

Look Both Ways



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JASON REYNOLDS

Reynolds grew up in Oxon Hill, Maryland, an unincorporated suburb of Washington, D.C. While a young student, Reynolds grew frustrated by what his teachers assigned him to read—he found that he couldn't identify with the characters or get interested in books about subjects that seemed to have little to do with his lived experience. Because of this, he didn't read a novel until he was 17. Two things began to turn Reynolds onto literature and poetry: rap music in the form of Queen Latifah's album *Black Rain* as a young kid, and reading Richard Wright's novel [Black Boy](#) as an older teen. Inspired by Queen Latifah, he wrote poetry all through his teen years and through college, even as he failed English classes. His first novel, co-written with Jason Griffin, was a critical and financial failure, so Reynolds took a job managing a Rag and Bone clothing store and contemplated giving up on writing. A friend, however, encouraged Reynolds to write in his own voice. The result was *When I Was the Greatest*. Since then, Reynolds has written several other young adult novels, mostly about young Black characters living in neighborhoods that resemble the one where he grew up. His goal is to help improve literacy rates and, specifically, to try to convert “book-haters” by writing books that he would've been interested in as a young person. Since 2020, Reynolds has been the Library of Congress's national ambassador for young people's literature. His books have won the Coretta Scott King award, the Carnegie Medal (which *Look Both Ways* won in 2021), and have been named finalists for the National Book Awards.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In interviews, Jason Reynolds has said that he wanted to write *Look Both Ways* about the only time of day when young kids often don't have adult supervision: their walk home from school. While in decades past it was normal for kids to have lots of unsupervised time, this began to change in the 1980s as fears of kidnapping and childhood sexual abuse climbed in the U.S. However, later analyses have found that advocacy organizations and the media overstated how many children were abducted yearly, and it wasn't made clear that the vast majority of children reported missing actually ran away or were kidnapped by one of their own parents. While some parents have been charged with child abuse or neglect for allowing their children to walk to school or play at parks unsupervised, a 2016 federal law protects parents' right to allow their children to walk to school alone. Many states and municipalities also have their own rules regarding at what age, and under what

circumstances, children can be unsupervised in public. Beyond this, Reynolds situates *Look Both Ways* firmly in the late 2010s; his stories mention social media sites, cell phones, and the video game *Call of Duty*. It's also possible to situate *Look Both Ways* within the broader movement to portray and celebrate Black people's joy, and to tell stories about Black people that aren't simply about racism or other struggles. On social media, this takes the form of hashtags like #BlackGirlMagic and #BlackJoy, the latter coined by The Black Joy Project.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Reynolds has been upfront about the purpose of his books: to speak to young readers who don't often see characters that look like them in books. Because of this, most of his books, including *When I Was the Greatest*, *The Boy in the Black Suit*, and *Miles Morales: Spider-Man*, follow young Black characters going through events and experiencing things that Reynolds experienced as a young person, and that kids of color still experience today. *Look Both Ways* is often considered a part of the cultural movement to highlight stories about Black characters that aren't just about the characters struggling with racism. Other young adult and children's books that share this distinction include Ibi Zoboi's *My Life As an Ice Cream Sandwich*, *Shuri: a Black Panther Novel* by Nic Stone, and *Rebound* by Kwame Alexander. The humorous aspects of the collection, as well as the stories' focus on bullying, also recall [Diary of a Wimpy Kid](#) by Jeff Kinney. As inspirations for his writing more generally, Reynolds has listed [Black Boy](#) by Richard Wright as the novel that sparked his love of literature and spurred him to discover other African American authors, such as Zora Neale Hurston ([Their Eyes Were Watching God](#)), Toni Morrison ([Beloved](#); [Song of Solomon](#)), and James Baldwin ([Go Tell it On the Mountain](#); [If Beale Street Could Talk](#)).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Look Both Ways: A Tale Told in Ten Blocks
- **When Written:** 2018
- **Where Written:** Washington, D.C.
- **When Published:** 2019
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult; Short Story Collection
- **Setting:** City blocks surrounding Latimer Middle School, in an unnamed American town
- **Climax:** Each chapter has its own different climax
- **Antagonist:** Bullies, poverty, fear
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Sign Language. In interviews, Reynolds has revealed that Kenzi and Simeon's secret handshake is actually sign language. The handshake says, "I can hear you even when the world can't."

Bus History. While nearly all students in the early 20th century were expected to walk to school, early horse-drawn school buses existed to pick up kids who lived far away from school. Kids boarded and got off the bus through a back door so they wouldn't scare the horse pulling the bus. Today, the back door still exists on buses as an emergency exit.



PLOT SUMMARY

In "Water Booger Bears," TJ and Jasmine are getting ready to walk home after school. They've been best friends and have been walking home together for the last six years, but Jasmine has been in the hospital for the last month due to a sickle cell anemia flare-up. In the present, though, things seem back to normal, except for the fact that TJ carries Jasmine's heavy backpack full of textbooks and homework she missed while she was out. On the walk home, Jasmine teases TJ for the boogers in his nose while TJ insists that people are just big boogers, since God made people out of dust and, according to their science teacher, people are mostly water. Jasmine insists she's not a booger. She'd rather be a water bear, a microscopic creature that can withstand extreme heat and cold. Neither of them see the **school bus** fall from the sky.

