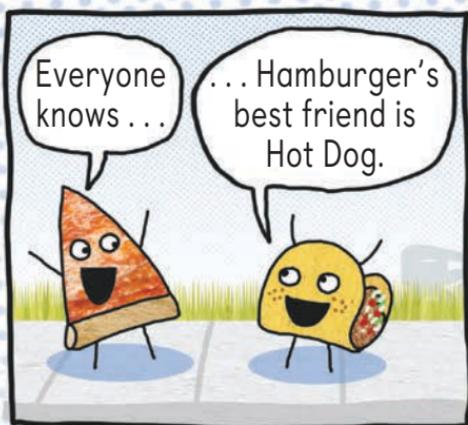
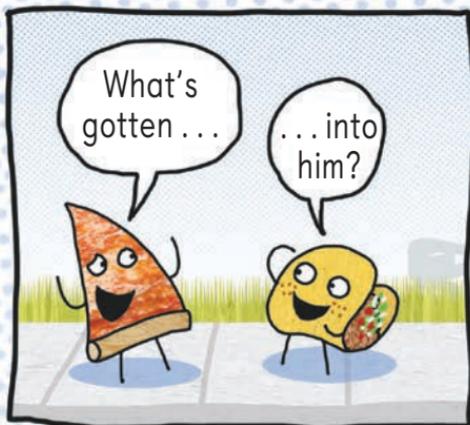


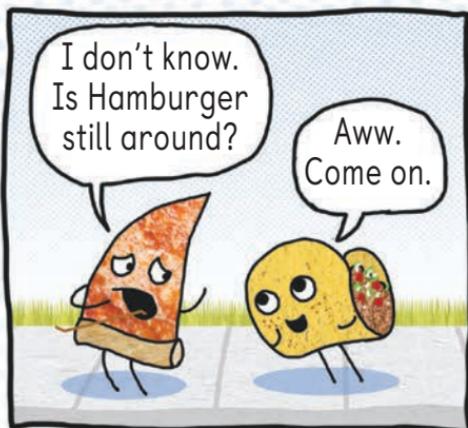
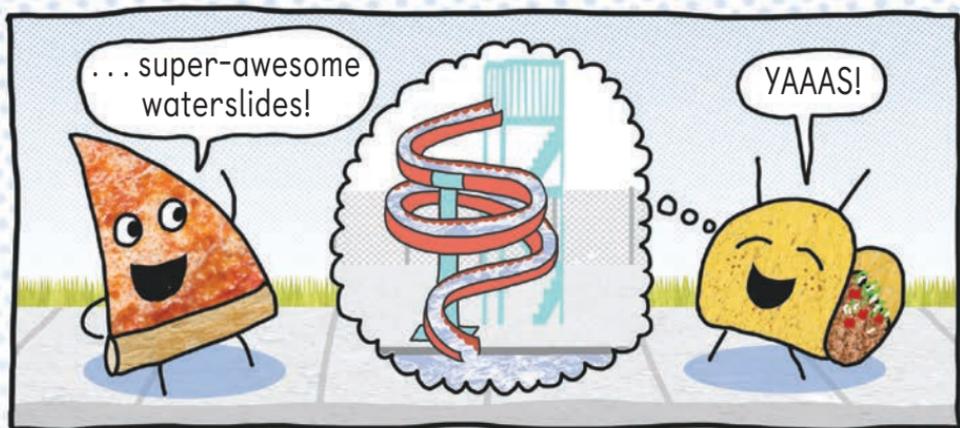
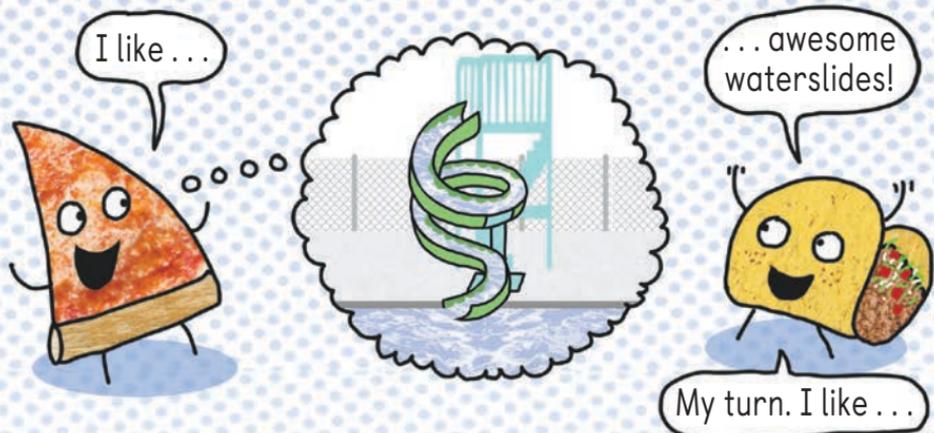
You're a WAY better  
friend than Hamburger!

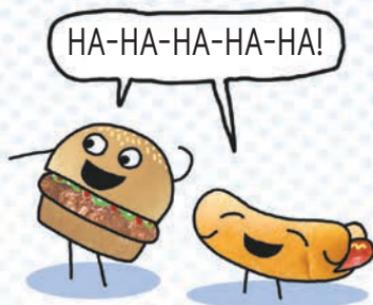
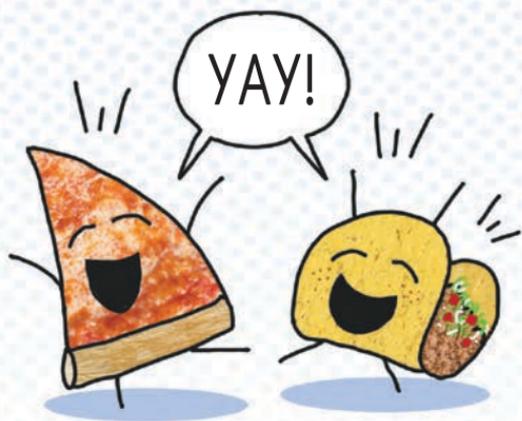
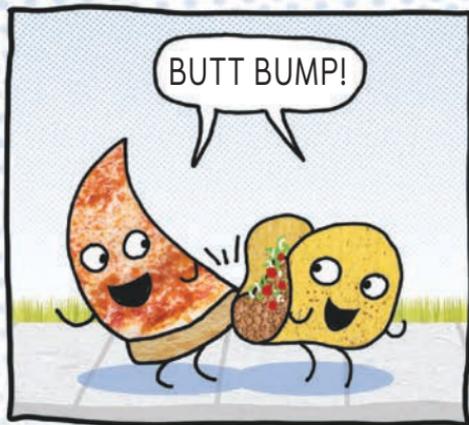
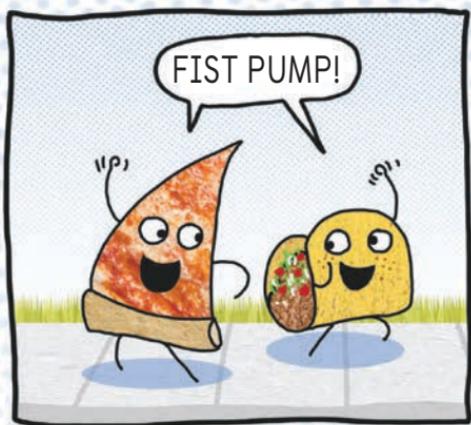
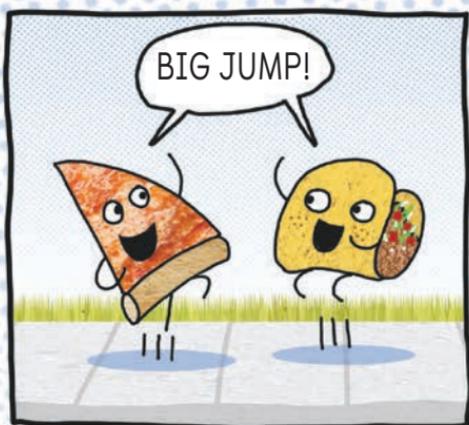
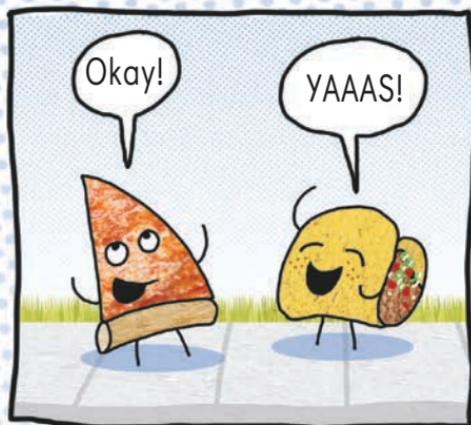


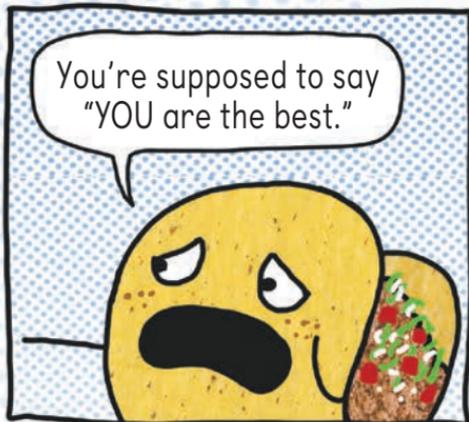
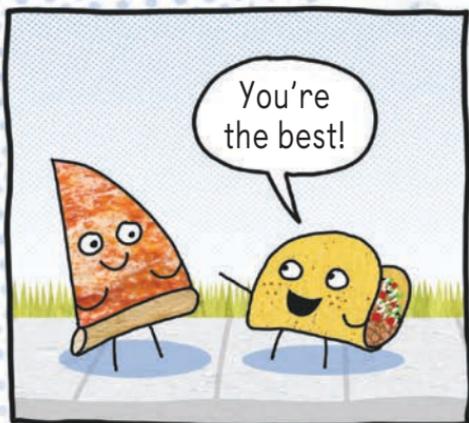
YAAAS!





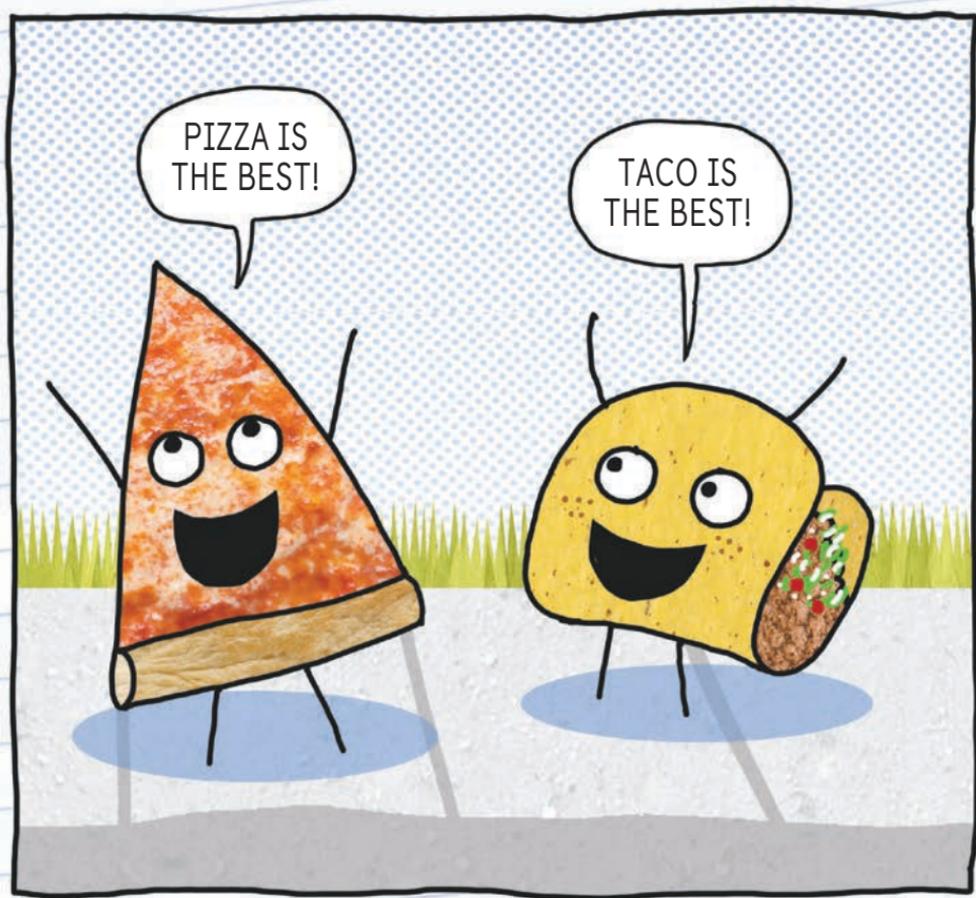


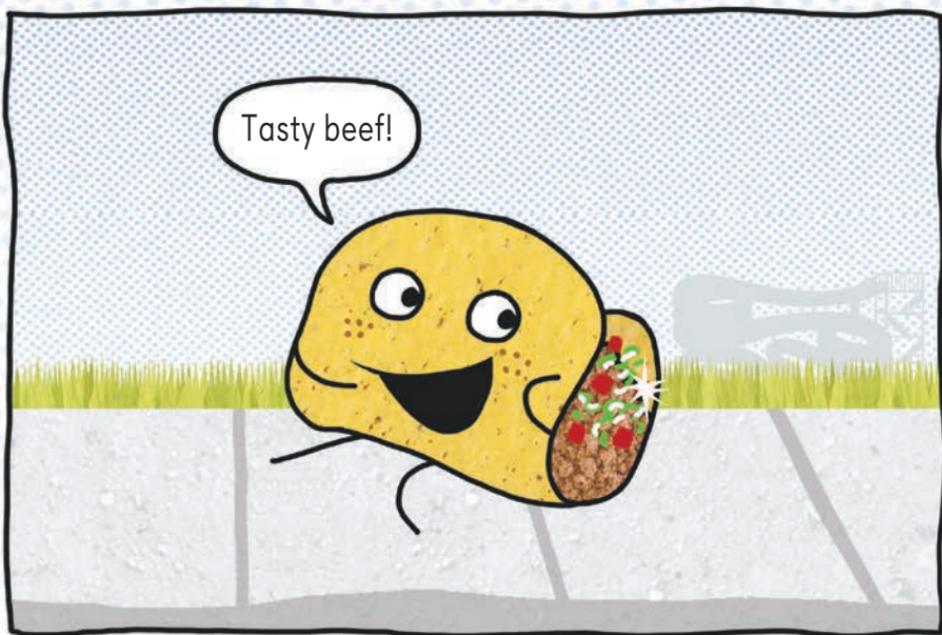




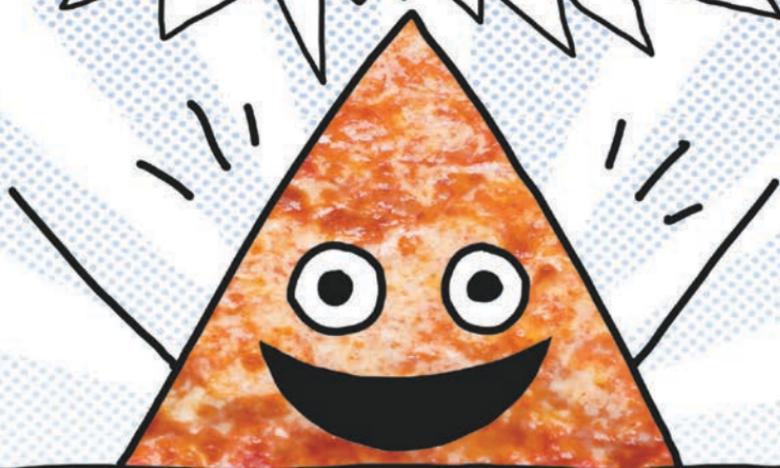
# Chapter 2

## PIZZA and TACO: Who's the Best?





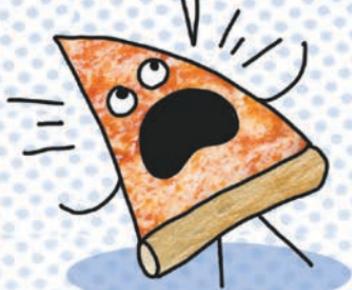
**Slice of life!**



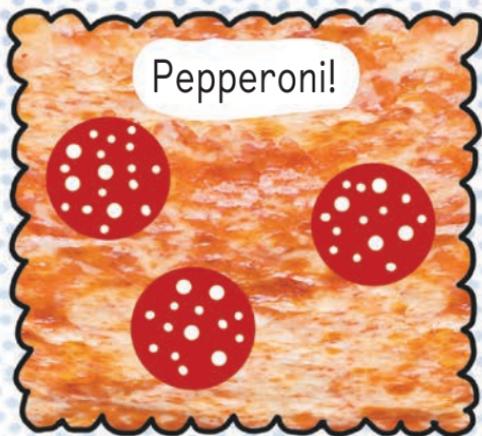
**SPICY!**



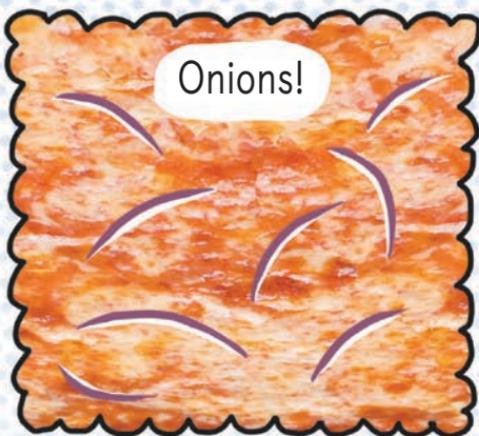
Unlimited toppings!



Pepperoni!



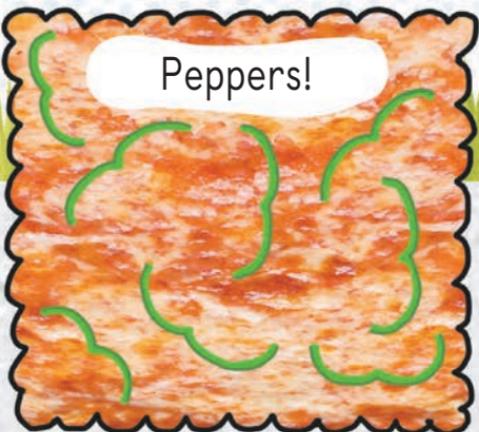
Onions!



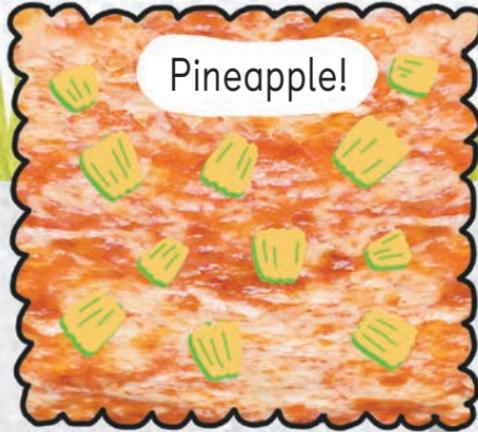
Mushrooms!



Peppers!



Pineapple!



Pineapple,  
YUCK!



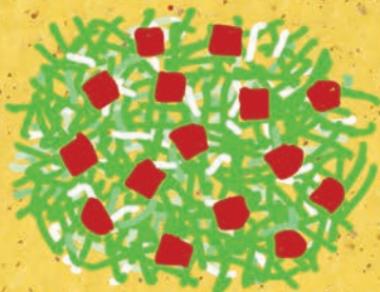
Fill me up with . . .



Lettuce!



Tomato!



Cheese!



Beef!