In "The Low Cuts Strike Again," the after-school bell rings and the Low Cuts, a group comprising Bit, Trista, Francy, and John John, meet outside. The Low Cuts grew out of a support group that the school counselor started for them—the kids each have a parent who has cancer. The Low Cuts are known for stealing loose change to supplement their free school lunches. Today, though, they have a different mission. They take their stolen 90 cents to the neighborhood candy lady, Ms. CeeCee, where they purchase retro candies. They resell the candies to old men at a local pool hall. With the nine dollars this yields, the kids buy ice cream and take it to Bit's mom, Ms. Burns. She just started chemo again because her cancer came back.

"Skitter Hitter" would've been a very different story had Pia known that Stevie would be out front with her broken skateboard, Skitter, waiting to apologize. Stevie attends a private boys' school, where a classmate named Marcus routinely bullies him. Yesterday, Marcus invited Stevie to help him pick on someone else after school: Pia. So as Pia skated home, Marcus, his cronies, and Stevie stopped her, pushed her, and sent her skateboard flying into the street, where a car smashed it. This was horrifying for Pia, as her sister, Santi, died two years ago when a jealous skater boy pushed her into traffic. Ashamed of his actions, Stevie told his mom about what

happened and about Marcus's bullying, so today she's brought him to Latimer to apologize. But since Pia doesn't know Stevie is here, she leaves school the back way with Fawn, another female skater.

In "How to Look Both (Both) Ways," Fatima is new to walking home on her own this year. Her first two walks home were disastrous: Fatima tripped, kids on a bus laughed at her, she got caught in the rain, and a dancing and singing woman named Benni scared Fatima a bit. But Fatima wanted nothing more than to be able to walk home and enjoy some alone time, so she downplayed these experiences to her parents. Now, she keeps a notebook with a running list of all the things that change or stay the same as she walks home, which helps her feel more in control. On the day the story takes place, things change because Fatima tells Benni about Ms. Broome's writing assignment: to imagine herself as an object. In response, Benni demands to know how Fatima is going to change the world. Fatima considers being cement to repair the sidewalk cracks or an umbrella, but instead she asks Benni to borrow one of her imaginary instruments to play.

In "Call of Duty," yesterday, a boy named Slim accidentally kissed popular gamer Ty Carson when they were fighting over the water fountain. By lunchtime, Slim was telling people Ty kissed him. Bryson Wills, a fellow gamer who's friends with Ty, defended Ty at lunch. To prove that a kiss doesn't mean anything, Bryson kissed Ty on the cheek. So after school, Slim and his cronies chased Bryson and beat him up. Bryson's mom let him stay home today to recover. Ty has seen the videos on social media and knows what happened, so after school gets out, he races toward Bryson's house and stops to grab a fistful of roses on his way. He arrives when Bryson is taking a break from playing *Call of Duty*. Bryson accepts the roses and invites Ty inside.

"Five Things Easier to Do than Simeon and Kenzi's Secret Handshake" details those five things that are easier to do. First, it's easier to get through the hallway after the final bell rings. This is because Simeon is a big kid—and he carries Kenzi on his back, since Kenzi is the smallest kid in class. Second, it's easier to convince Ms. Wockley to not get the boys in trouble for the piggyback ride. She lets Simeon tell her why he should be allowed to carry Kenzi and sends the boys on their way. Third, it's easier to get to the neighborhood, which is a part of town that makes most people nervous. But to Simeon and Kenzi, it's where they can be themselves. The fourth thing easier than the handshake is choosing a snack from Fredo's corner store—though Fredo insults Simeon's size, and Kenzi steals Fredo's newspaper and lighter in retaliation. The fifth easier thing is making wishes. Simeon fashions a piece of newspaper into a candle, sticks it in his MoonPie, and offers it to Kenzi to blow out like a birthday cake. Kenzi wishes his brother, who's in prison, was here. Simeon and Kenzi perform their handshake. Satchmo finally comes up with a lifesaving plan in "Satchmo's

Master Plan.” Years ago, a rottweiler named Brutus bit Satchmo when Satchmo fetched a ball out of Brutus’s yard, and Satchmo’s friend Clancy did nothing to help. Satchmo has been terrified of dogs since then—but unfortunately, his neighbor, Mr. Jerry, just got a new dog. Satchmo is certain the dog will chase and try to kill him, so his plan to evade the beast includes swimming through a neighbor’s pool, breaking into another neighbor’s car, and if necessary, praying a school bus will fall from the sky and distract the dog. But as Satchmo reaches Mr. Jerry’s house and prepares to execute his plan, Mr. Jerry calls for Satchmo to come meet his dog—and the dog seems nice.