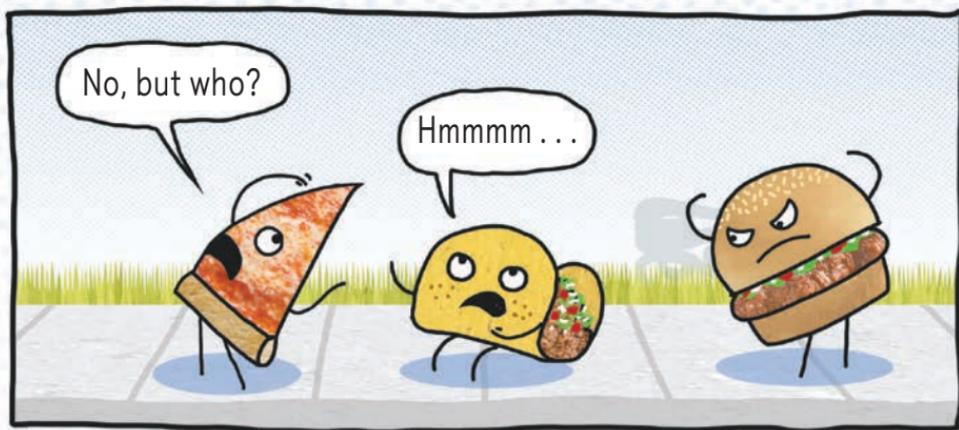
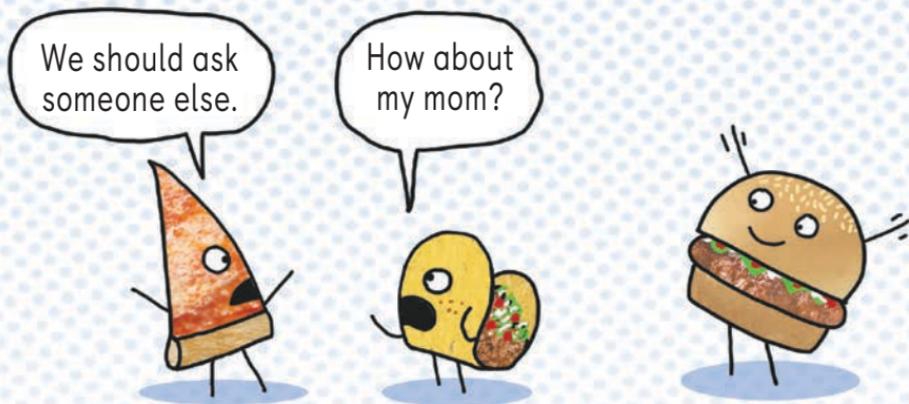
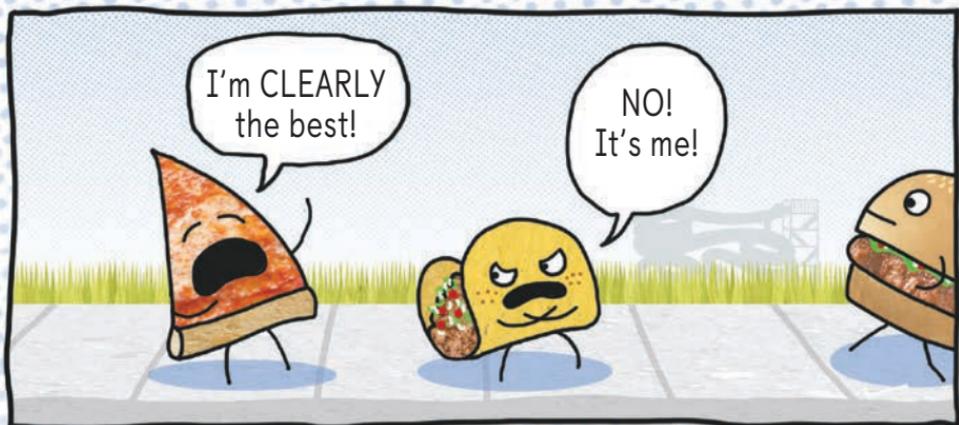
or

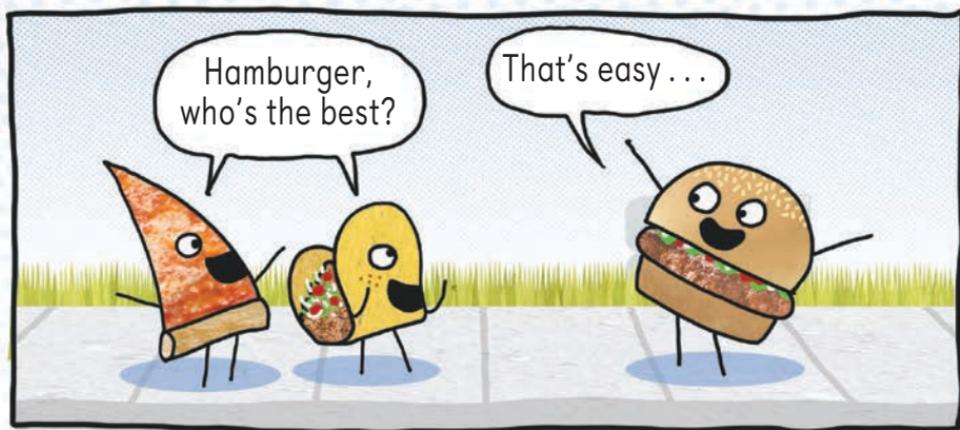
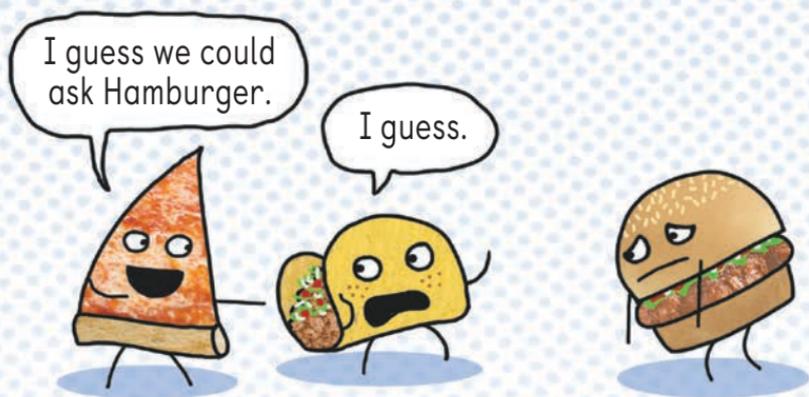
Beans!

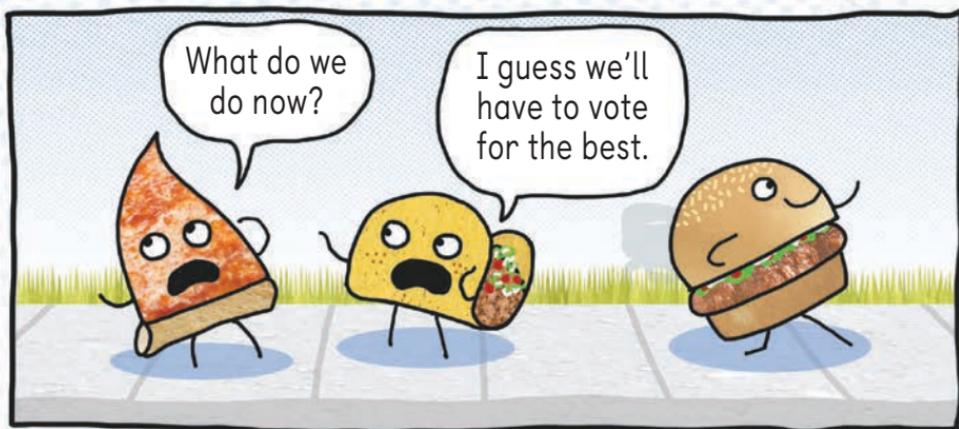
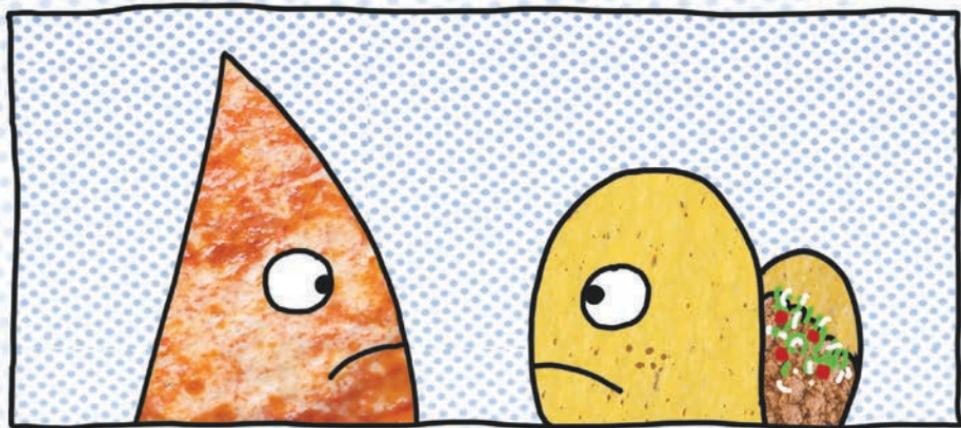
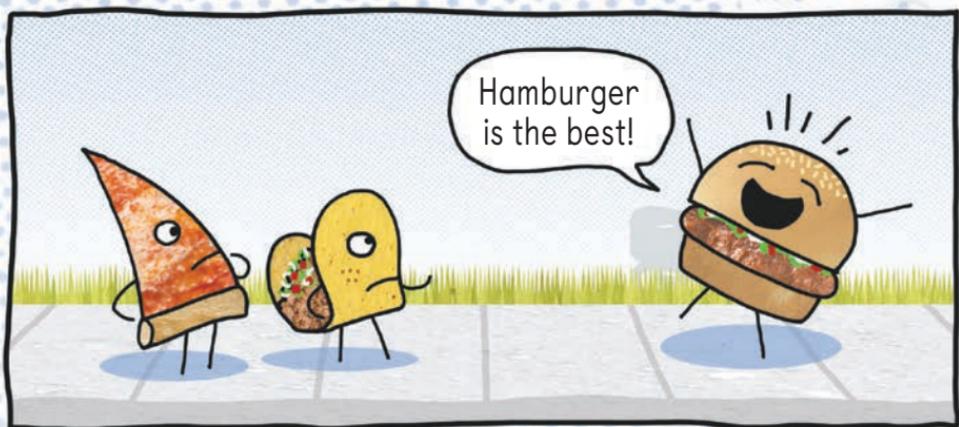


**BEANS!!!**  
**Ha-ha-ha-ha!**  
**Who farted?**  
**Ha!**





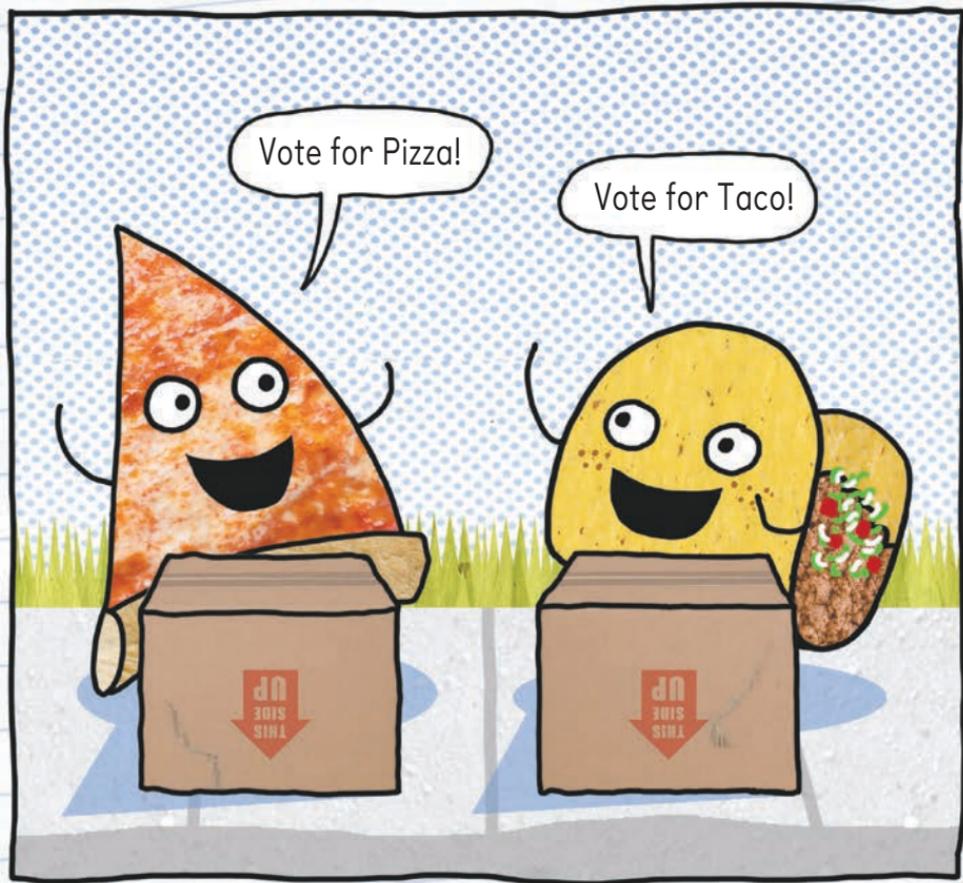


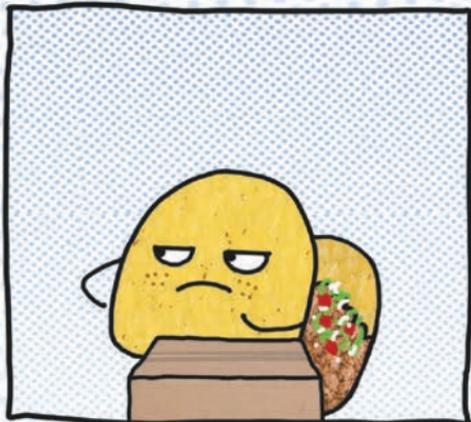
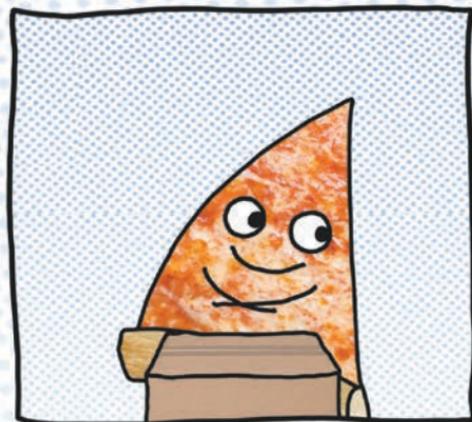


# Chapter 3

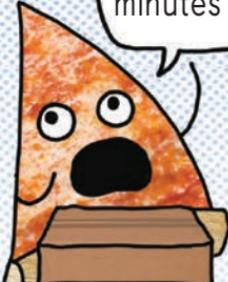
## PIZZA and TACO

### Vote for the Best!







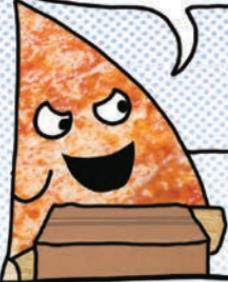


Four square  
and seven  
minutes ago . . .



Pizza makes  
a good point.

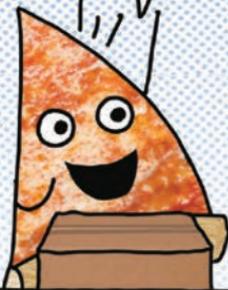
Like the top  
of his head.



Beans, beans, good  
for the heart . . . Ha!



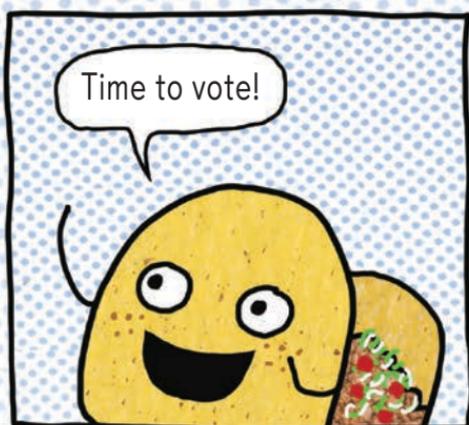
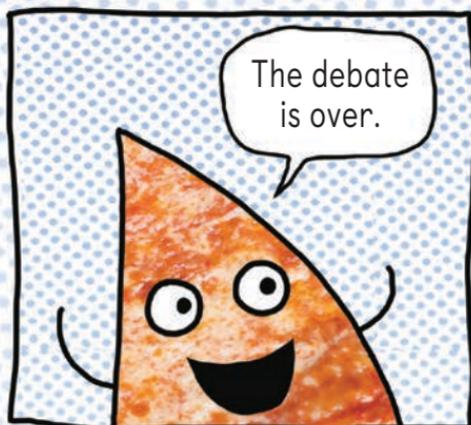
**TACO TUESDAYS!**  
**TACO TUESDAYS!**



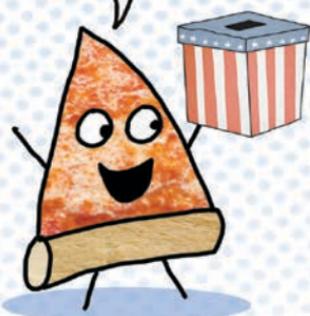
**PIZZA EVERY DAY!**



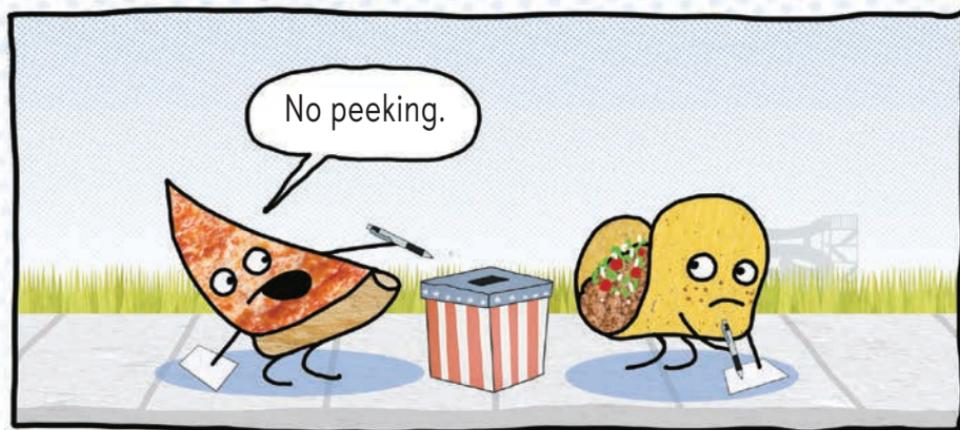
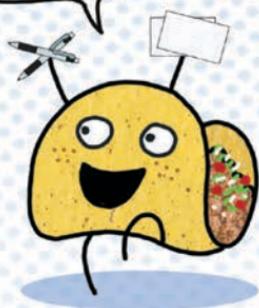
Where's the beef?  
Here's the beef!

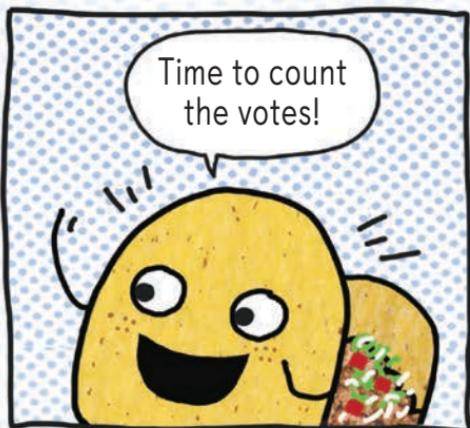
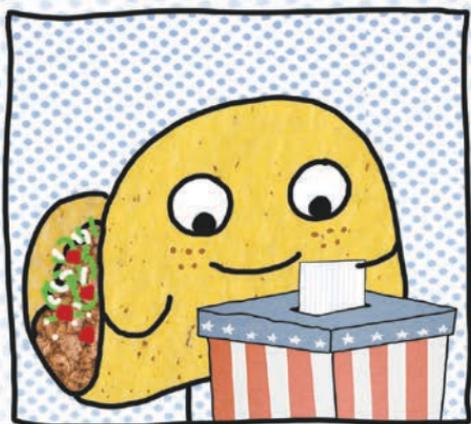
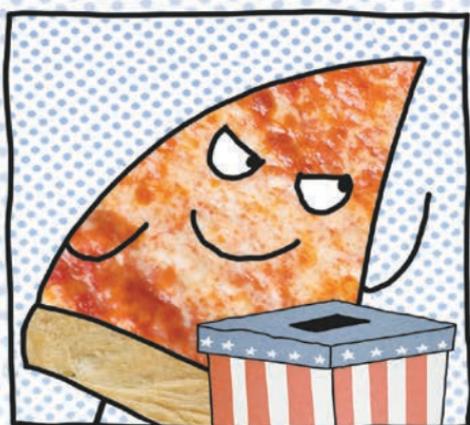
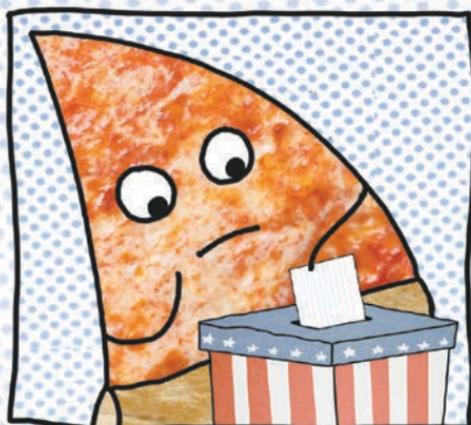


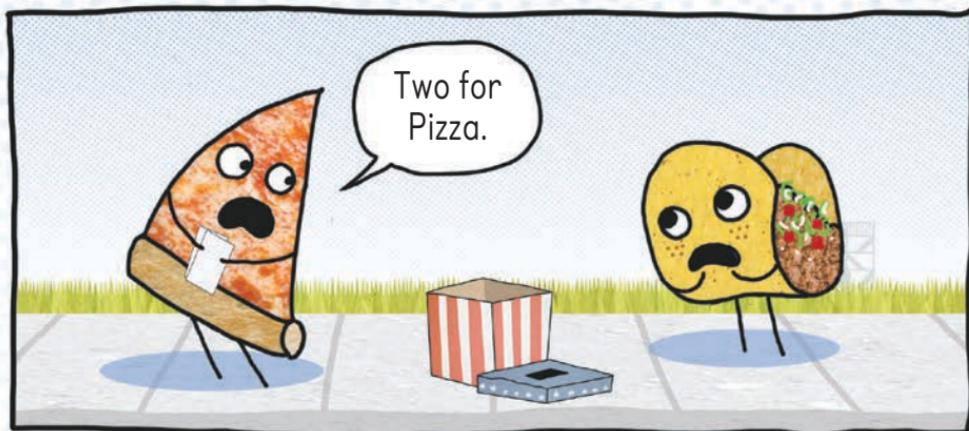
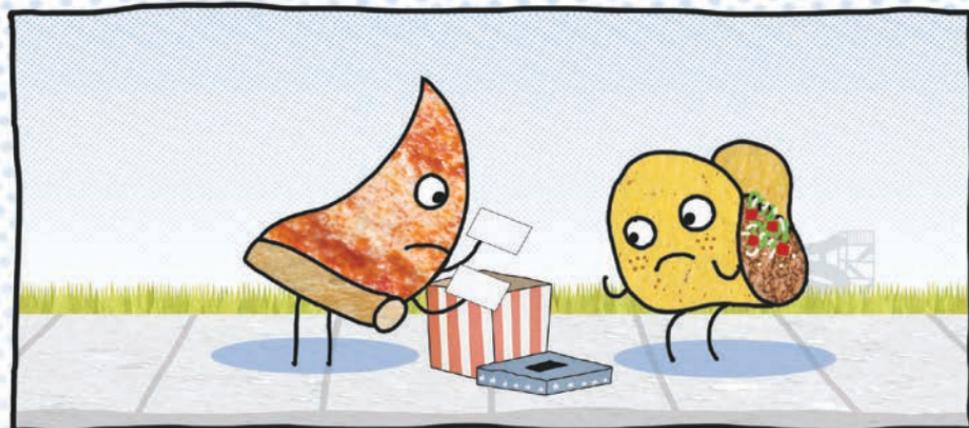
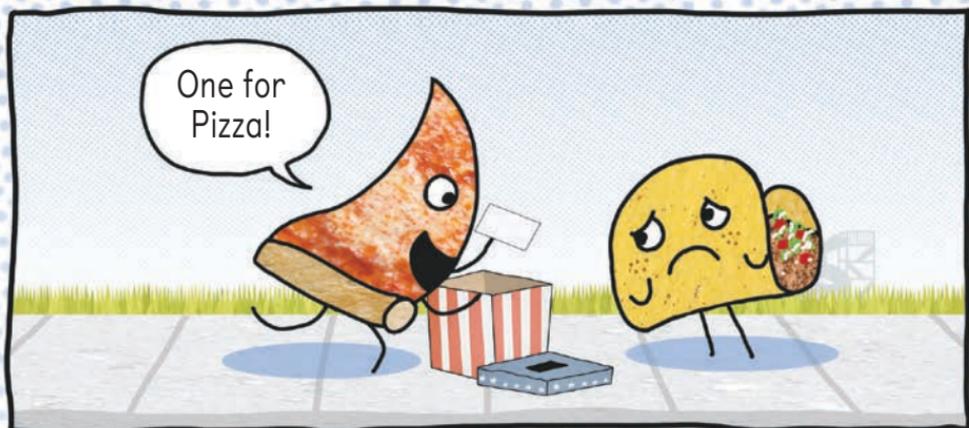
I have a ballot box.

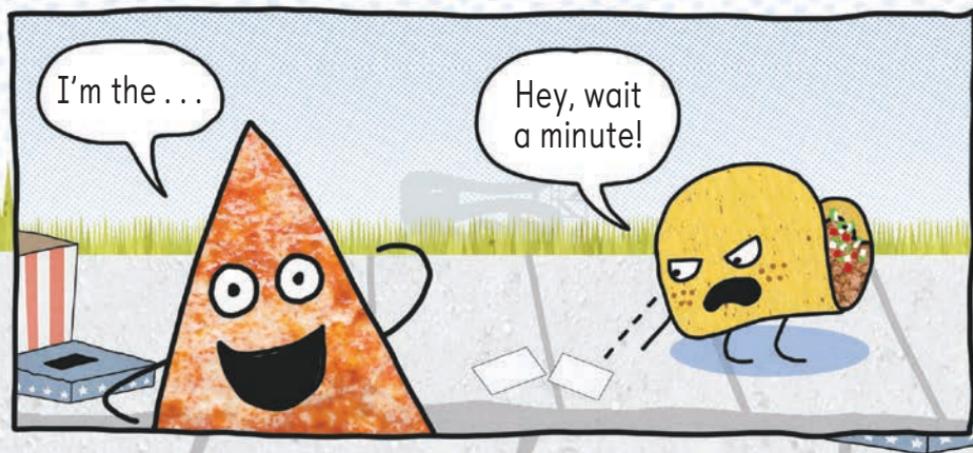


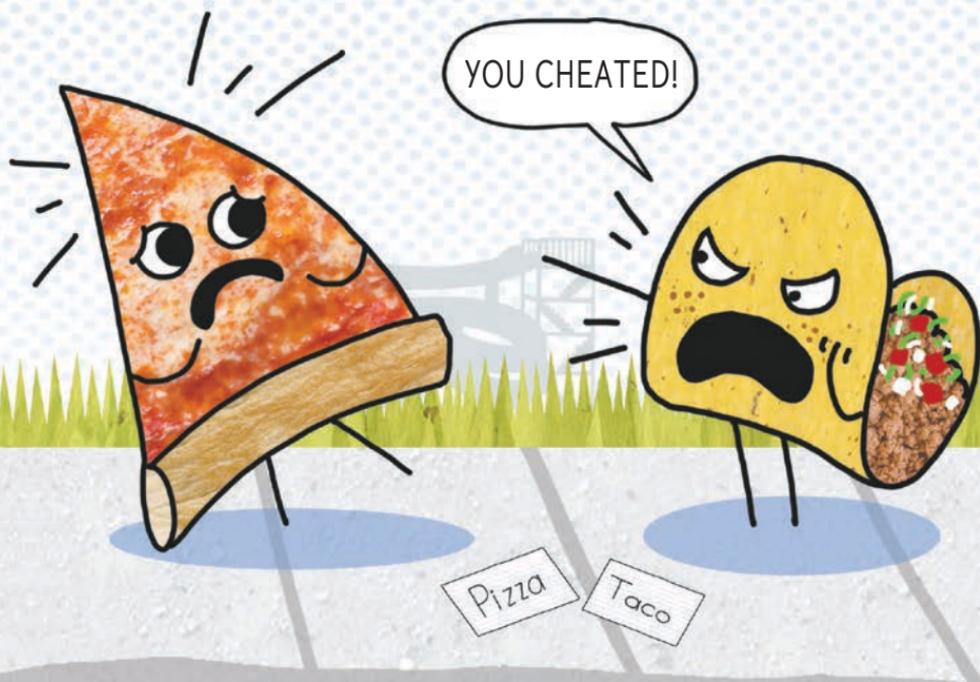
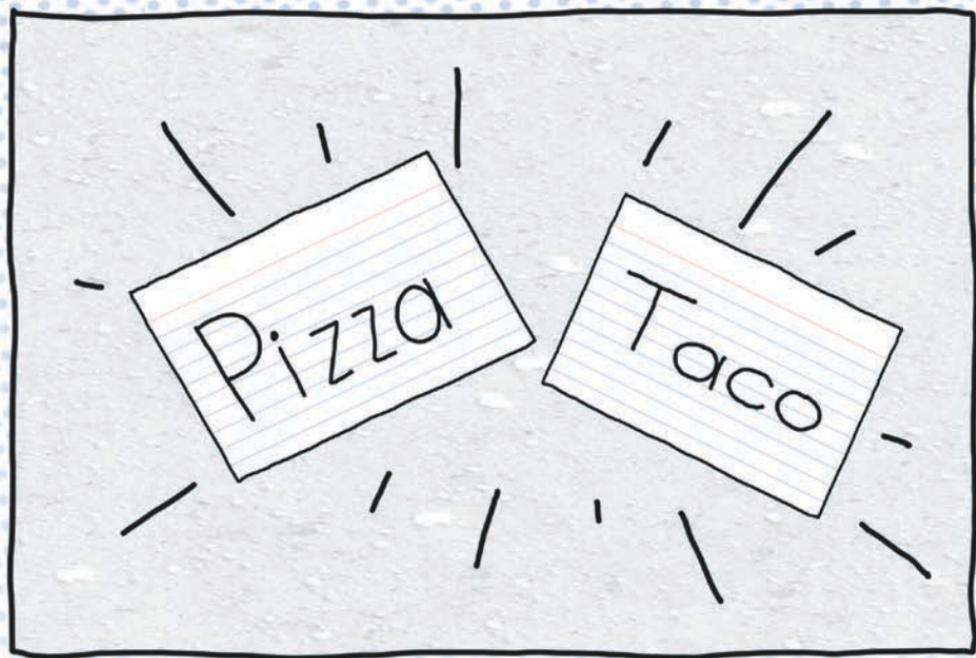
I have paper and pens.

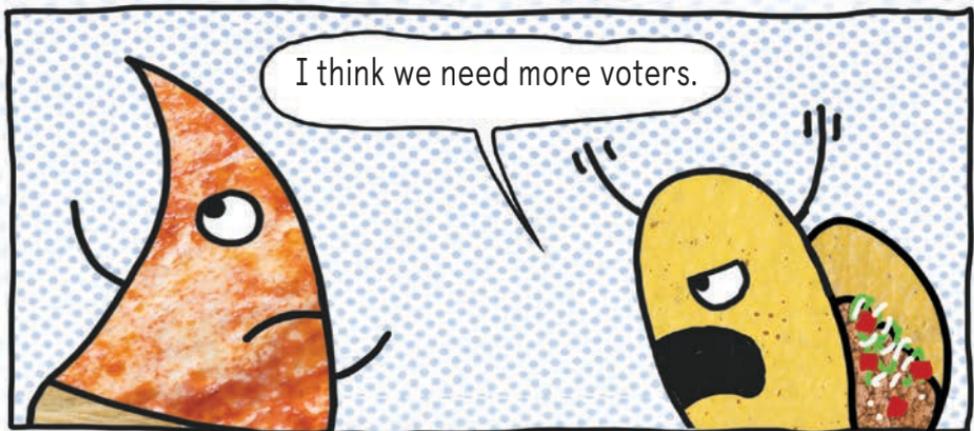
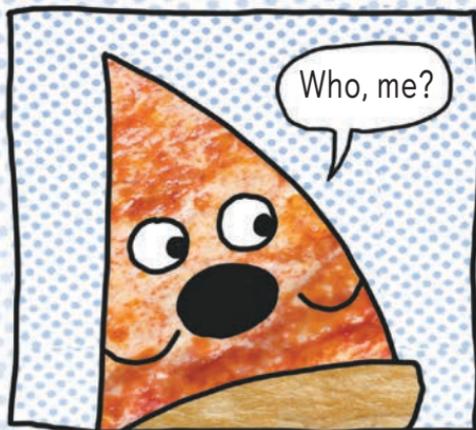


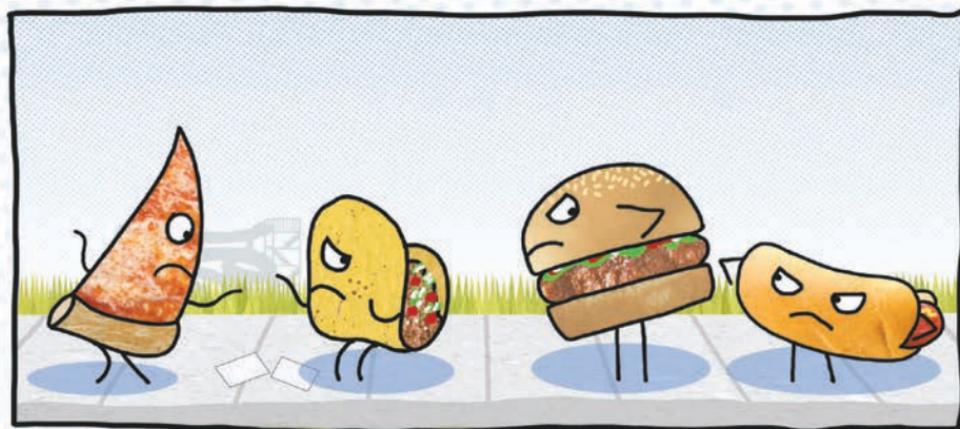
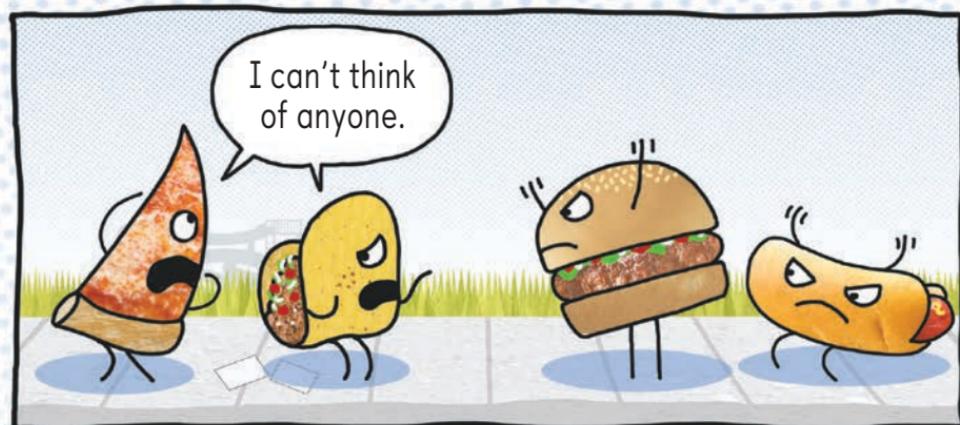
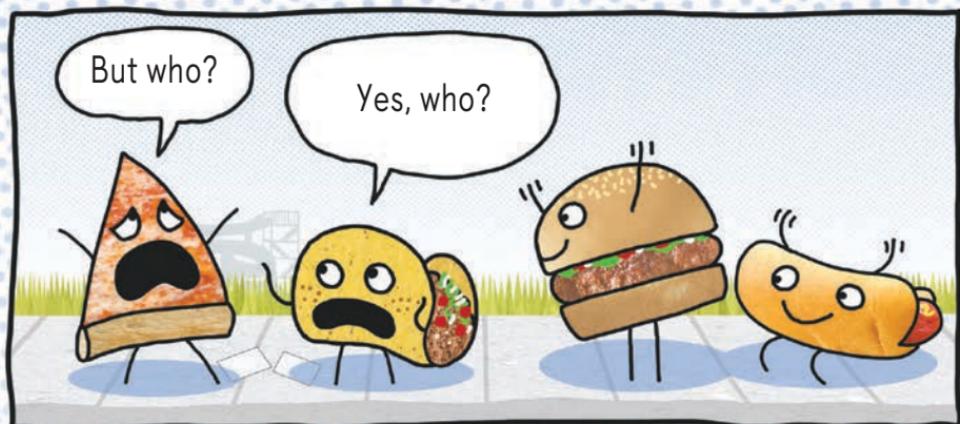


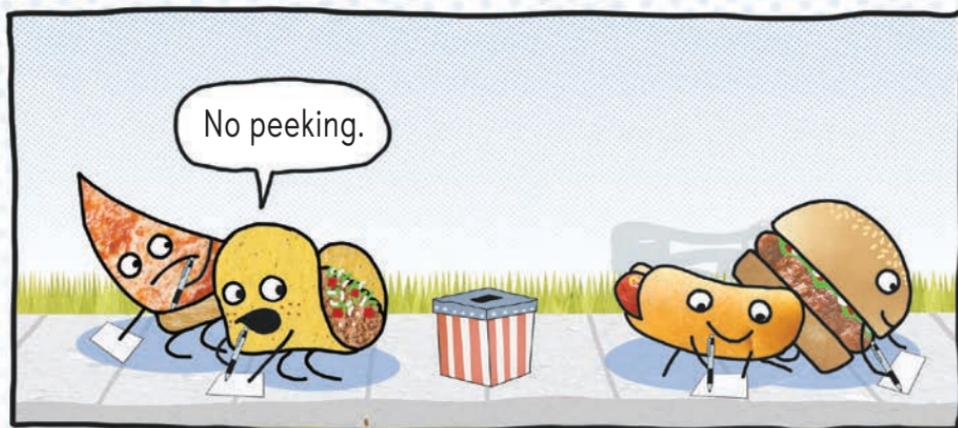
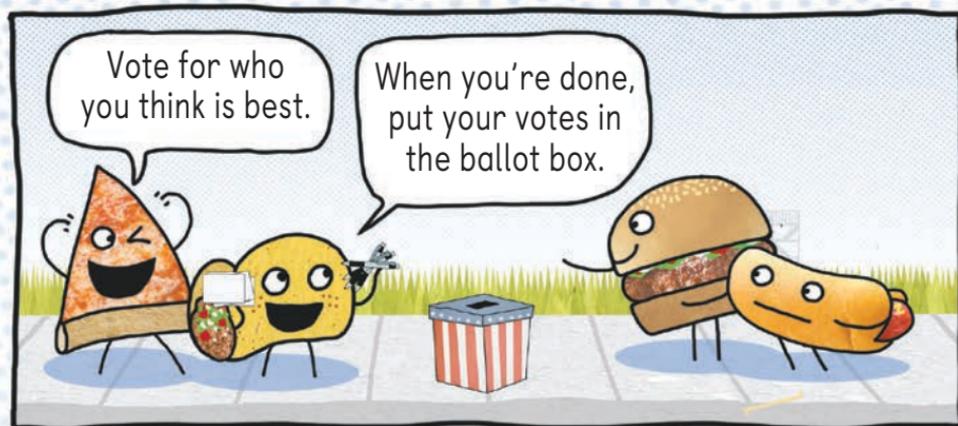
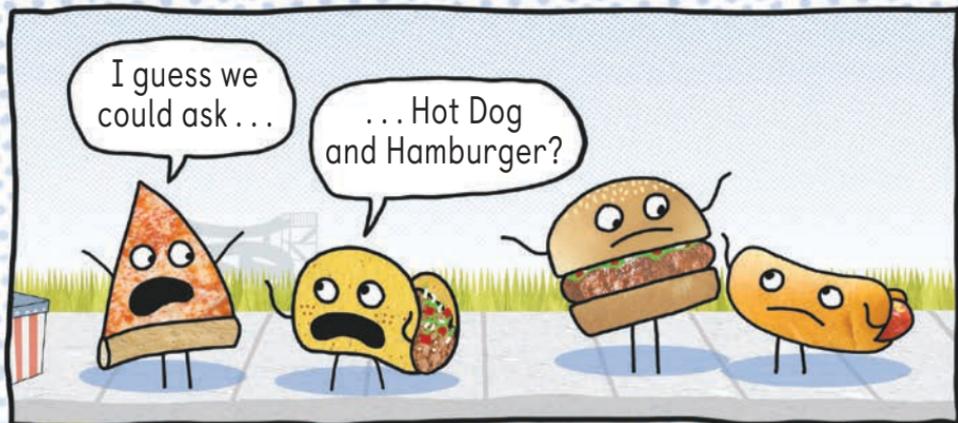




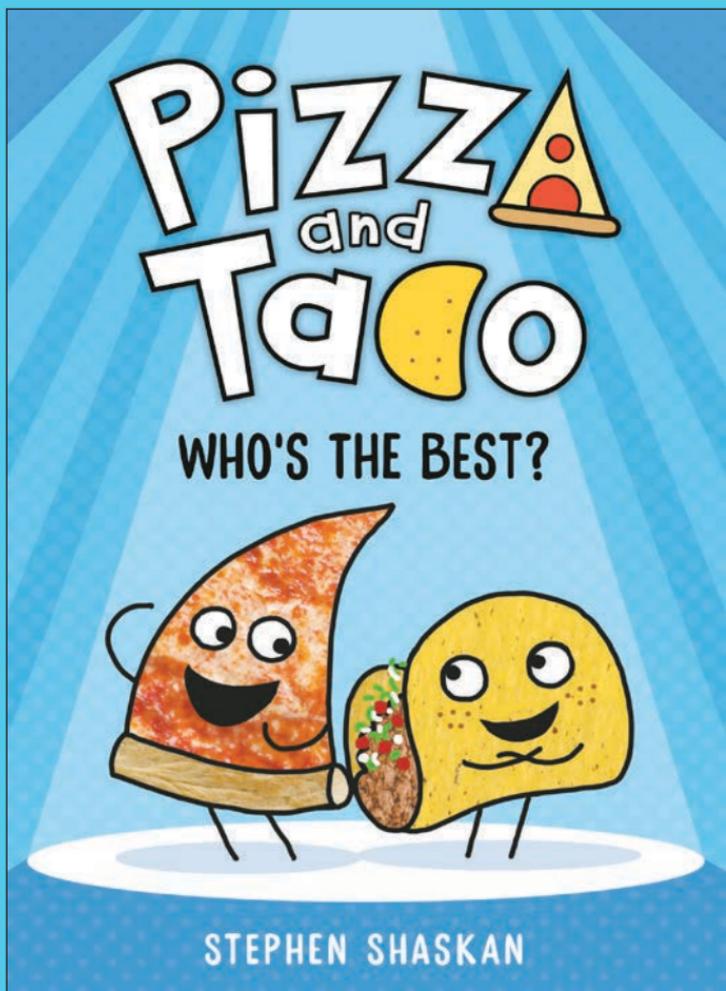








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# STEPPING STONES



**SNEAK PEEK**

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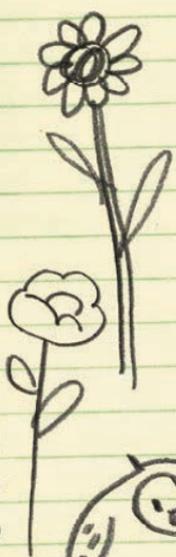
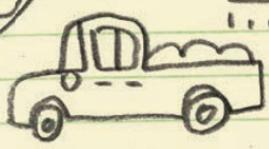
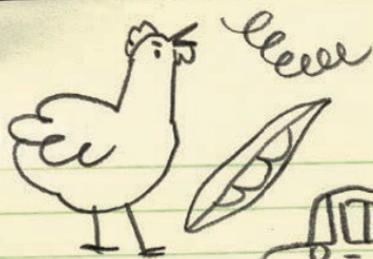
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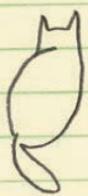
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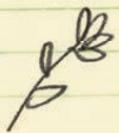
# STEPPING STONES



By Lucy Knisley  
colored by Whitney Cogar



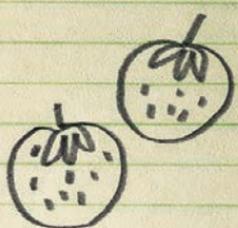
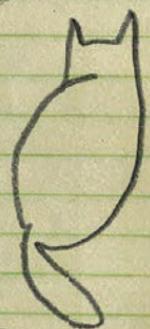
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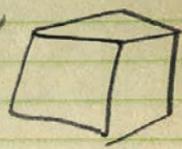
KEEP READING FOR A SNEAK PEEK. . . .



Chapter  
One



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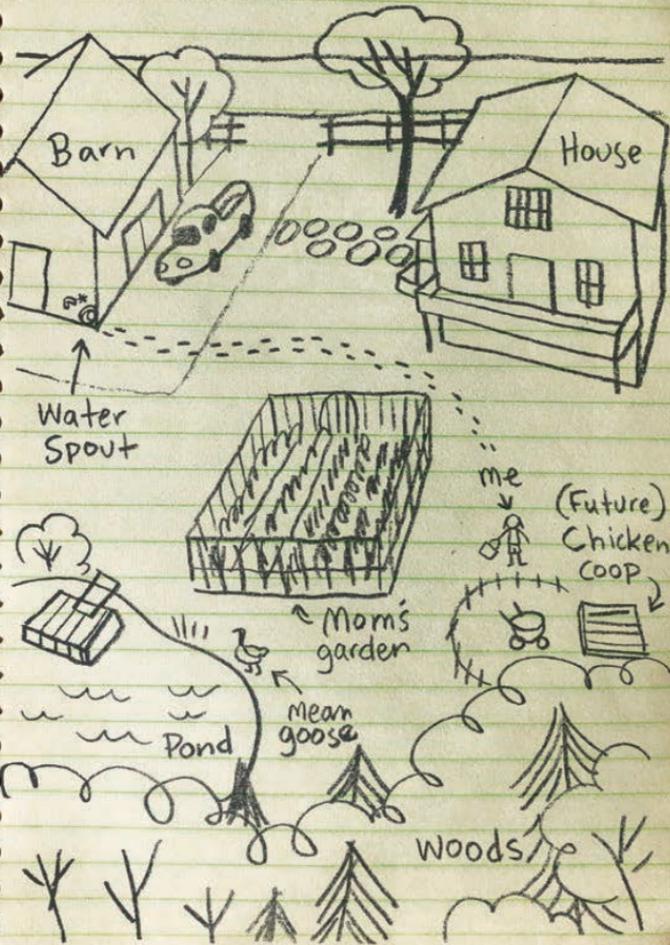








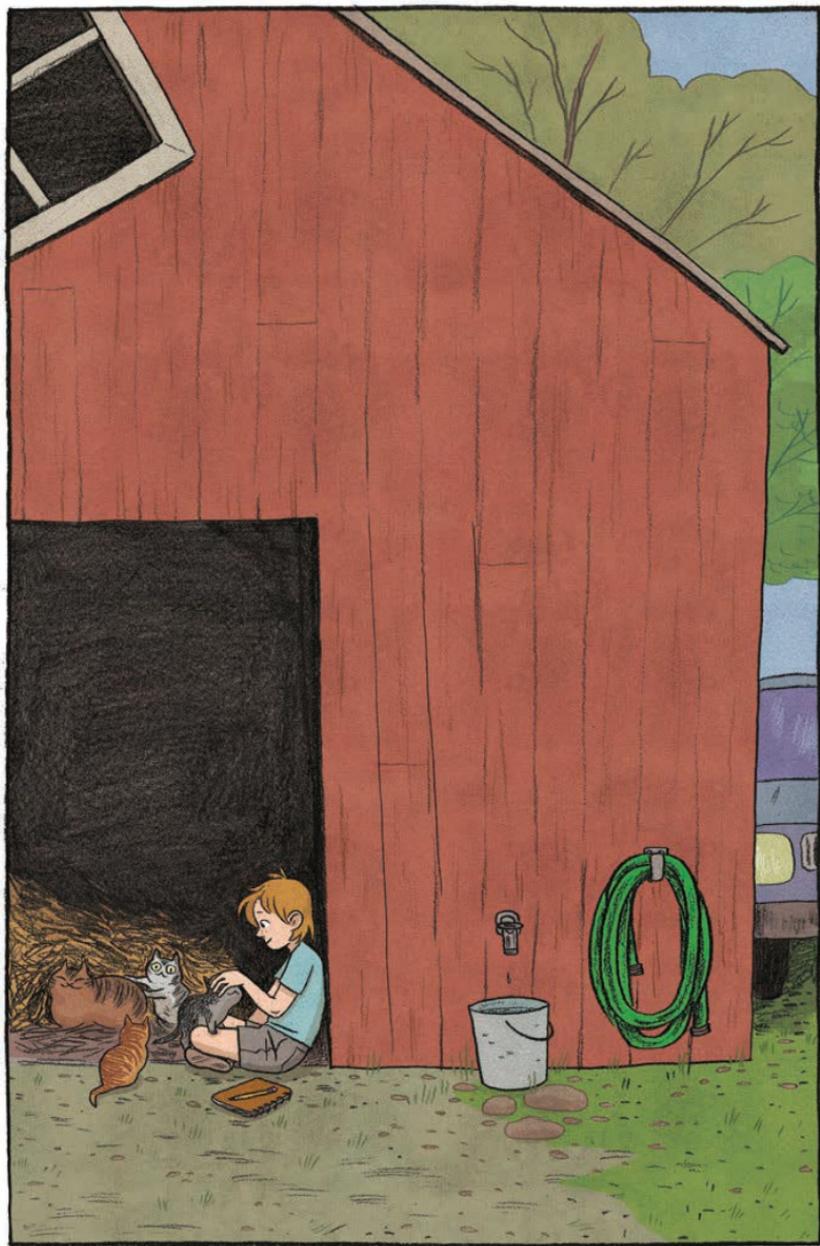
# Map of Peapod Farm

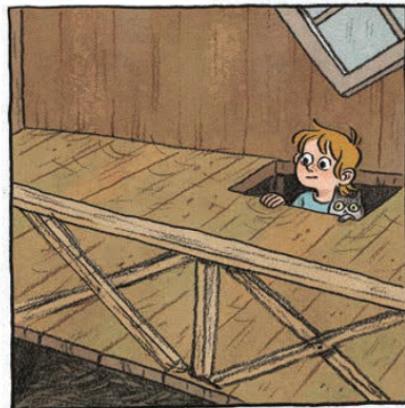








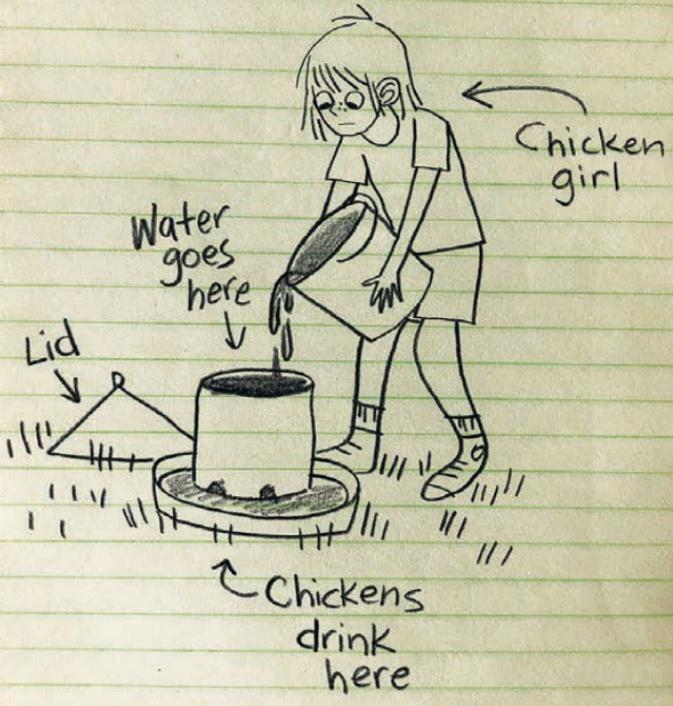


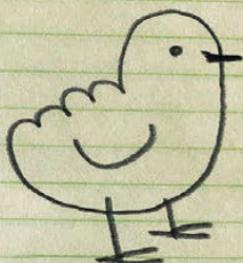




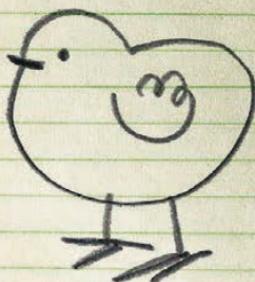








Chapter  
Two





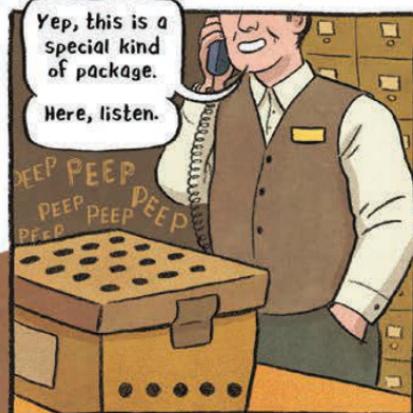




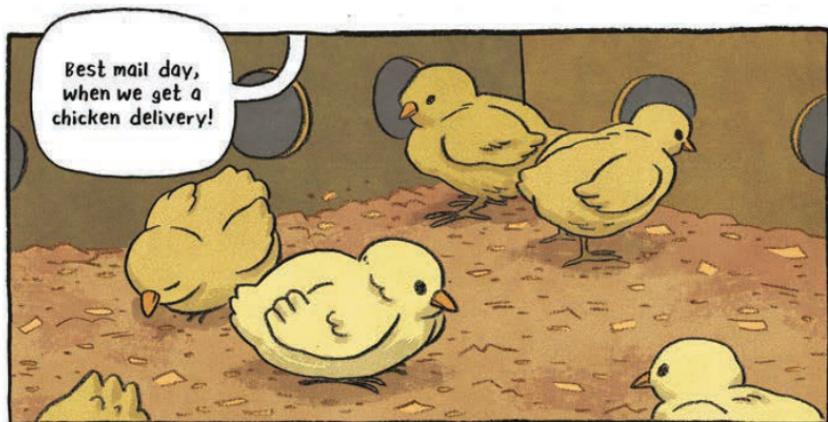




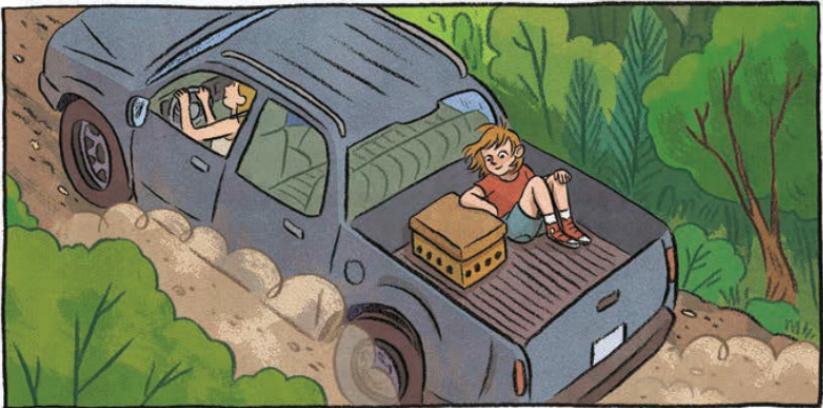


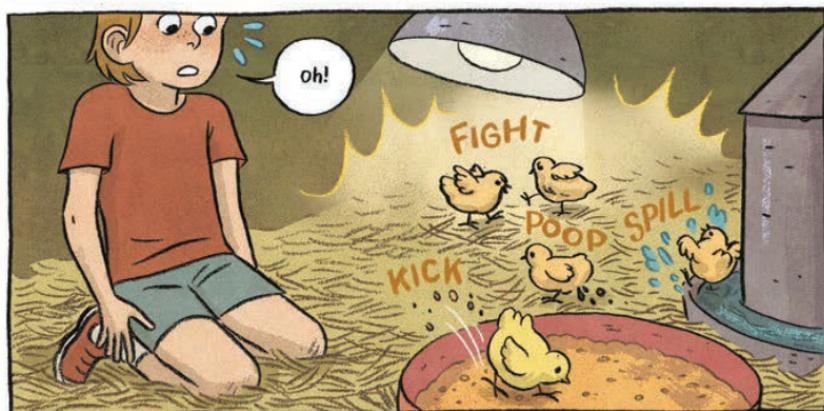




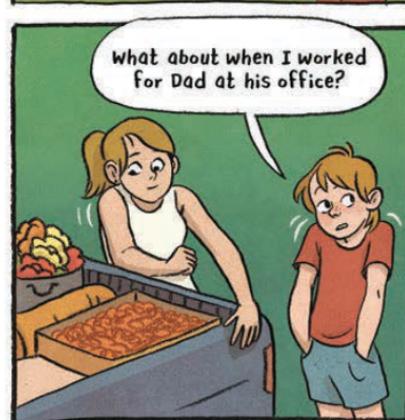


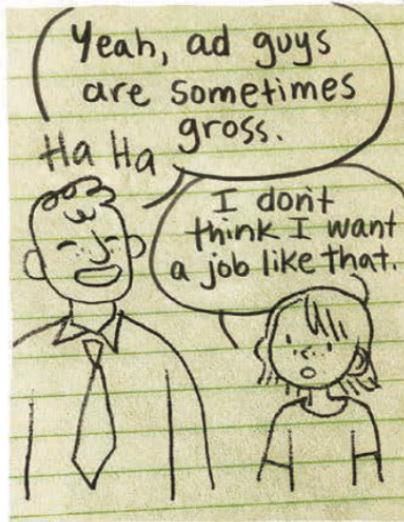
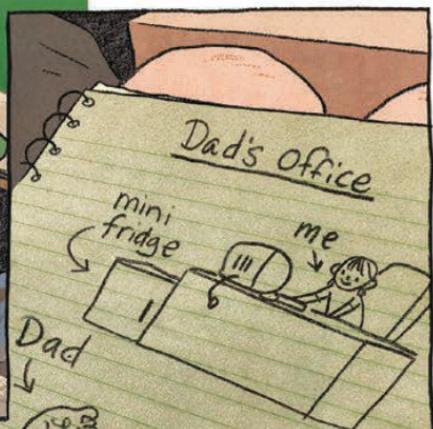


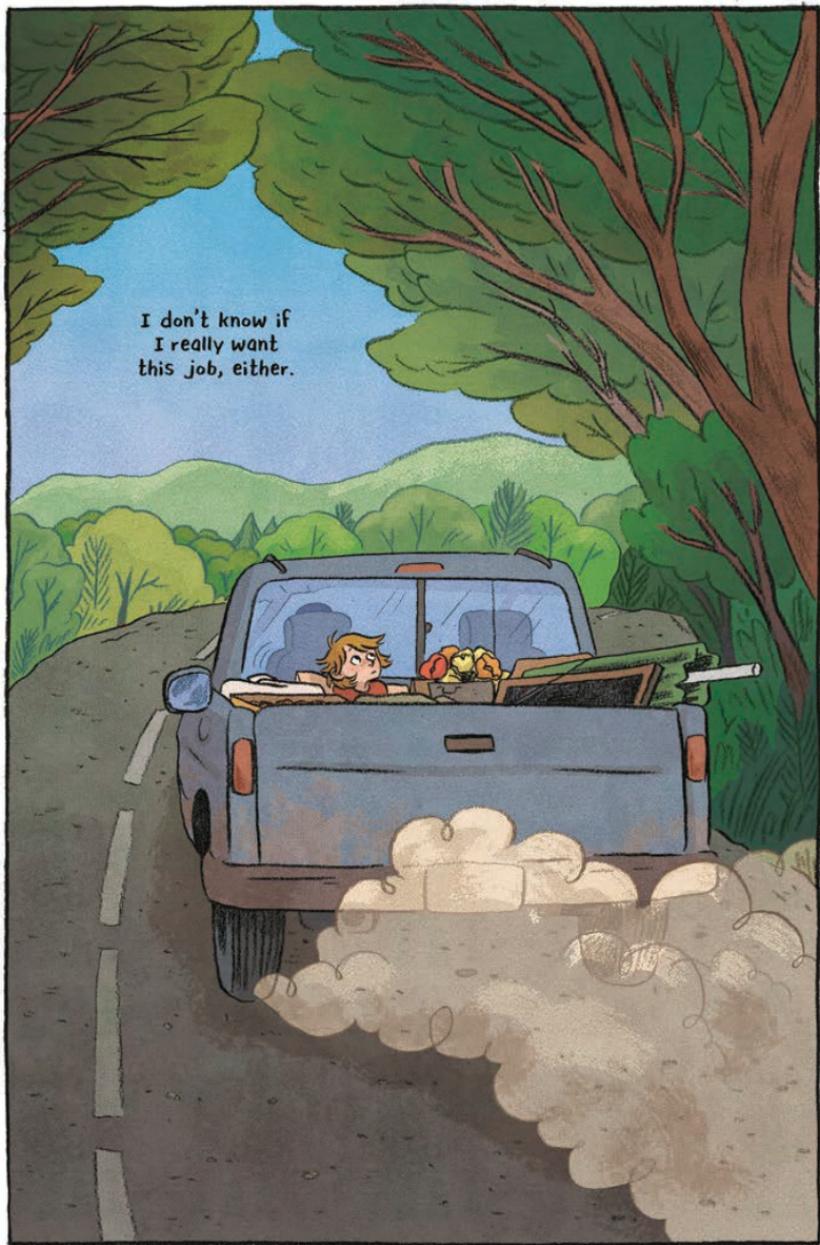




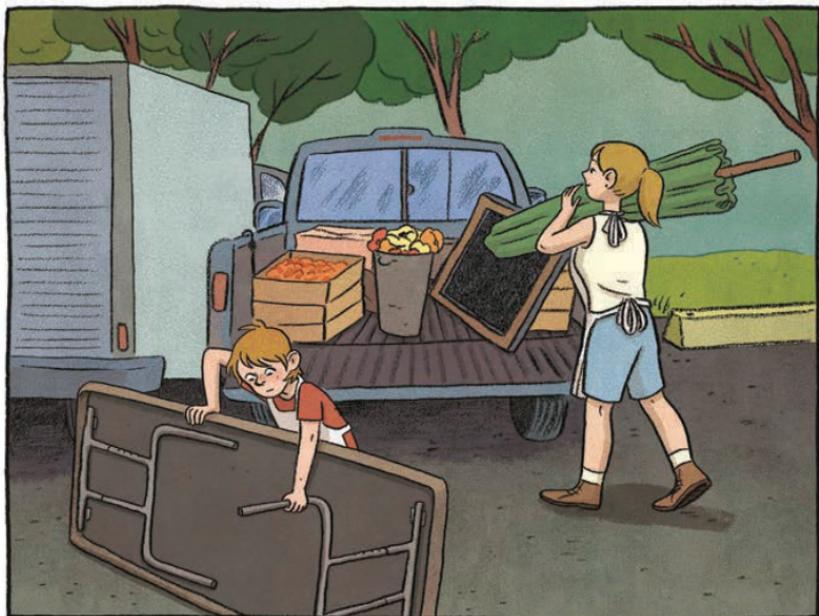


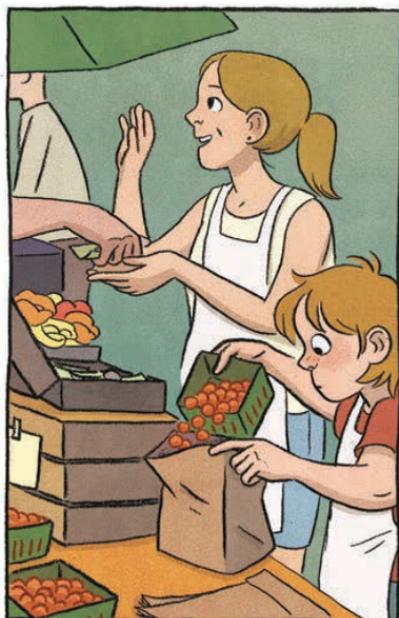






I don't know if  
I really want  
this job, either.



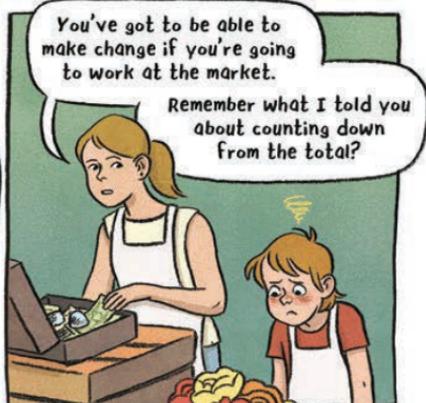






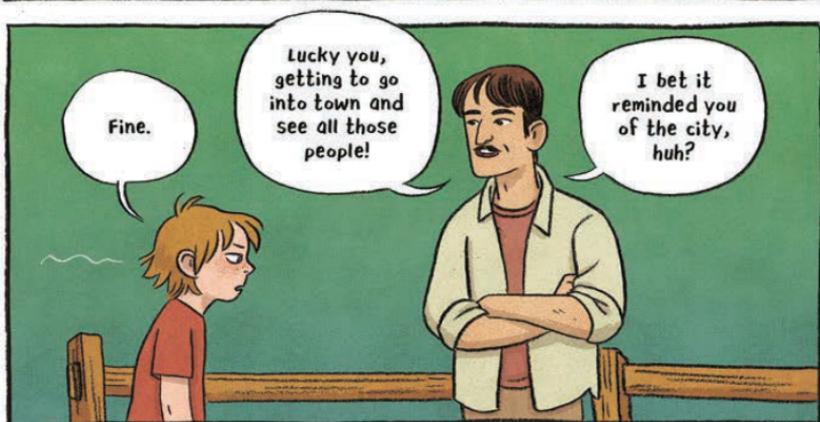








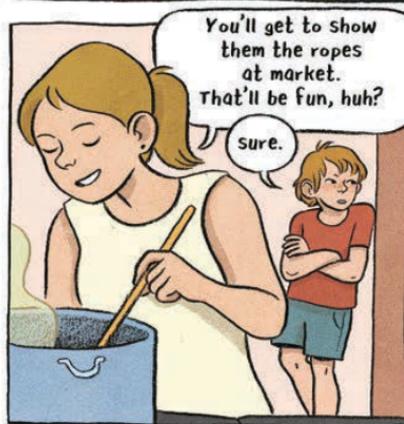










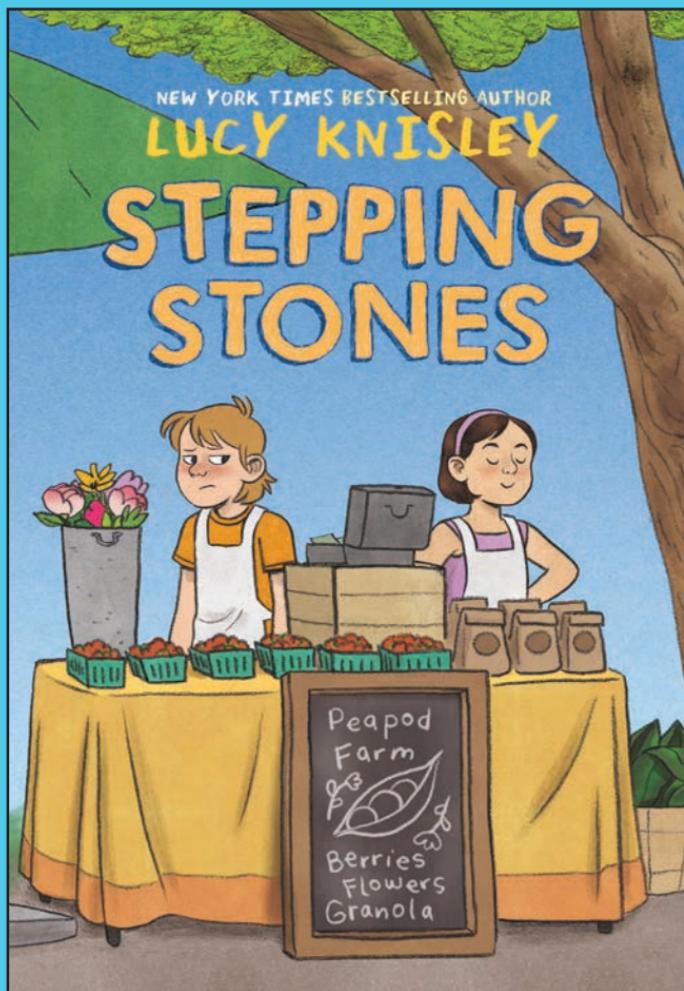








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# CLEAN GETAWAY



SNEAK PEEK

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# CLEAN GETAWAY

NIC STONE



Crown Books for Young Readers

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**KEEP READING FOR A SNEAK PEEK. . . .**



## Quite a Ways to Go

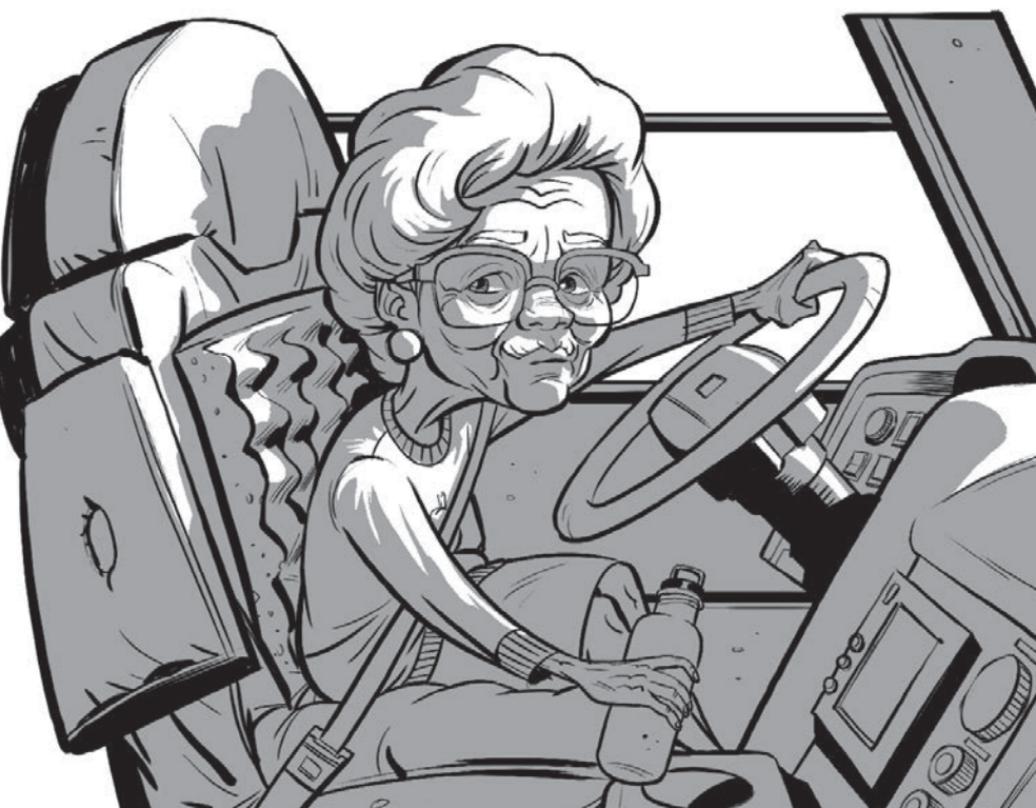
It might sound silly, but to William “Scoob” Lamar, the WELCOME TO ALABAMA THE BEAUTIFUL sign looks . . . well, *beautiful*. Not as beautiful as his best friend Shenice Lockwood in her yellow sundress, but beautiful enough to make Scoob tip his head back, close his eyes, and sigh into the breeze blowing through the open passenger-side window of G’ma’s Winnebago.

Exhale Dad’s lockdown. Inhale the sweet fragrance of freedom. Which smells like pine mixed with a little bit of truck exhaust.

“You all right over there, Scoob-a-doob?” G’ma

says from the driver's seat. She's propped up on the gingham-covered foam wedge she uses to see over the steering wheel, pale, polka-dotted little hands perfectly positioned at ten and two. She's only four feet, eleven inches tall, G'ma is.

Hearing his *full* nickname makes Scoob cringe. G'ma gave it to him when he was five years old and obsessed with an old cartoon he used to watch at her house about a dog who liked to solve mysteries. G'ma thought it was *just too adorable!* that he couldn't pronounce *Scooby-Doo*. And because



Shenice was G'ma's neighbor, she picked up on the nickname and started using it at school. So it stuck.

Well, the *Scoob* part did. Which is fine. Kinda *cool*, even.

*Scoob-a-doob*, though?

"G'ma," he says, "you mind if we stick to *Scoob*? The rest is a little . . . babyish. No offense," he adds.

"Oh, none taken!" G'ma says. "My apologies, Mr. Scoob."

"I mean . . . you can drop the *mister*, too," Scoob goes on.

This makes G'ma laugh.

Which makes Scoob smile. He'd never tell anybody, but there's really no sound in the world he loves more than his grandmother's barking laughter. Dad's not a fan; says it "grates" on him because it's the one reminder of G'ma's past smoking days "and potential future lung cancer," but it reminds Scoob of elementary school days playing card games she taught him that he wasn't supposed to know the rules for—like Texas Hold'em and blackjack. Even now, it blows Scoob's mind that a harsh, booming sound like that could come out of a person as little as G'ma.

“I mean it, though,” she says. “You feeling all right? I’m not driving too fast, am I?” She kicks him a wrinkly wink.

Now Scoob’s the one laughing. He looks up from the brand-new road map she handed him once they were both settled and seat-belted: according to the speedometer, the brand-new Winnebago he and G’ma are in has a max speed of 120 miles per hour, but G’ma has yet to push the needle to 60. “Definitely not too fast, G’ma. Though I do wonder if there’s a *minimum*-speed-limit law you’re breaking.”

“Oh you hush,” she says. “Speaking of which, you never said if you liked my new sweet ride or not. That’s what you kids call it these days, right? A sweet ride?” She says it in a way that makes her sound like a smarmy used-car salesman with oil-slicked hair.

Scoob chuckles and shakes his head. Then he peeks over his shoulder into the back.

Truthfully, when G’ma popped up out of the blue and asked if Scoob wanted to “go on a little adventure,” he was too geeked at the thought of a loophole in his punishment to give much thought

to anything else, their destination included. Especially when she said he'd "probably miss a couple days of school." (Bonus!) He finished item three—*empty the dishwasher*—on the to-do list Dad left for him on the kitchen whiteboard every day, and grabbed his suitcase. Then, after scribbling Dad a quick note about being with G'ma "for the night," Scoob hightailed it out of the house as fast as his off-brand-sneaker-clad feet would carry him. Even left his phone at home.

Largely so Dad can't call him, but he won't tell G'ma that.

The suitcase had been sitting in Scoob's closet for a month. Dad promised Scoob a trip to St. Simons Island this year—Scoob's *first* choice was Universal Studios, but Dad said Scoob was "too old for all that." (He'd been "too young" the previous year, but whatever.) So Scoob packed up according to Dad's specifications three days before they were supposed to depart.

Except they didn't go. Scoob got in trouble at school, and voilà: trip canceled. Lockdown commenced. Spring break ruined before it could begin.

Scoob hadn't been able to bring himself to unpack the bag, so he hid it. Now he can see it sitting on the seat of the dining booth in G'ma's *new sweet ride*.

Scoob was in such a rush to get out, it didn't *fully* \*click\* that he and G'ma weren't in the MINI Cooper until she asked him to get out of his seat—while the vehicle was in motion—and “grab a GPS from the fridge” (that's *Grandma Protein Shake*, otherwise known as *Ensure*) for her.

*Fridge?* Scoob thought, lightbulb slowly illuminating.

That's when he looked behind him for the first time. And almost choked on the gum that shot down his throat when he gasped.

“Ain't he handsome?” G'ma said, smacking the dashboard twice. “Brand spankin' new, this fella. I've decided to call him Senior after your late grandfather. He and I had a Winnebago back in the day before your dad was born and your G'pop—” She paused. Then: “Anyway, I ain't gettin' any younger. Sold my house and bought this baby—”

“You *sold your house?*” Scoob said, stunned.

“Sure did. Fetched a pretty penny for it, too. God

bless home equity and hipsters lookin' to 'revitalize' or whatever the heck they're calling it."

"Wow." (Was there anything else he could've said? She sold her *house!*)

"Well, ya gonna get me a GPS or not?"

Scoob gulped, removed his seat belt, and made his way to the back. Dad would've breathed fire and shot smoke out of his ears if he'd been around to see.

As he opened the for-*real*, for-real fridge—with separate freezer!—G'ma gave him a rundown of "Senior's" features. "You see those lights above your head?"

Scoob looked up. "Yeah . . ."

"Those are *LEDs*," she said. "Real state-of-the-art! There's also a microwave, a *two*-burner cook-top, and *two* ultra-HD TVs where you can watch anything! Rated PG-13 or lower, that is."

Scoob rolled his eyes.

G'ma pushed on. "Bathroom's there to the left of the mini-pantry—got a flushing toilet and a shower! And that dining booth you see there? Doubles as a bed. And speaking of beds, there's one in the rear for me, and one for you right above the cab here.

There's a window up there and everything, kiddo!"

Scoob could hear the proud smile in her voice.

Which made him smile too. Despite the fact that she'd called him kiddo.

As he grabbed the drink for G'ma and saw that the fridge was fully stocked, Scoob realized he'd never again play on the old tire swing in G'ma's backyard or kick back on the old window seat in the attic with his favorite book. When it hit him that *this*, this bizarre truck that contained everything a person needs to live, this *thing* was now G'ma's house?

Creepy.

G'ma's fingers do a tap dance on the steering wheel, pulling him back into the present, and he takes a deep breath and lets his eyes continue to roam around the open space behind him. It's so weird to him that if he has to pee, all he's gotta do is walk like fifteen feet to the little bathroom. And it *flushes*? Where does the stuff even go? It's not like they're connected to a sewer. And what about the dirty dish and shower water?

G'ma's house had one of those old-school bathtubs with the fancy metal feet, and Scoob secretly

loved to get in with one or two of the lemon-sized balls G'ma would buy that would fizz up like Alka-Seltzer and turn the bath all kinds of wild colors. *Plop! Fizzzzzzzz . . .* and the water would be blue and kind of shimmery. Like taking a soak in the galaxy.

This RV doesn't have a tub. So no more galaxy baths.

His gaze catches on the kitchenette thingy as he faces forward. Which just adds to his sudden sadness. He can't imagine G'ma making her blue-ribbon-winning cast-iron French toast—first pan-toasted, then baked in the pan for a few minutes for extra crispiness on the outside—on that rinky-dink cooktop thingy. No more extra-sweet Arnold Palmers on the porch swing. No more reading in front of the fire.

In all honesty, the RV gives Scoob the willies. But of course he can't tell G'ma that. Not when she's so excited about it.

"Well?" she says, taking her baby-blue eyes off the road to look at him. Second only to Shenice's honey-brown ones, G'ma's got the prettiest eyes Scoob's ever seen. "What do you think, kiddo?"

Scoob traces the handle of his door and gulps

down his true feelings. “I think it’s great, G’ma!” he says with forced enthusiasm.

Whether or not she can tell he’s lying, Scoob doesn’t know.

“Good,” she says. “Settle on in. We’ve got quite a ways to go.”



## Pay the Bill

The trouble really started six months back during those weird three weeks of school between Thanksgiving and winter break. Scoob's got no idea why, but over the course of that stretch, Bryce Benedict—a kid Scoob *used* to be friends with (“until he started playing ‘footyball’ and got too big for his britches,” G’ma likes to say)—started picking on Shenice’s little brother, Drake.

Drake has epilepsy—which was never a big deal until Bryce’s antics began.

Things started pretty light: Bryce would make unnecessary detours past Scoob, Shenice, and Drake’s

table in the cafeteria to tap Drake on the back of the head as he'd shout "'Sup, Drakey-Drake?" loud enough for the whole room to hear.

After a few days of this, the tapping turned to shoving, turned to smacking. There was one morning Bryce hit so hard, Drake cried out in pain. The nearest teacher hadn't been paying attention—if she had been, Bryce probably wouldn't have done it. But when she turned to see what'd happened, Bryce was gone and Drake said nothing.

So no one else said anything either.

The following day, Bryce cornered Drake in the hallway to taunt him. Scoob arrived just as Drake's arms jerked of their own accord and he dropped all the books he was holding.

Of course old Bryce found this—and Shenice's protective punch in the chest—hilarious.

He shoved Drake's shoulder—hard—and walked off just as Scoob rushed over to help Shenice and Drake with the books. As they gathered everything, Scoob could tell Drake was fighting with everything he had to keep from crying.

Shenice *was* crying.

For the first time in his life, Scoob experienced a

violent urge: he wanted to smack Bryce upside his fat head.

“Whew,” G’ma says as Scoob relays the story to her over an early dinner. They’re at a place called DamnYankees, and the lemon pepper wings truly are *smokin’*, just like the menu says. Decor’s a bit . . . country: rodeo posters and horseshoes and cowboy hats all over the walls, lassos and saddles hanging from the ceiling. There’s even a mounted bull’s head, massive horns menacingly outstretched. “Can’t blame ya, Scoob-a-doob,” G’ma continues.



Scoob sighs, grateful *some* grown-up in his life seems to understand. “I knew you’d get it, G’ma.” Because she always does.

“What’d Drake have to say?” G’ma asks.

“He shrugged it off. Said ‘He’s just being a bully.’ Which made me even madder.”

“I bet. Hard seeing someone you care about brush that kinda thing off, ain’t it?”

Scoob nods. “It really is.”

As the days wore on, Bryce’s taunting got more intense. One day after school, Shenice confided in

Scoob that Drake hadn't been sleeping real well. That he'd been having bad dreams, and she was pretty sure they had to do with Bryce picking on him. That he'd been having more seizures despite taking his medicine like he was supposed to.

"That's when I started noticing that Drake would, like . . . blank out at random times," Scoob says to G'ma. "There was even a day someone was talking to him at the lunch table and he didn't respond. Just sat staring straight ahead."

People had looked around at each other and started whispering.

And on Drake sat, perfectly still. Blinking. Blinking. Blinking.

"Bryce passed by and hit him, and Drake's whole body lurched forward like a board. Which Bryce thought was *hilarious*." Scoob's eyes narrow as the anger begins to simmer again. "He pointed one of his fat, pink fingers at Drake and laughed. Imitated Drake's blinks. 'Looks like he's having one of his "seizures,"' he said. Did air quotes and everything." Scoob shakes his head.

G'ma shakes hers, too.

"*Then* he said, 'Too bad it's not the type where

he shakes and his tongue falls out . . .’ And he stuck his big, ugly tongue out and pretended to convulse. Shenice jumped up and said something I won’t repeat, and then Bryce looked at *her* like the evil villains do in the cartoons just before they hurt people. When he took a step toward her, I—” Scoob sighs. “I lost it, G’ma. Just kinda . . . snapped.”

Scoob will never forget hearing Ms. Manasmith gasp as he leapt from his seat, hopped the table, and tackled Bryce.

Then they were on the floor. Bryce on his back. Scoob on top of him.

Punching.

Punching.

Punching.

Scoob’s got no idea how long he punched. He just knows that at some point, one of the punches failed to connect because he was flying up, up, up. And by the time his surroundings came into focus, there was no longer a youngish white lady staring at him, but a little old brown-skinned dude.

Mr. Armand. The principal of Casey M. Weeks Magnet Middle School.

Soon, *that* dude was joined by a BIG, slightly

lighter-brown-skinned dude: Dr. James Robert Lamar Jr.

Scoob's father.

"And that was the beginning of the end," Scoob says to G'ma as he rips another hunk of lemony-peppery meat from a chicken leg.

"The end of what exactly?" G'ma's eating raw oysters. Scoob shuts his eyes as she picks up a shell and tips the glob-of-gross into her now-snaggletooth mouth. She removed her "partial." The thought of the false teeth currently chillin' in their purple glitter container inside G'ma's purse almost grosses Scoob out as much as the oysters.

Scoob shudders and takes a sip of sweet tea to clear his head. "Sorry, what was the question?"

G'ma smiles. "You said the fight with Bryce the bonehead was 'the beginning of the end.' The end of *what*?"

"Oh," Scoob says, lowering his eyes to his near-empty plate. "The end of . . . well, Dad's faith in me, I guess."

Not that Dad would *listen* to Scoob when Scoob tried to explain why he did it. "You think a police officer will care about you 'defending a friend'

when they toss you in jail for aggravated assault?” Dad said on the way home from school to begin Scoob’s three-day suspension. “You can’t react violently to someone else’s words. Especially someone like Bryce. When boys like *you*”—he pointed to the brown back of Scoob’s hand—“hit boys like *him*”—he opened his own hand and pointed to his pale palm—“the punishment is harsher and the fallout infinitely worse, William.”

Scoob will never forget Dad’s look of disappointment.

“Seems a tad extreme, don’t you think?” G’ma says, plucking Scoob back to the present.

He shakes his head. “Not really. He used to tell me he had faith in me all the time, but now he acts like I’m some hardened delinquent. It’s like he thinks there’s no hope for me or something. Won’t even look me in the eye anymore. Especially since that *other* incident.”

“The one with the computers.”

“Yep.”

G’ma doesn’t press further. Which Scoob is thankful for. He really doesn’t want to get into that right now.

He takes another swig of sweet tea to swallow the little ball that's risen in his throat. This is the first time he's spoken aloud about the way Dad's been to him lately.

Kinda makes him want to cry.

But he won't.

Though he can totally feel G'ma looking at him, and he knows from the way the hairs on the back of his neck are rising, she's doing that thing where she tries to see inside his head. If he looks at her now, she'll see all the other mess—Scoob's frustration over the fact that Bryce wasn't punished, his annoyance that all the teachers look at him like he's a lit stick of dynamite now *despite* the fact that Bryce is still terrorizing people (though not Drake anymore), his anger over the unfairness of the whole situation—swirling around behind Scoob's eyes, and she'll drag it all out of him.

But he doesn't want to tell her any of that.

Right now Scoob just wants to get back in G'ma's fancy new drivable home and GO.

Go, and never ever look back.

He pulls himself up straight and lifts his chin.

That's when he notices an older white man in a baseball cap a few tables over looking between him and G'ma like they're some alien beings. Yeah, kids at school used to ask questions when they'd see Scoob and G'ma together—he's black and she's white—but this feels different. Less about curiosity and more . . . disdainful.

And that guy's not the only one: bouncing his eyes around the room, Scoob realizes a *bunch* of people are looking at him and G'ma funny. One lady he makes eye contact with openly sneers at him like he's done something wrong.

Like he *is* something wrong, even.

It's the same way Dad looked at him when he stepped into Mr. Armand's office that first time after the fight.

His hand tightens around his damp glass of tea. Which he'd really like to pick up and lob at the woman. Give her a *reason* to look at him the way she is.

G'ma's warm hand squeezes Scoob's other one, which is resting on the table in a fist. He locks eyes with her and she smiles. His chest unclenches a little.

“Whattya say we blow this popsicle stand, huh?” she asks him. “We’ve eaten our fill. Now time to eat some road.”

Scoob nods and grins. “Sounds disgusting, G’ma. But okay.”

As they make their way outside, G’ma turns to him and says, “These small towns are really something, aren’t they? *Bass ackwards*, as your G’pop used to say. But that’s all right . . .”

She doesn’t say anything else, and Scoob doesn’t respond. But as they pull away from DamnYankees it hits him: he’s pretty sure G’ma didn’t pay the bill.



## Never Seen Before

By the time Scoob and G'ma have “set up camp”—aka parked the RV at their “campsite” in the hills of Alabama’s Cheaha State Park and connected G'ma’s fancy water filter and hose to the spigot at their campsite so they won’t run through what’s in the RV’s fresh water tank—the drooping sun has turned the sky the colors of Scoob’s favorite fruit: a sweet Georgia peach.



In fact, Scoob snagged a few from the bowl on his kitchen table and stuffed them in his backpack while on the way out the door with G'ma this afternoon.

Come to think of it, that bowl was empty when Scoob left for school this morning. He'd eaten the last two the night before as he sat through a show Dad was making him watch on National Geographic about the fiercely territorial nature of hippos.

Which means Dad refilled it at some point. For Scoob. Because Dad doesn't like peaches. Always says they're "the pits," and then he laughs at his corny dad-joke.

When had Dad done that?

"Ready for a little adventurin', Scoob-a-doob—whoops!" G'ma giggles as she approaches the picnic table where Scoob's sitting, drawing pine trees all around the spot where he circled the park they're at on the map G'ma gave him.

Well, at least that's what he *was* doing before he got all googly-eyed over the peachy sunset.

"Sorry," G'ma goes on. "Forgot I'm supposed to drop the *a-doob* now that you're practically a grown man." She winks at him and pats the top of his head.

“Aww, come on, G’ma.”

“How about *you* come on,” she says. “We’ve got a short hike, and I wanna get to the peak of this mountain before the sun disappears. You carry this.” She sets a wooden box on the picnic table in front of Scoob. The hinged lid is ornately carved, and it’s about the size of his school math book.

He freezes.

G’ma’s treasure box.

He looks over the loops and swirls and leaves etched into the top. The box is a reddish brown, and he knows it’s made of rosewood because G’ma told



him years ago when he first noticed it sitting up on her mantel.

It's the one thing that was always off-limits in G'ma's house. Scoob's never even touched it before.

Okay, that's a lie. As soon as he was tall enough—age seven-ish?—he reached up and touched the lacquered side just because . . . well, because he wasn't supposed to touch it.

Looking at it now, though, Scoob gets smacked again by the fact that he'll never see it on the mantel again. Never see the inside of G'ma's *house* again.

“Stick it down in your knapsack,” she says.

Which . . . she wants him to carry her treasure box in his backpack? Up a mountain? What if she's only taking it up there to toss it over the edge or something? Rid herself of it like she did her *home*. Scoob doesn't know if he could handle that.

He gulps. “We're . . . uhh . . . taking it on a hike?”

“That we are,” she says. “Now scoot your boot.” And she walks off without another word.



So okay. Watching the sun go down all the way from the highest point in Alabama is kinda neat. In fact,

Scoob's looking forward to getting back down to the campsite so he can add a sunset in the margin of his road map. "Well, ain't that something?" G'ma says from beside Scoob. They're in the observation room at the top of an old tower, which the pamphlet says was built in 1934.

"Can you believe Bunker Tower had been standing for nine years by the time I was born?" G'ma says. "It's magnificent!"

"It's something, all right." Scoob gives a wary glance around the interior. He sure hopes it doesn't suddenly decide to crumble.

"I've been waiting fifty-one years to see this view, Scoob-a-doob," G'ma says.

That gets Scoob's attention. "Fifty-one *years*?"

"Yep."

Scoob shifts his gaze back out across the landscape. "Why didn't you come before now?"

"Wasn't ready."

No idea what that means . . .

"Really not ready now, but the world ain't slowing its spin."

"Okay," Scoob says.

"Go ahead and open the box."

The box. Scoob forgot he was even carrying it, though, come to think of it, his shoulders are hurting from the extra weight. He takes a deep breath, shrugs the bag down, and drops to a knee. Unzips and pulls out the box.

Stares at it.

“It won’t bite ya,” G’ma says. “Well . . . at least I don’t think it will.” She smiles and pats the top of his head.

Scoob runs a thumb over the brassy latch. What if what’s inside isn’t all that exciting? It’ll ruin the whole thing. Scoob would never admit it to anyone, but there are books he’s never finished because he liked imagining all the things that *could* happen. Knowing what *does* happen would take the fun out of it.

Scoob’s mom pops into his mind unbidden. Her name is Destiny, but . . . well, he’s never met her. He knows she left when he was a baby because she wasn’t ready to be a mom—Dad told him that part—but he doesn’t know much else because the one time he asked about her, Dad made it clear he didn’t want to talk about it.

So he just makes things up. Though he’d never

tell anyone. In his mind she's been everything from an astronaut like Mae Jemison—Dad's an aeronautical engineer and has a picture of Mae in her space suit on the wall in his office—to a brown lady Indiana Jones going on treasure-hunting adventures.

She's an unsolved mystery. His personal treasure box.

And now he's holding *G'ma's* treasure box. He's imagined it containing everything from his granddad's ashes to the bones of some beloved pet to heaps of glittering jewels. He imagines the vines carved into the lid coming to life like wooden snakes, lashing at him the moment he tries to lift it.

"Well?" *G'ma* says.

Scoob closes his eyes, flicks the latch, and shoves the lid up. Peeks inside through one barely cracked eye.

The contents are . . . unexpected.

"Voilà. My greatest treasure."

There's an old radio tucked up against the left side, plus some matchbooks and a few postcards. There are guidebooks to places Scoob's never heard of before, and some newspaper clippings; a series of weathered road maps not unlike the one *G'ma* gave

him, a small photo album, and a little green book called . . . *Travelers' Green Book*. “For Vacation Without Aggravation,” the cover says in bold white letters.

The Green Book is from 1963. As in not even this century.



“Wow, *this* thing sure stirs up some memories,” G’ma says, grunting as she bends at the waist to remove the Green Book. It’s about the same size as the postcards.

Scoob watches her flip through it like she does a deck of cards before dealing Texas Hold’em. “What is it?” he asks.

“Somethin’ that helped keep a lotta folks like your G’pop—and *me*, for that matter—alive back in the day.”

Scoob zeroes in on the cover. It features an image of two women—he can’t tell what race they are; everything is tinted green (surprise, surprise)—

leaning over a small boat beneath a sky full of fluffy clouds. “Really?”

“Mmhmm.” She sighs and taps the book against her palm. “Hate to tell you this, Scoob-a-doob, but travel around this grand ol’ USA wasn’t always a safe thing for people who look like you. This was a meeeeeean place back when your G’pop and I were young, and that book existed to let Negro travelers know which hotels and such would accept them as customers. There are even some *other* countries in there. Here.” She hands Scoob the book. “You hold on to it. Might learn ya somethin’.”

Scoob flips the book to check out the back, then shoves it into his pocket without a word.

“Now grab the Alabama map, if you will, please.”

He riffles through the rest of the stuff, looking for what she requested, and finds it beneath a napkin with a circular stain on it. Probably from a cup of coffee. It’s weathered and pamphlet-style, ALABAMA printed vertically in bold letters on the front.

“Open it up.”

There’s a route highlighted—broken up by circled

spots with handwritten notes scribbled over them—that cuts straight across from the Georgia/Alabama line to Alabama’s midpoint in Birmingham, and then veers southwest to the state’s opposite border.

“Can you see what’s circled just below and to the right of Anniston?”

Scoob holds the map a little closer. “Cheaha State Park.” *The highest point in Alabama* is scrawled above the spot of green.

In awe, Scoob looks all around him. Then at G’ma. Who nods. Just once. “Fifty-one years,” she says.

Then she begins to sob like Scoob’s never seen before.





## Life Pollution

On the way back down the mountain, Scoob's so focused on G'ma—that was his first time ever seeing her cry, and she told him a *lot* about his grandfather—he trips on a tree root and comes down hard on a small rock partially buried in the dirt of the walking trail.

“My word, are you all right, Scoob-a-doob?” G'ma says, reaching to help him up.

“I'm fine, G'ma.” Scoob dusts the woodland debris from his clothes and tries to play it off.

They continue walking, Scoob's mind swirling. While G'ma sobbed over the sunset, it hit Scoob:

his grandfather had needed a *book* that listed “safe” places to do something as simple as get gas back in the day.

Because he was black.

By the time they get back to G’ma’s new sweet ride, there’s a dull ache in his right arm, but all he can think about is the phrase *For Vacation Without Aggravation* and that boat on calm water beneath those fluffy clouds.

That is, until they’re inside the RV where the light is brighter.

“Oh!” G’ma shouts, startling Scoob. “Oh, oh, OH! That needs to be cleaned immediately! Come, come!”

When Scoob looks at his arm and sees the lines of drying blood that have run down over his hand from a nasty-looking cut near his elbow, the dull ache explodes into a burning throb. “Oh.”

“Put that bag down,” G’ma orders, and as soon as he does, she’s dragging him over to the kitchenette sink by his good arm and washing her hands. Then she shoves his arm underneath the warm water.

It takes the force of Thor to keep his jaw clenched so he doesn’t scream like a giant baby.

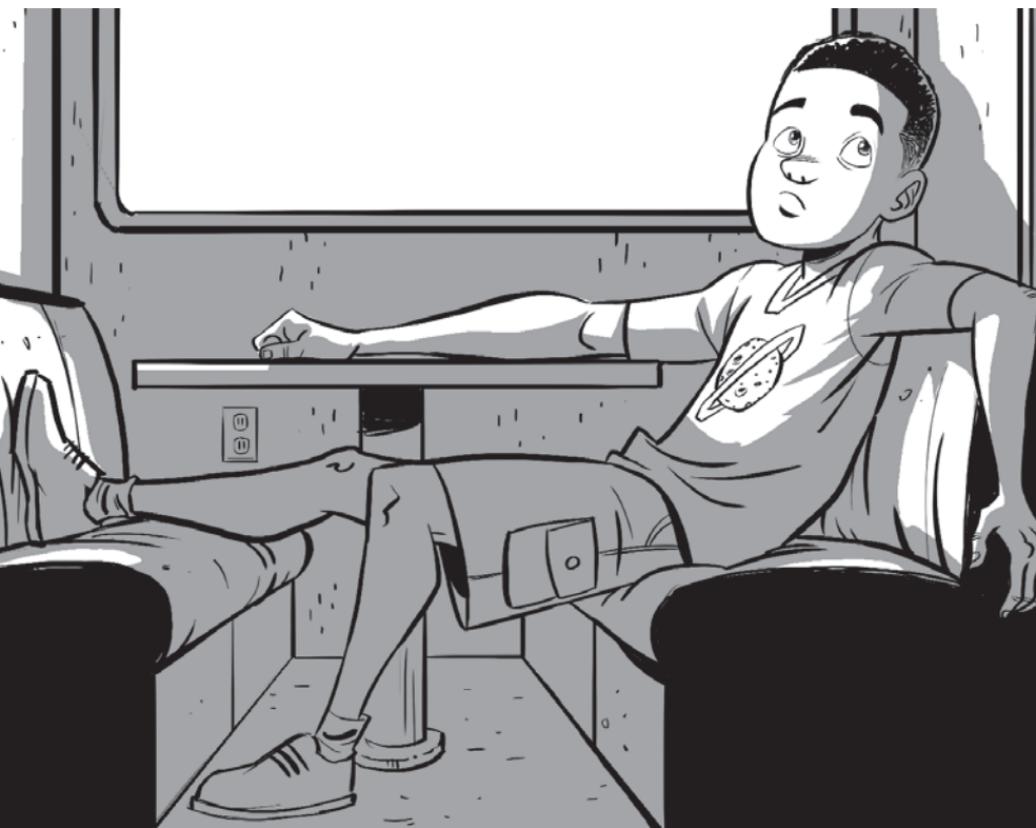
In fact, said *jaw* is aching by the time G'ma finishes with the rubbing alcohol and weird-colored Betadine and bag balm (for chapped cow udders?). By the time the nickel-sized cut is bandaged, Scoob's exhausted.

He collapses into the dining booth and looks up at the over-cab bunk where he's supposed to sleep.

What if he rolls off?

"Hot cocoa?" G'ma says.

Scoob shakes his head. "No thanks, G'ma. Think I'm gonna call it a night."



“All right, well, before ya go . . .” She unzips Scoob’s backpack and pulls the treasure box out. Digs around and stretches a photo out to him.

“That’s your G’pop,” she says. “Keep that with your Green Book.”

Of course now he can’t sleep.

Between the photo and the book, Scoob’s thoughts are whipping around faster than a load of clothes in their front-loading washer during the spin cycle, something he typically loves watching but is queasy about now.

In the photo, “G’pop” is leaned up against what looks like a white box on wheels with a big green *W* up under the driver window. Scoob is guessing this is the Winnebago G’ma mentioned earlier, though it’s clearly the great-great-grandparent model of the motor home where Scoob is currently stretched out in his bed, staring at this picture.

Scoob brings the photo closer to his face. G’pop was tall and string-beany, a shade darker than Scoob, so two shades darker than Dad. Scoob can *see* his dear old dad all up in G’pop’s face—though Dad is currently older than G’pop was in this picture, so it’s almost like looking at a *younger* Dad—

and it makes Scoob wonder if this is what *he'll* look like in a decade and a half or so. People are always telling him he's the "spitting image" of Dad, which is kinda nasty, but whatever.

It's weird, looking at his grandfather. In almost twelve years, this is the first photo Scoob's ever seen of the guy. He'd never really even heard G'ma talk about the dude before tonight. Which, now that he thinks about it, probably isn't normal? He never questioned it before because Dad always said the old man had been a "nonentity" since before Dad was actually born.

But from the beans G'ma spilled all over the top



of Alabama, Scoob now knows that James Lamar Sr. was quite the *entity*. Especially to her, his darling wife, Ruby Jean.

What G'ma told him through her tears (and a little snot and drool, too): in 1968 she and G'pop bought an RV. They planned to drive from their home in Georgia across five southern states and straight into Mexico. On her maps—which are *all* in the treasure chest—G'ma marked the stuff she wanted to see along the way. But they'd had to skip most of her chosen sites because G'ma is a white lady but “your G'pop was a *Negro*, as we used to say back then.”

Cheaha Mountain had been the first stop she wanted to make, but when they got to the turnoff for the drive to the top, G'pop told her there was no way they'd be able to park up there without people messing with them.

Scoob puts the picture aside and picks up the green booklet. Reads the words just inside the front cover—*Assured Protection for the Negro Traveler*—skims the intro page, which outlines state-by-state “statutes on discrimination as they apply to public accommodations or recreation,” then flips to

the *Alabama* section. Scoob knows Anniston is the closest city to where they are now, and it's not in the book at all.

Which means there was *nowhere* safe for black people to stay around here back when G'ma and G'pop took their trip.

So they drove past.

This journey Scoob and G'ma are on now? According to her, "It's my chance at redemption. To finish what your G'pop and I started fifty-one years ago." And while she doesn't go into detail, she does tell Scoob they never made it to Mexico.

G'ma lets out a gigantic *snort* from her curtained-off "bedroom" at the opposite end of the RV, and Scoob switches back to the picture and holds it in the light coming through the small window. G'pop just looks so . . . *chill*. Real happy, smiley type of guy, despite having on plaid booty-shorts hiked up to his belly button that *cannot* be comfortable.

Dad told Scoob G'pop was a jewel thief who went to prison shortly before Dad's birth. And G'pop died there.

In prison.

Really, the only time Dad ever brings G'pop up is

to say, “No son of mine will become a low-life criminal like my father!” when he’s going off on Scoob about some “infraction” or another.

But G’pop doesn’t *look* like a terrible guy. And after hearing G’ma talk about her “beloved *Jimmy Senior*,” Scoob wonders if Dad got it all wrong. Dad himself even said he’d never *met* G’pop.

What if G’pop really wasn’t all that bad? G’ma obviously loved him enough to marry him, and Dad’s always saying, “William, your grandmother is a queen. Never forget it.” That has to mean something, doesn’t it?

Thoughts of Scoob’s mom slip back into his head like those long stringy clouds, see-through and not fully formed but visible. Dad doesn’t know it, but Scoob’s aware she’s tried to contact Scoob before. Just before he turned ten, she left a voice mail that Scoob accidentally heard while trying to call Drake on Dad’s phone.

He still remembers every word:

James, it's Destiny. A friend of mine helped me find your phone number . . . hope that's okay. I know

it's been a long time, but . . . well, I'm better now and . . . I need to see my baby boy, James. Please.

And she left a number.

By the time Dad woke up from the nap he was taking, Scoob had listened to the message sixteen times. And he *knows* Dad knows he heard it because there's no way to make a listened-to voice mail “new” again.

And try as he might, after hearing her voice, he'd been unable to slip back into his imaginings of her that time. He watched Dad for *days*, just waiting for him to say, “Son, I think it's time you met your mother,” but it never happened. Days became weeks, and Dad didn't say a word.

By the time Scoob worked up the courage to just call the number she left—twenty-seven days later, on the day *after* his double-digit birthday—*ten* meant he had to be braver, right?—he got a *the number you have dialed has been disconnected or is no longer in service* message.

He said something to Dad then: “Hey, Dad, I know my mom called—”

And that's all he got out. Cuz Dad cut him off. "She left, William. She's gone. Absent. Same way my father was. End of story."

But what if it's not? What if there's *more* to the story like there clearly is to G'pop?

Scoob fills his cheeks with air and blows out. Rolls back to his stomach and tucks the picture of G'pop into the Green Book, then shoves both under his pillow. He peeks through the window by his head. The sky looks like somebody took an oceanful of the silvery glitter stuff G'ma sometimes wears on her eyelids when she's "feelin' fancy" and threw it into the air. He had no idea so many stars even existed.

G'ma said they can't see them from Atlanta because there's too much *light pollution*. Tonight, he learned more than he realized there was to know about a guy he'd always been told didn't matter. What else could Scoob not know about in the sky of his existence?

Is there such a thing as *life* pollution?



## Run for It

When Scoob wakes up the next morning and climbs down from his bunk, G'ma is gone. He doesn't think much of it: there's coffee in the pot by the sink, a half-done crossword puzzle beside an empty mug, and a plate of green grapes on the dining booth table.

But when he goes to pee and hears rustling and scraping sounds behind the RV—like someone's messing with it—the Green Book and everything G'ma told him about why she and G'pop hadn't stopped here leaps into Scoob's head at the same time his heart leaps up between his ears.

So does that restaurant. Damn Yankees. It only took Scoob and G'ma twenty minutes to get to where they are now from there. In addition to eating together despite their different skin tones—which, if you let G'ma tell it, was the cause of the dirty looks they were getting—Scoob is ninety-seven-point-two percent sure he and G'ma dined-and-ditched.

What if someone tailed them up the mountain and decided to wait until morning to strike? Or what if they went to round up some of their buddies before making an approach? Scoob read *To Kill a Mockingbird* in language arts last quarter. He knows how stuff used to go down.

There's a creaking sound and then a thump.

What if they already *have* G'ma?

*Scraaaaaape.*

He takes a deep breath. Not the time for peeing: who/whatever's back there might hear it. He slips out of the bathroom and over to the window beside G'ma's bed. Pulls the shade back just enough to peek out.

The window is a little bit open, and there's a faint *clang* and then a whispered cussword—in a

voice Scoob knows (though he's not sure he's ever heard it use *that* word before).

He pulls the curtain back a little more.

G'ma appears from behind the RV, clad in camo—the kind that looks like a forest floor—from the cap on her head to the top of her orthopedic Velcro sneakers. She's got a rectangular piece of metal tucked under her arm and what looks like a screwdriver in her hand.

Weird.

Scoob watches her scan the surroundings before scurrying along the edge of the woods they're parked against. She disappears behind the trailer parked at the next campsite over.

*What the heck?*

He lets the curtain drop, too confused to do anything but sit on the bed with his eyebrows furrowed.

At the sound of what has to be a snapping twig or something, Scoob looks out again and sees G'ma tiptoeing back across the clearing. This time he can see what she's carrying: a license plate.

Except it's green. And though Scoob knows he hasn't seen *all* the plates in Georgia, he's pretty sure

most of them are white. Dad's sure is. So was the one on G'ma's MINI Cooper. *KAL0627*. He remembers from the time he came down the hill too fast on his Rollerblades, lost control, and smacked his forehead right on the *L0*.

He slumps back on the bed. More noise from behind the RV as (Scoob assumes) G'ma attaches the green plate to the bumper.

He's obviously missing something, right? G'ma wouldn't steal someone else's license plate . . .

The knob on the RV door turns, and Scoob scurries into the bathroom and pulls the door shut. Turns on the shower and sits on the lowered lid of the toilet.

Definitely doesn't have to pee anymore.

There's a knock. "Scoob-a-doob? You all right in there?"

*Nope*. "I'm good, G'ma."

"Didn't you shower last night, sweetpea?"

Oh right. He's supposed to "be mindful" of his "water use." G'ma told him all about the collection tanks for the (dirty) water they use—including the fact that they have to be emptied by hand.

Gross.

“I’m just about done,” he says, whipping his clothes off. Can’t come out dry now, can he? “I . . . uhhhh . . . had a sweaty night.”

“I see,” G’ma says. “Well, I’ll get started on our breakfast. Bacon and eggs okay with you?”

“Yep!” What even kind of question is that?

Scoob hops in, does a three-sixty so all of him gets wet, then shuts the water off. He slides open the shower door. Looks around.

Curses under his breath.

“Hey, G’ma?” he shouts, shivering.

“Hmm?” comes the reply.

“Can you pass me my towel?”



G’ma must’ve changed out of her license-plate-swapping gear (*Did she really swap a license plate?*) while Scoob is “in the shower” because by the time he comes out, she’s standing over the cooktop in a neon-orange *jogging suit*, as she calls it. All Scoob knows is every time she moves, it sounds like somebody’s ripping a sheet of paper. Well . . . that, and instead of a pile of dead leaves, she now looks like a cotton-ball-topped traffic cone.

It makes him smile. And relax a little. “Nice outfit, G’ma.”

She puts a hand on her hip and gives a little shake. “You know I like to keep it snazzy.”

Scoob laughs aloud.

“You go on and have a seat,” she says. “I’m just about done with the vittles.”

“Vittles?”

“Look it up on that mobile device of yours.”

Oh.

“Where is it, by the way? I turned mine on for a spell this morning, and there was a voice message from your dad saying he’s been trying to reach us but both of our phones are ‘going straight to voice mail,’ whatever that means.” She waves her hand like the very notion is a nuisance. “Anyhow, it made me realize I haven’t seen you with your phone in your hand since we left. Which is”—she looks over her shoulder at him, white eyebrows raised—“*odd*, I daresay?”

“Oh. Uh.” Scoob gulps. “I left it at home.” He scratches the back of his head. *You need a haircut, William*, he imagines Dad saying. “Turned off.”

G’ma spins all the way around, mock-gasps, and puts the spatula over her heart.

“Come on, G’ma.” Scoob drops his chin as his face gets all warm.

She rotates back to plate the food, then brings it to the table. Scoob closes his eyes and inhales. Smells so good, everything else vanishes from his mind. *Poof.*

“Don’t you feel . . .” G’ma’s voice shoves everything he doesn’t want to think about back into his head. “What’s that expression you kids use? *Bucky-naked* without it?”

“Nobody says that, G’ma.”

“Well. You know what I mean.” She eats a forkful of scrambled cheese eggs. “How will you chat with friends? Play your games? Watch the TubeYou—”

“YouTube.”

“Mmhmm.” She sips from a fresh cup of coffee. “Exactly.”

Did he think about all that before powering the thing down and shoving it beneath his mattress?

Of course.

But Scoob’s awareness of the angry call he knew he’d get the moment Dad read his note and realized he’d jetted while grounded made all the stuff he’d be “missing” feel pretty minor.

Though hearing about this voice mail does make him a nervous. Maybe he made the wrong decision leaving the phone at home. “Did you . . . call him back?”

“What’s that?” G’ma says.

“Dad. Did you call him back and let him know we’re okay?” Why Scoob cares, he can’t say. But he does.

“Ah, I’ll send him a text,” she says. “Though I’m surprised to hear you want me to.”

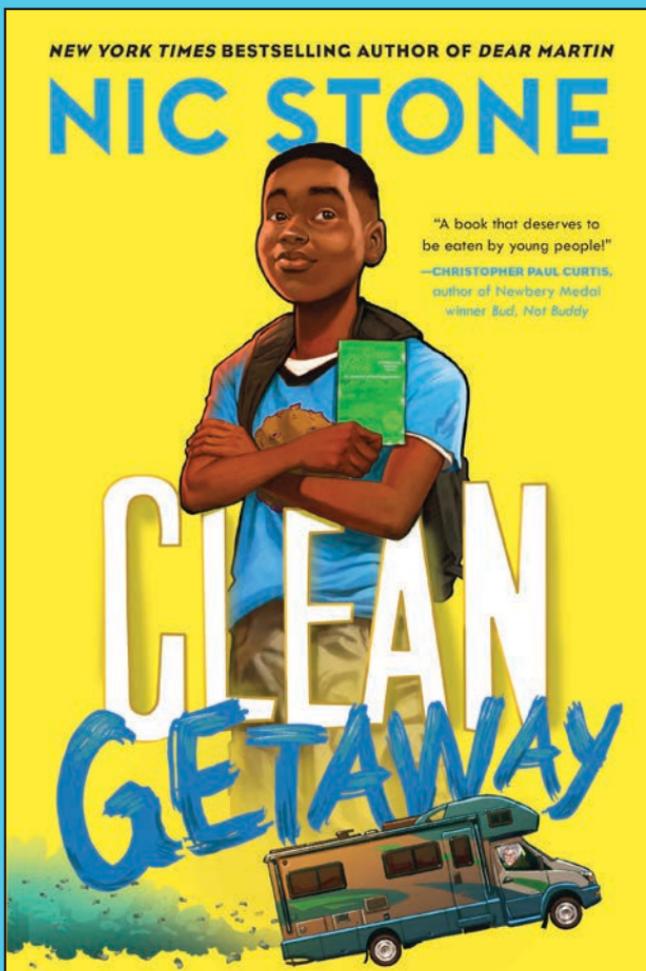
“You are?”

“Yep. You leaving your phone at home makes me think you and I have something in common.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

She grins and takes her final bite of egg. Leans toward Scoob with a twinkle in her eye. “Looks like we’re both trying to make a run for it.”

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# THIS IS MY AMERICA

A NOVEL BY KIM JOHNSON

**SNEAK PEEK**

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**THIS  
IS MY  
AMERICA**

**KIM JOHNSON**

Random House  New York

**KEEP READING FOR A SNEAK PEEK. . . .**

Saturday, April 23

Stephen Jones, Esq.

Innocence X Headquarters

1111 Justice Road

Birmingham, Alabama 35005

Re: Death Penalty—Intake Department

Dear Mr. Jones,

My dad has precisely 275 days before his execution. You're the only hope we have because every lawyer we've used has failed us. In the last appeal, Judge Williams didn't take more than five minutes to consider.

We mailed a renewed application since it's now been seven years.

Please look into James Beaumont's application (#1756). We have all the court and trial files boxed up and ready to go.

Thank you for your time,

Tracy Beaumont

P.S. Jamal's going to college. Can you believe it? All that running added up to something. If you have those letters where I say he was wasting his time, please destroy them.

P.S.S. Next Saturday at 10:00 a.m. Jamal's doing an interview on The Susan Touric Show. You should check it out.

## READY. SET. GO.

Time runs my life. A constant measuring of what's gone and what's to come. Jamal's hundred-meter dash is a blazing 10.06 seconds. That's how my older brother got this monumental interview. I'm not thinking about Jamal's record, though. I'm thinking about Daddy's time. Seven years—two thousand five hundred and thirty-two days served, to be exact.

This running clock above my head's been in place since his conviction. That moment branded me. Mama gripped the courtroom bench to keep from collapsing as each juror repeated *guilty*. I looked to Mama for an explanation. The empty look in her eye cried out the answer: death.

Since then, it's tick-tock.

Here at the TV station, Jamal rocks steadily in the guest chair, watching highlights of his track career with the producer

during a commercial break. He glides his hands over his fresh barber cut, his mind more likely on the camera angles that'll best show his waves.

We're true opposites, despite our one-year difference.

He's patient.

Calm.

Thinking.

Living.

Loving.

He's everything on the outside I wish to be. Bringing people in, when nine out of ten, I'd rather push them out. That's why I hate that my mission crosses paths with the biggest day of Jamal's life.

Five minutes and thirty-seven seconds until showtime.

As the commercial nears its end, I don't have to look up to know Mama's leaving the makeup room. The click of her heels echoes past a crew of engineers and radiates as she circles around Jamal to the guest seating area on the side of the studio stage. She enters like only a proud Black mother can, hair all pressed and curled, with a sharp black skirt suit that fits her curvy figure.

Mama's been name-dropping everywhere she can about the news anchor Susan Touric showcasing Jamal as a top athlete. I expected a live audience, but the set is a small studio and crew. I look out to Susan Touric's interview desk with a backdrop image of Austin, the state capital. They've pulled out a white couch so there's space for my family to join Jamal at the end.

Mama smiles at Jamal, then at my little sister, Corinne, but I swear she throws some silent shade my way. Her not-so-subtle warnings have been going on for the past month. She knows I want Daddy's story to seep out, but Mama has made clear there is no room for Daddy on this occasion. Not because she don't love Daddy, but because she wants Jamal to have a clean slate at college as Jamal, not "Jamal, the son of a murderer."

If it was a few years ago, I'd understand, but Daddy's got less than a year. No extensions. No money for more appeals. While time uncoils itself from Daddy's lifeline, she's forbidden Susan Touric from mentioning him, too. The show agreed not to talk about Daddy in exchange for Jamal showing up; and if Susan tries anything, Mama says we'll straight up leave.

Mama stands by me and leans near my ear. "Tracy, ain't it something to see your big brother's hard work paying off?"

"Mmm-hmm," I say, even though I'm still hoping the journalist in Susan can't help but fling open Pandora's box—on live television.

Mama won't be able to stop it then.

Then our truth can breathe free.

The fight for Daddy's appeal won't be in vain. People will finally hear the truth. Wake up to the fact that Lady Liberty has failed us. Failed so many others.

Angela Herron floats into the room with a twinkle of excitement in her eye. Her long blond hair bounces with an unstoppable future. Angela's a new production intern for *The Susan*

*Touric Show*, even though she's only a senior in high school, weeks away from graduating with Jamal's class. It's no coincidence that her dad owns Herron Media back in Galveston County, where Jamal's worked the past two years. She'll always have it easy. I've worked my ass off to be in the running for the school newspaper editor next year so just maybe I can get into college internships early. Meanwhile, she's already advanced to a position most college grads can't get.

"Nervous?" Angela asks Jamal.

"Nah." Jamal's foot taps as he tries to play cool.

"You got this." Angela hands Jamal a sheet of paper. "Here are the questions Susan's asked the other guests."

"Thanks, Ang."

All the other interviews have the common thread of compelling American stories: a boy who battled cancer; an almost career-ending torn ACL; a girl hiding her gender at football tryouts. Each story a tearjerker. I'm hard pressed to believe that they'd leave out what's at the heart of Jamal's dedication. What he's had to overcome.

I glance over Jamal's shoulder and skim the questions, looking for my window of opportunity.

"Tracy," Mama says. "Give your brother space."

*Hater.* I step closer to Mama.

Angela goes over a few pointers. Before I can ear hustle more, Angela's boyfriend, Chris Brighton, enters with a large box of doughnuts that appear tiny in his hands. Chris is still built out

from football season, his strawberry-blond hair tucked under a Texas A&M hat with his jersey number, 27, stitched on the side. He'll be playing there next year. Just like at school, he barely acknowledges us.

"Excuse me." Angela goes to meet Chris, and I catch her mouthing, *What are you doing here?*

Chris places the box of doughnuts on the table. Angela touches his arm, like she's trying to be sweet, but by the way her mouth is turned down, it's obvious that she's irritated at him messing up her work flow.

"Can I have one?" Corinne asks, ogling the doughnuts.

Mama agrees, and Corinne tiptoes past Angela. When she reaches in, the box slips.

"Watch it," Chris snaps, catching the box. His square jaw is tight, like he can flick Corinne away with a nasty glare.

Jamal jumps up. Chris's ears get red as Angela shushes him, pointing to the red flashing ON AIR sign.

*Sorry*, Corinne mouths, then takes a bite.

Jamal joins us, his arm now around Corinne, who's dressed in a striped yellow church dress. I chose a simple black A-line dress. My hair in an updo, sleek edges, and curls all out like a crown was placed on top of my head.

The camera cuts away from Susan and they play a video of the four athletes they've spotlighted in May.

"It's starting." Corinne nudges Jamal before clapping like there's a live audience. Crumbs flying everywhere.

Jamal chuckles and joins in with Corinne. I can't help but let a smile slip and clap softly because Jamal deserves this.

The last of the footage includes Jamal's records rolling up the screen. He's compared to competitive world athletes with Olympic gold medals. Then they show Jamal's last track meet of the season, where he beat the boys' high school track record, tying the long-standing 1996 college record. I feel like I'm there again. The crowd cheered so loud it shook the bleachers. You knew something special was about to happen. Jamal dropped to his knees when the scoreboard confirmed the new record.

"You know what you gonna say?" Corinne asks.

"Do I know what I'm gonna say?" Jamal bends down to Corinne so he can whisper. "You got advice for me, baby sis?"

"Don't say ummm."

I burst out a laugh, then cover my mouth when Mama nudges me.

"That all you got?"

"You say ummm a lot when you're nervous." Corinne shrugs and takes Mama's hand.

"You hear her, Tracy?" Jamal elbows me. "I don't say ummm a lot."

"You kinda do." I smirk.

"Yoooo. You wrong for saying that right before my interview. You know what's gonna be stuck in my head now, right?"

"Yip," I say. "Ummmm."

"Ummmm," Corinne joins in. We sound like a chorus at the side of the stage.

“Knock it off now, girls.” Mama wags her finger at us.

Angela cuts between us, gesturing for Jamal to follow her onto the studio’s stage while we take a seat offstage. Jamal gives her a wink when she wishes him good luck. Her cheeks go pink. He can always make someone feel special. Daddy says he’s got a heart of gold. I just wish he wouldn’t throw it around like that.

I watch Chris in the shadows. White privilege at its finest. Today he’s exhibiting classic toxic masculinity. I can tell Angela doesn’t want him here, but he’s too arrogant to think different. He acts that way in school, too, like he could get away with anything, since his dad is sheriff.

Poised and ready, Susan Touric faces the camera marked NBS ONE. She looks like all the white newscasters they have at this station except the rotating weather girls of color. Susan’s dressed in a white blouse and a gaudy necklace of choice for the day. Her silky black hair is coiffed in a bob around her fake-tanned skin, and pink lipstick matches the color of her glasses.

The crew shifts into movement. The spotlight zooms in. The producer gives her a hand signal near the teleprompter. A green light blinks, and Susan plasters on a smile. On cue, the music begins. My heart now beats at a rapid pace.

“Reporting live here at NBS World News. If you’re just tuning in, we’ve been highlighting top scholar athletes across the country. I have the pleasure of introducing a local star: the number one track athlete in the state of Texas, soon to be high school grad, Jamal Beaumont.”

Jamal’s dark brown skin shines as he flashes a wide smile. He

sits lean and tall in a closely tailored dark blue suit, white shirt, and red tie he saved up for so Mama wouldn't worry about the cost.

The camera loves him. My stomach twists because I need the interview to bring attention to Daddy's case, but it'll take away from Jamal. I hope he'll forgive me once he realizes what I'm trying to do.

Bring Daddy home.

Alive.

"When did you first start running?" Susan leans forward and rests her hand on her chin. The same way she begins every interview.

"You're going to have to ask my mama, because I swear I came out running."

Mama laughs, nudging me, then mouths, *It's true. It's true.*

I chuckle. Mama's loving every second of this.

"When you're not running, you're also working at a local radio station and have your own show Thursday evenings."

"Yes. I love it. I'm planning to major in communications and media."

"One day you could be interviewing me."

"That's my sister's thing. I'm more behind the scenes. Audio engineering."

"Brains and brawn, huh?"

He gives her a modest smile. Susan eats it up.

"Do track stars run in the family? There's usually more than one. Am I right?"

Jamal swallows, stopping for a millisecond, but I'm sure only Mama and I notice.

"The men in the family have those genes for sure."

Jamal's talking about Daddy. Before we moved to Texas, Daddy had his own track glory days in New Orleans. His name kept hometown business afloat in tough times, with customers wanting to help him out. After the flood, all that was lost. People left, and the local history was forgotten. Life was still hard a decade after Hurricane Katrina, so when Hurricane Veronica hit, we also left for good.

We evacuated to Texas, but Daddy never ran again. During his trial, they said it was his speed that got him all the way across town so quick. Daddy's fast, but he's not Superman fast.

I watch Jamal, nervous with how he'll handle this.

"Well, they must be proud," Susan says.

"He is." Jamal hesitates after he says "he." He looks directly into the camera, and I smile at his secret way of acknowledging Daddy, and his ability to sidestep additional questions is impressive. Jamal's not going to let this interview go down like that.

I'm both proud and nervous. I bite my lip, regretting that I tried all week to persuade him to use this as an opportunity to talk about Daddy's appeal. Now Jamal's guarded, each word carefully crafted to avoid Daddy coming up.

"One thing I love about highlighting you, Jamal, is that you could have chosen to go anywhere in the country, but you

chose Baylor. Everyone thought you were going to Track Town, Oregon, or North Carolina. Why Baylor?”

“I’m a mama’s boy. Plain and simple. Got my two sisters over there.” Jamal points to us. “And I can be home in about four hours if I need to. What can I say?”

“I’m sure your family loves that you’ll be close. Let’s bring them out now.”

Angela leads Mama to the stage, where she sits next to Jamal. Corinne squishes in, and I end up at the edge of the couch.

The hot lights beam down on me. I’m dizzy now, with one thing on my mind.

The thing everyone here is thinking about, the thing that hasn’t been said but that’s boiling near the surface.

“Let’s meet your sister Corinne.”

Corinne’s round face immediately goes blank; her eyes bulge, like they’re about to pop.

“How old are you, Corinne?”

“Seven.”

“You love your brother?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m gonna be real sad when he goes off to college.”

“I bet you are. What’s special about your brother?”

“He’s fast. And . . . when he packs my lunch, he always leaves me notes. I’m gonna miss that.”

“What kind of notes?”

“Nice stuff.” Corinne pauses. “Like if he knows I’m worried

about something or trying to be funny. Like, ‘Smile. I’m watching you, Bighead.’”

Susan laughs awkwardly.

“It’s okay if he says Bighead.” Corinne shoots me a warning. “Only he can say it, though.” I chuckle, because she’s told the world her nickname from Jamal, and now he’ll have to triple his notes to her.

“Or on Mondays when I’m real sad, he always leaves me a note like, ‘I love you more than the sun.’ I keep all those.”

Her voice has a heaviness to it no seven-year-old’s should have. The thing that goes unsaid in our family. That missing piece of us that keeps us down because we only see Daddy an hour on Saturday or Monday.

“Tracy.” Susan tries to stay upbeat. “You’re a year behind Jamal. Are you also an athlete? College plans?”

“I used to do track.” I pause, looking at Corinne, and then go for it. “I’m a school journalist and organize Know Your Rights workshops in the community.”

Mama digs her finger into my side. I have to grind my jaws together to keep a smile.

Susan’s face is expressionless before she turns to Mama.

“Mrs. Beaumont, what do you think about your son?”

“I’m so proud of Jamal. Anyone would be lucky to have him. He’s respectful. Dedicated. Charming. There’s no one like him.”

“I’ve definitely picked that up.” Susan rests her hand on her chin again. “Bet your husband is real proud, too.”

“He is.” Mama gives a tight smile.

Three minutes left on the show clock. My chest floods like I’m being filled by water. Time’s almost up. Susan has opened the door to talk about Daddy. I know that what hurts Jamal will hurt Mama. But we all want Daddy home. I can’t let this opportunity pass us by. I speak before Susan asks Mama another question.

“College seems so distant because I’ve been focused on helping my father’s appeal.”

Mama parts her lips. A small gasp escapes.

Jamal flinches, and it’s like a wave has come crashing down over the entire interview.

“Jamal.” Susan turns to my brother. “Is this what influenced your decision to stay close to home?”

Jamal’s expression goes blank.

Susan keeps going when Jamal doesn’t answer. “Because your father is in the Texas Penitentiary.”

I watch him. Hope this pushes him to speak up on Daddy’s innocence. But he’s staring past the camera like he wants this to be over.

“Three-hour drive from Baylor to see him or your family.” Susan uses her hands like it’s an actual map.

Jamal stays composed. “I couldn’t find a reason in the world to go somewhere else. I wouldn’t want to miss any time with Pops, Moms, Corinne.” Jamal gives me a once-over. “My dear sister Tracy.”

Shame runs through my veins when Jamal singles me out.

“I can imagine,” Susan says. “You don’t get that time back. Every week counts.”

She’s wrong; every second counts.

“Now, your father, how long has he been sitting on death row?”

*Sitting?* Why do people say *sitting*? Like he’s waiting patiently in line with a number in his hand.

“Yes. Ma’am. He’s . . . umm.” Jamal shoots a look at Mama. He’s starting to flounder.

The crew is buzzing, scrambling at the breach of contract.

“He’s been, umm . . . on death row over seven years since the conviction,” Jamal says.

Inside I scream out in joy that he doesn’t skirt the issue.

“Must be painful.”

“A lot of pain felt from him missing in our lives.” Jamal pauses when his gaze is caught on Mama. “I’m sure there’s a lot of hurt, of course, from the families who lost the Davidsons that night.”

Daddy’s innocent. Why did he say it like that?

“But I take all that and train. I run. I care for my family. I work. I live my life freely because my dad can’t. I don’t need to be at a big track school. Not when the thing that matters is putting in work to help take care of my family. That’s something I can control. No one can beat me.” Jamal gives a shy smile. Slows down his rapid pace of talking. “In my head, I mean. Everyone has to lose sometime. But in my head, I can’t lose. Because I’m growing with each race.”

“Your dedication’s a rare trait, Jamal.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I don’t let things get me down. That’s why I’m so glad you highlighted me, and we can focus on my accomplishments.” Jamal smiles, unaffected by her prodding questions. I almost believe him.

“Must be hard, though.” She puts her delicate hand on her chin again. “Your father’s death sentence, having to start over from New Orleans, and then . . . the challenges in Texas.”

“Texas is home now. I plan to keep it that way.” Jamal keeps his fake grin.

It aches to watch Jamal keep his composure. He’s avoiding the topic as best he can. Mama’s scowl says she’ll slam it shut if Susan tries her.

“How long does your father have on death row?” Susan’s voice goes low.

“Two hundred and sixty-seven days.” I say it because knowing how long Daddy has left is the air I breathe. Time to live. To appeal. To turn back time.

Mama whips her head at me. The camera follows.

“Two hundred and sixty-seven days,” Jamal repeats. “That’s why we want to keep our family together and focus on the good.”

“Yes.” Susan touches Jamal’s shoulder this time. “I can’t imagine how hard it must be having your father in prison. Convicted of a double murder. Unimaginable.”

“Our father is innocent,” I say. “He’s been trying to appeal. But we don’t have the financial resources to prove his innocence.”

I've been writing to Innocence X to take Daddy's case. They represent people wrongfully convicted and sentenced to death. Especially those in underserved communities. People who can't afford their bail, let alone an attorney with a team of expert witnesses to prove their client's innocence.

After seven years of letters and no response, I'm getting Innocence X's attention. Today.

"If your father is innocent, I'm sure the system will work."

"No," I say. "The system has failed us. Continues to fail us."

"I don't know much about the details of his case, but we can talk after the show, since we've reached the end of the interview time. Jamal, what would you—"

She's cutting me off. I can't let her take this time away from me. I haven't said enough. I stand so the camera is forced to focus on me.

"Do you know how many men have been put to death who were later exonerated postmortem?" I point to the camera. "What about conviction rates by race and class? The system works if you have the money to defend yourself."

Backstage, the crew creeps to the edge of the stage. My legs are Jell-O underneath me. I'm close to collapsing right here, so I form a fist that fills me with courage.

"My father is innocent, and we have the evidence, but not the legal support to appeal his case. There are hundreds, thousands, of cases like his. Innocent people sentenced all the time."

Susan's spiderlike eyelashes blink rapidly. Her legs point

toward Jamal because she knows this should be his interview, but the journalist in her focuses on me.

“What evidence do you have proving your father’s innocence?”

The producer throws his arms up in frustration.

“He was home all evening,” I say.

“You were young then. I’m sure it’s hard to remember. I barely remember what I had for lunch.”

“That’s not something you forget, ma’am. A small town with a double murder, everyone locked in the memories of where they were that day.”

“He was home,” Mama interjects, even though I know she’s angry at me. “This interview today is about Jamal, but I can’t sit here and not defend my husband. He. Is. Innocent.”

“Then, who do you suspect killed the Galveston couple?”

“Mark and Cathy Davidson were murdered, but not by my father or his business partner, Jackson Ridges. Other suspects have been recently identified,” I say.

Mama’s and Jamal’s expressions turn hard.

I know Mama doesn’t like when I lie, but we need to catch Innocence X’s attention.

“Unfortunately, the Galveston Police Department refuses to look into them, but we will find a legal team to represent my father’s case. When they study what we have, we’ll prove his innocence and the real killer will be arrested.”

As soon as the interview is over, Jamal jumps out of his seat.

“Tracy.” Mama’s got her hand on her hip. Susan Touric steps between us. Along with the producer, she blocks my view of Mama, but not before I witness how upset she is.

“This is unacceptable,” Mama says. “We had an agreement.”

“I stayed within my parameters,” Susan says. “Your daughter—”

Mama puts her hand up to me as I draw in closer to join the conversation. Her gesture is instantly sobering. This won’t be the time or place to talk to Mama. She won’t listen to a word I say. I want this to be a moment to celebrate because I did what I’d planned, but to everyone else around me this isn’t a celebration. I’m standing in the rubble of a building I blew up.

I follow Jamal, who is now in the hallway with Angela. Jamal’s shaking his head, and Angela is tearing up. Her boyfriend, Chris, paces as he waits for Angela on the other side of the studio.

“Jamal.” I reach for his shoulder, but he brushes me away. My cheeks are hot. “Jamal, I’m sorry.”

“Forget it. Go to Ma.” His voice is expressionless.

“I mean it. I’m sorry.”

“I knew you’d make it go the way you wanted to. Just wish you wouldn’t have done it like that.”

His response isn’t what I expected. I wanted him to be upset with me. Shout. Yell. Anything to help me figure out how to approach him, but he doesn’t give me anything.

“Give me a second, please,” I start.

“I don’t wanna hear it.” Jamal walks back to the studio.

I turn my head to find Mama. Angela stands in my way.

“You’re so selfish. You think you know everything, but you don’t,” she says.

“My father’s innocent.” I turn away from her.

“It’s not just this. It’s the same thing with the school paper, always about you and what you want to do. Think about how Jamal must feel.” Angela shakes her head, then storms out the exit doors. The Texas heat sucks the air out of my lungs until the door shuts behind her.

Mama’s no longer on the stage. The only person left is Corinne. She hasn’t moved from the interview couch. She’s crying. Jamal gets to her first; a sob builds in my throat watching them. Jamal sinks down to his knees and wraps his arms around her waist. I stand awkwardly behind him, wanting to help but knowing I did this. Corinne puts her arms around Jamal’s neck, her tears wetting his collar. The hurt I’ve forced on to my family knocks me backward as I look up at Corinne’s searching eyes.

“Everyone is angry,” Corinne says.

Jamal brushes her hair back. “Sometimes people do things that hurt because they think they’re helping.”

I shut my eyes and hope it’s not a lie.

# WHAT HAD HAPPENED WAS . . .

Mama's silence is worse than being scolded. I can't take it anymore, so I text my homegirl Tasha for a ride to Polunsky Prison. Maybe this way I can smooth things over with Daddy before Mama and Jamal get to him on Monday.

Tasha's twenty minutes away on foot if I cut across the field from my house. She lives in an old historic block that seems to be forgotten. The rows of shotgun homes perch up close to the sidewalk along dusty potholed roads. I swiftly approach her dull-green-colored house.

Tasha's already out front. "You know I'm not one to judge, but damn, why'd you go off like that?"

My face droops. "Nice to see you, too."

"I'm surprised your mama didn't skin you alive on television."

"It wasn't that bad, was it?"

“Train wreck.” Tasha slams her palm and fist together. “Full-on collision.”

*Damn.*

“If I take you to Polunsky, I’m not aiding and abetting, am I?”

“She didn’t answer when I asked.” I shake my head. “I didn’t want to stick around for her to stop me.”

“Come here.” Tasha leans in to give me a hug. “Are you grounded?”

“Probably.”

“Jamal pissed?”

“He won’t talk to me.” I put my head down. “Didn’t even come home with us, so I haven’t seen him since this morning.”

“Jamal’s not the type to hold grudges.” Tasha lets me in, and I enter her living room. “Remember when you washed his white jersey with your red pants?”

“Yeah,” I say, and chuckle. “He rocked that pink for weeks.”

“He’ll forgive you. Just don’t hold your breath if he ever gets another interview. No way he’ll let you in the building.”

“I know.” I let out a small smile that hurts, holding on to hope that Jamal won’t be mad forever.

I follow her down the hallway, passing two tiny bedrooms on the way to the kitchen that’s placed in the back of the house. Tasha only has two window units for air-conditioning, but the long shotgun shape of the house lets cool air flow throughout.

When we get to the kitchen, Tasha’s sister, Monica, is

practicing on her keyboard while her mom washes dishes. They all have the same long, thin braids, same flawless dark brown skin and high cheekbones. Folks easily confuse mother and daughters for sisters when they're out shopping. Only thing her mom's missing is the large gold hoop earrings.

"Need any help?" I ask Tasha's mom, Candice.

"Hey, Tracy." She gives me a hug. "I'm good. I know you rushing. Tasha, get your daddy's keys."

"Daddy Greg! Tracy's here." She yells out the kitchen window instead of going out back.

She calls him Daddy Greg because she grew up not knowing what to call him, since he was in prison. She wanted to call him Greg, but calling him Daddy was a requirement. *Say it with respect*, he always said to her, and her mama was always repeating that. So Tasha did what she do, called him *Daddy*, but always making it a point to add in *Greg*.

We used to be on the same page about getting our dads back. The first time Daddy Greg was out, Tasha was excited, but he barely stayed in the house and disappeared days at a time. He had a hard time adjusting, especially when he couldn't land a job, part of his parole. So back in jail he went. Three more years. Now he's done all his time, and Tasha don't trust he won't mess it all up again. Her tone stays sharp with him. Unyielding. Unforgiving. He spent his time in prison only to come home to a new prison, where he's free, but serving his own penance through harsh glances and judging looks.

Tasha pounces on Monica's keyboard and starts singing off-key.

"Stop." Monica pulls it back toward her, then gives me a nod. "Hey, Tracy."

I nod back.

"Tasha, quit playing around," Candice says. "You know you can't hold no tune, so just leave it for your sister."

"Damn, Mama, why you gotta say it with your chest like that? Can't a girl dream? Be the next superstar. Try out for one of those talent shows."

"You love to sing, baby. Got a real nice voice."

Tasha smiles.

"But you ain't no Whitney Houston."

"Ain't nobody trying to be Whitney, Mama."

"What you want me to say. Beyoncé? Come on now. You best focus on school. Be a business major. Accountant, I say, because you always up in my business. Checking my wallet."

I let out my first hearty laugh since before the Susan Touric interview. Glad I chose to come see Tasha and not lock myself in my room, holding my breath every time someone comes up the stairs.

"That's the problem with this generation, going on these reality shows because someone didn't knock some sense into them before they get on the screen and have their dream snatched on live television."

"That's cold, Ma." Tasha crosses her arms. Then scowls at

Daddy Greg as he enters, joining in naming all the careers she should try that require no musical talent.

When things finally die down, Daddy Greg hands over his keys and turns to me. “How’s ‘Tracy’s Corner?’”

“Good,” I say. “The column is getting popular. Readers are up.”

“Most popular with Black folks,” Tasha says. “The rest hate-read. You know them white kids don’t like hearing about Black Lives Matter each week.”

“That’s their problem. And they’re about to be big mad next year when I’m setting up feature stories.”

“Let me guess,” Tasha says. “Court cases and police brutality on every page?”

“Don’t let Tasha give you a hard time,” her mom says. “She stays reading ‘Tracy’s Corner.’”

“The editor position is a lock.” Tasha gives a wicked smile because she was just messing with me.

“Better be. I put in as many hours as the editor this year.” I glance at my watch. I want a lot of time with Daddy.

“You got this, Tracy,” Daddy Greg says. “Speak your truth.”

“So, whose fault is it you broke parole again?” Tasha rolls her eyes at Daddy Greg.

“Don’t you start.” Her mom’s tone is icy.

“It ain’t easy getting out and finding work. I’m lucky I did this time. You don’t know what serving six years can do. I was out early, thinking about who’s protecting my peeps. Are they gon’ feel some type a way I’m out?”

“That’s your problem,” Tasha says. “You were thinking about them and not us.”

“Tasha.” I touch her hand. We can’t understand what that life is like. Every moment of your day controlled. The people in there were his family for six years.

“The last three years I was thinking about what kind of man I was gonna be when I got out. An end date became real after messing up. I wasn’t going to spend the rest of my life in there. I was caught up on that before.”

I gulp hard, look away. He’s talking about people like my daddy who aren’t ever getting out.

“I’m sorry, Tracy. I didn’t mean it like that,” Daddy Greg says. “I feel your daddy coming home. I didn’t mean to put you out like that. I’m just saying, I was gonna be ready this time.”

Candice hands a glass of sweet tea to Daddy Greg. I look at them with envy that they’re back together, but Tasha’s not looking like she’s happy. She’s looking at them like she’s lost. Been betrayed.

“We gotta go.” Tasha spins, grimace on her face. Not even realizing while she’s mad at her dad, mine’s still in a cell block.

Tasha storms off without me.

“All right, I’ll be seeing ya.” I lean back awkwardly with my hands shoved in my shorts pocket.

“Don’t worry about all this,” Daddy Greg says. “I gotta prove myself. She’ll come around.”

We look at each other, nodding. But Tasha’s gone hard; her

walls have climbed so high that I don't know if she can break them down and let anyone in.



The car is silent, so I pull out my notepad and start a letter to Innocence X.

“Damn, you stay writing letters.” Tasha breaks the silence. “I’ve only written letters to Daddy Greg. Never even knew what to say then.”

“Gotta reach them somehow.”

“Why don’t you call them?” Tasha says, backing up her car. “Just call until they answer. Email.”

“They don’t take email or phone calls for cases. Only letters and applications to their intake department.”

“It sucks your dad’s locked up, but at least he’s still a good dad. Hell, he could trade places with Daddy Greg. I wouldn’t mind.”

“Tasha.” I put my pen down. Jokes about death row I don’t take lightly.

“Sorry.” Tasha taps my leg. “I didn’t mean you better off than me. Just having Daddy Greg home isn’t all cracked up to what it should be. He’s trying to fold into our lives, and he just don’t fit, you know.”

“He’s been gone,” I say, then pause. “Time stopped for him but kept moving for y’all. You guys will figure it out. Even if he was here all that time, you’re seventeen—you were gonna give

him hell anyways.” I bump her shoulder and she only gives me a sliver of a smile.

I bite my tongue from saying how easy it is for her to say that. She had a clock to work with. Mine is different. Mine is a countdown.

“Can’t change the past, Tasha.” My voice is strained from irritation.

Tasha huffs but keeps her thoughts to herself.

We keep our chitchat light for the next hour, knowing we’ve touched nerves. I count down signs until we reach Livingston, a small town where Polunsky Prison is located.

Silence completely takes us over again. Everything else washes away except the fast beat of my heart as we take the long road past acres filled with grass and farmland. Then we see the fenced-in wall of the maximum-security prison. It’s twenty feet tall along rows of cinder-block towers with razor wire atop it. From a distance, you can see the guards standing on top and the surveillance cameras lined up around the perimeter. As usual, an uneasy feeling swirls in my stomach. But this time is different—I defied Mama during Jamal’s interview. Lied about new suspects, and I’m certain Daddy’s heard all about it by now.

## THE APPLE OF OUR EYE

We turn into the prison's parking lot. A roar of laughter escapes a group of boys perched outside. They circle around one guy who's trying to play it low-key. His eyes shift, watching the parking lot. A black garbage bag is sprawled on the ground in front of his feet, confirming he's the one just released. Also by how his boys are all hype. They punch playful fists at each other, rapidly spitting out catch-up stories to him. I think they might be so into themselves they'll ignore us parking, but the second we drive toward the visitor lot, I hear their chatter.

"There you go, man." I'm not sure who says it.

A whistle blows out long and low.

"Not a chance," Tasha says out the window.

His boys huddle laughing, saying "oohh." Their voices eventually fade as she pulls into the lot farther away from releases.

I give a grateful smile to Tasha for driving me the two hours to visit Daddy. Knowing she'll be out here waiting for me when I'm done.

I enter the first small building and join a short line, dump my things in a yellow bin. The security woman smooths her hands down my arms, up my waist, across my bra line, then down my legs.

Then I go to the next building and wait until I'm called over the loudspeaker. I sit by a small round-table bench as the prisoners line up behind the glass. I'm grateful they changed the rule to visit death-row inmates, and I don't have to come all this way to pick up a phone to talk to Daddy through a glass window.

There's a buzz, then a clank as the locks release and the door is propped open by an officer. Rushing in to see their visitors, a few guys bump into one another.

My heart stops, hoping this doesn't turn into some altercation that'll shut down visiting hour while they go into lockdown. Or worse, I witness Daddy getting into it with someone. I shut my eyes for a moment, thinking about the first time I saw him with injuries. I blink the memory away.

It takes so much out of me and the family getting ready for a visit, pushing away whatever's bothering us. Always finding a way to ball it up during our visits so we don't put that stress on Daddy.

The men size one another up until one's distracted by his son yelling, "Daddy! I see Daddy!" He turns to mush, then gives the guy a dap.

A grin takes over my face when I finally spot Daddy in line. He's tall, with broad shoulders that are covered by his orange jumper. His beard is grown in a bit, and he's kept his Afro about two inches. He used to keep his hair lined up before prison. Considering everything, he still looks the same to me, which gives me comfort.

Daddy scans from corner to corner until he finds me at the table. I warm over at his matching grin. I tap my fingers nervously until Daddy takes a seat in front of me.

"You came," Daddy says.

"What do you mean?"

"I thought your mama might've locked you up after that stunt you pulled. What were you thinking?"

I put my head down.

Daddy flicks at my hair, then shoots out a bellowing laugh.

"You should've seen your mama's face on television. Eyes all bugged out. It's probably the one time in my life I was glad to be locked up, so I wouldn't be on that car ride home or have to stay up listening to your mama talk my ear off all night about you, girl."

I laugh with relief. "I'm sorry. I know you said not to."

"You wrong. This was Jamal's day today. My baggage don't need to follow him to college."

"I know, but we gotta catch Innocence X's attention."

"You're a fighter. I love that about you." Daddy brushes my hair back. "But you need to start preparing yourself—"

“Never.” I glance away.

A bald-headed, muscular white guard watches us; the way he’s looking at us bothers me. Daddy follows my gaze.

“Don’t pay them no mind.”

Daddy rubs his hands together, callused from the three-hour daily work outside. He gets one hour in the library, another break from his concrete sixty-square-foot cell. In his cell, he reads five hours a day. That’s where Daddy picked up studying the law, after being filled with disappointment after each appeal. This is what we share between us on visits. Our ability to swap facts back and forth and all my letters to Innocence X. Mama tells him everything going on with us kids. Jamal fills the visit with things Daddy likes. Like his working hard, his track practice, Mama, and all the notes Jamal’s left for Corinne that week. Daddy loves that the most.

When I talk to Daddy about his case and get too hopeful, he makes me promise not to get upset because getting an appeal grows more unlikely with each day. But Daddy’s also not the type to give up. He could’ve accepted a plea deal, but he said he wouldn’t admit to something he didn’t do. God would be watching over him and set him free. He believed there’d already been tragedy enough with the Davidson couple being murdered, and him and his best friend, Jackson Ridges, being blamed. Mr. Ridges was killed by the police as they tried to take him from his home. Daddy thought God wouldn’t let more pain come from that tragedy. So he pled innocent, and life without

parole was off the table. It would be a death sentence if found guilty.

I used to believe that what Daddy said about no more pain was true. Like the Messiah Himself would walk right through the courtroom and carry my daddy out. Now I know it's up to us.

"I didn't mean to ruin Jamal's moment." I watch him with hopeful eyes.

"I see no one else came to make this visit." Daddy squeezes my hand. "I need you to stay close, not pull apart."

"They'll be here Monday. I just wish Jamal'd understand what I was trying to do. I couldn't not talk about you."

"I knew you wouldn't be able to control yourself if you had the chance. I had a bet out here when we watched it, but I didn't expect you to lie. You don't know what that does in here."

I look away. I know I shouldn't have lied about possible suspects. I only wanted to attract Innocence X's attention.

"Someone got away with murder, and it's never been right I had to do the time. Trust me, no one knows that injustice more than me. I feel it every day. But you can't make stuff up."

"But if we get someone to look into your trial, they could see they didn't have any evidence to convict you in the first place. Then they'd find new suspects."

Daddy pats my hand. I try to let the topic go. We've talked about this too many times. I'm preaching to the choir. The fact is, the gun that killed the Davidsons was never found. Daddy

never owned a gun. Every Texan in our neighborhood certainly has one, but not Daddy. They arrested him anyway.

Next, they went after Mr. Ridges. He paid with his life when he refused to open the doors for the police. Mama had called to warn him that Daddy'd been taken in. Mr. Ridges didn't want to go out like that. Not in front of his kids. But it was too late. The police shot up the house, nicking Quincy, who was my age, and killing Mr. Ridges with shots through the window. They didn't wait for a negotiator like they do on TV. They straight-up started shooting.

After he was dead, it was easy to put blame on Mr. Ridges. They *needed* him to be guilty. Especially when they'd almost killed Quincy. I've always believed the police and prosecution were willing to do anything they could to justify killing Mr. Ridges and shooting a ten-year-old. Regardless of whether Mr. Ridges or Daddy owned a gun, they both had alibis. Their fingerprints were found in the office meeting room, along with the prints of multiple other people who'd met with them, but it didn't seem to matter that their prints weren't found in the back, where the Davidsons' bodies were discovered.

"Don't think I haven't thought this through a million times. Sometimes these things happen. Everything kept boiling down to the fact I was about to do business with Mr. Davidson."

We both look down.

They'd questioned other suspects. Rumors flew around town that Daddy was upset with Mark Davidson. It's true Daddy and

Mark Davidson had gotten into an argument the day before, but it was because Mark didn't want to join their business venture with Jackson Ridges, just with Daddy.

That's not worth killing someone over.

Daddy changes subjects, tells me a story about when I was a baby and he'd knew I'd be trouble, but I've heard this story a million times. The only thing in my head is what I can do in the next nine months to bring Daddy home. A chance to stall his sentence. Save him before it's too late.



When I get back in Tasha's car, I can't hold in all the disappointment from *The Susan Touric Show* and the helplessness from seeing Daddy. Each moment replays in my mind. I hold my mouth closed to stop a cry from escaping.

"Let it out, girl." Tasha rubs my back. "Don't hold that shit in."

"I just don't know what to do," I say between cries. "I've tried everything."

"Not everything. You still got something left. I don't know you to give up. What you did today could've worked. You don't know yet." Tasha hands me my notepad to finish my letter to Innocence X.

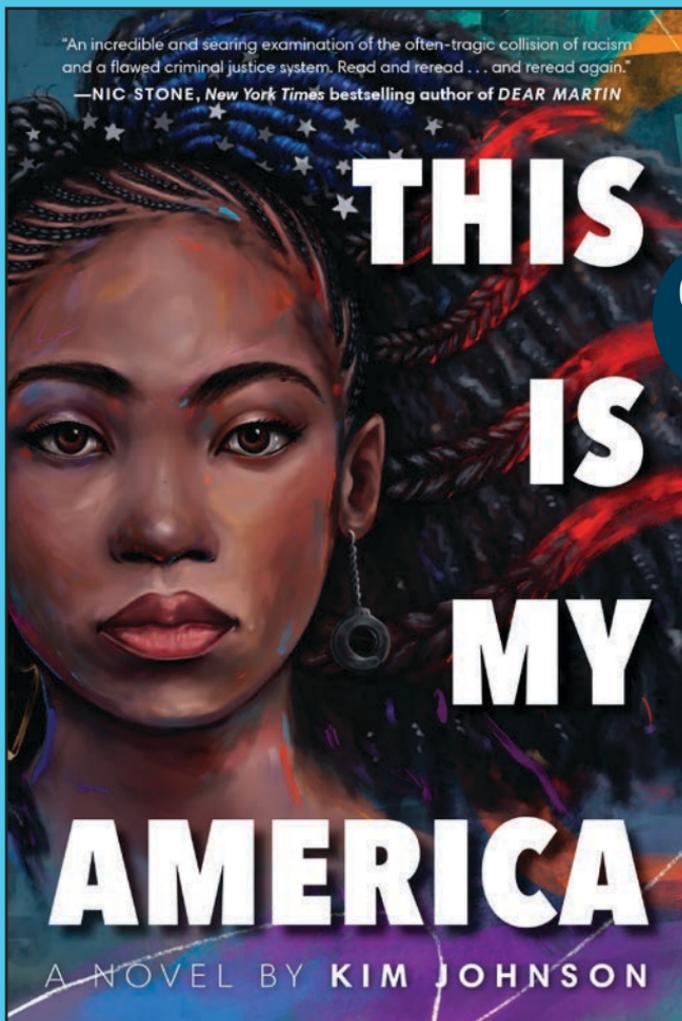
Blurry eyed, I take the notepad from her, the pain still sitting in me. Tasha drives away as I finish my letter.

I used to plan the letters out more, writing pages and pages on why Innocence X needed to help Daddy, but time is running

out. The climate's changed with a new governor who's stricter on sentences, filling up for-profit prisons with minor convictions. Increased visibility of racial injustice in policing adds more pressure for Innocence X to respond to cases hitting the media. My fear is they'll forget the old cases—unplug the chance for those, letting the clock wind down. Because I know the truth is, no one's excited to look into a seven-year-old case. Attention spans are reserved for big stories and hashtags following the next news cycle.

Innocence X knows who I am, and now it's the principle of writing. There's nothing I've been able to control about what happened to Daddy. I'm broke. Can't vote. Can't afford a lawyer. But I've got control of my voice and my mind, and that means I can do at least one thing: write a letter.

# Ready to find out what happens next?



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