In “Ookabooka Land,” Cynthia “Say-So” Sower has been a comedian her whole life. Her grandfather and fellow comedian, Cinder, taught her how to perform and make jokes, and Cynthia wants nothing more than to make Cynthia’s mom, who has little time for Cynthia due to working and attending night school, laugh. So Cynthia passes out flyers after school inviting her classmates to her comedy show at 3:33, hoping her mom might skip school and come too. Nobody comes to the show, as usual. So Cynthia writes a joke on a piece of paper, stuffs it in an envelope with a stamp, and writes her own address on it. When she gets to the apartment she shares with her mom and Cinder, she offers Cinder the letter. Cinder’s memory has been slipping since his girlfriend, Miss Fran, died—so later, after he reads the letter, he’ll believe that he wrote the joke in it and will suggest Cynthia perform the joke at school.

In “How a Boy Can Become a Grease Fire,” today is a special day for Gregory Pitts: he’s going to ask his crush, Sandra, for her phone number. But Gregory’s friends Joey, Candace, and Remy have to get him ready first. Gregory is known for smelling bad, so Remy douses Gregory in body spray that only helps a little. Candace rubs lotion into Gregory’s hands, arms, and face, and Joey instructs Gregory to put VapoRub on his lips (he couldn’t find Vaseline). Greasy, smelly, and his eyes watering from the menthol in the VapoRub, Gregory walks to Sandra’s house. His friends watch as he reads Sandra a note of compliments and asks for her number.

In “The Broom Dog,” Canton used to agree that a school bus can be anything—but a year ago, when his mom, Ms. Post, was hit by a bus and injured while saving a kid who walked into the street, buses began to terrify him. To help him cope, the custodian, Mr. Munch, made Canton pretend emotional support dog out of a broom head. Shockingly, stroking the broom dog helped Canton. That was a year ago. Today, Canton sits outside and works on his homework while Ms. Post guides kids across **Portal Avenue**. When she’s done and he stands up, he forgets the broom dog is even on his lap. Ms. Post observes that the well-worn dog looks a bit like a school bus, and Canton tosses the broom head into the air—it’s a school bus falling from the sky.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jasmine Jordan – Jasmine is one of the protagonists of “Water Booger Bears” and is TJ’s best friend; she’s just returned to school after a month out sick with sickle cell anemia. She lives on Marston Street with her mom and has been best friends with TJ since he moved onto the street six years ago. This means the two are often teased at school, since many kids insist boys and girls can’t just be friends. Jasmine has relied on TJ’s sense of humor more than usual in the last year, as her parents divorced and his jokes were able to smooth things over between her parents when he visited Jasmine in the hospital. In the present, some things are just getting back to normal for Jasmine (like being able to walk home with TJ and teasing him for his prominent boogers), while other things remind her of her illness (such as TJ carrying her backpack for her, since it’s so heavy with textbooks and makeup homework). Jasmine doesn’t agree with TJ’s theory that humans are basically big boogers. Instead, she says she’d like to be a water bear, a microscopic creature that can withstand extreme conditions.

Terrence Jumper “TJ” – One of the protagonists of “Water Booger Bears,” TJ is Jasmine’s best friend. He lives in a small house on Marston Street and has for the last six years with his “new mom,” Ms. Macy. He and Jasmine have been best friends since he moved into the neighborhood, which regularly attracts unwanted attention at school from kids who believe that boys and girls can’t just be friends. Jasmine loves TJ for his sense of humor and his fearlessness when it comes to all things disgusting, like dog poop and bugs. He’s always willing to smash bugs (and sometimes eat them), and he has no issue picking chewing gum off of the bottom of their shoes. His sense of humor has helped her get through her parents’ divorce as well as her hospitalization for sickle cell anemia. On the walk home during the story, TJ and Jasmine argue about boogers and TJ proposes that people are just big boogers—something that makes Jasmine laugh. The story implies that TJ’s humor, however, is a coping mechanism that he uses to deflect from possible anger issues and a painful past. The story never mentions a father figure, but the kind and engaged Ms. Macy is TJ’s third female guardian after an “old mother,” whom TJ describes as “scary,” and a “*mother mother*” TJ says he’s never known.

Britton “Bit” Burns – The protagonist of “The Low Cuts Strike Again,” Bit is the unofficial leader of the Low Cuts. The Low Cuts are a group of four kids whose parents all have cancer—and the group is known for stealing pocket change. While most kids and teachers at school think of the Low Cuts as budding criminals, they only steal the change because they think they have to: cancer treatments have caused all four Low Cuts’ families to fall on hard times, so the kids receive free lunch and usually just want to buy extra food at lunch with the

change. Most people seem unaware of this, though, and they don't understand that the pressure of his mom having cancer causes Bit to act out and be volatile. He's known for knocking people out if they tease his friends, and so nobody is willing to cross him. In "The Low Cuts Strike Again," Bit shows how kind and generous he really is, and how this is so often misinterpreted: as the Low Cuts pool their money and purchase candy, adults think the kids are up to no good. But Bit just wants to get enough money to buy his mom, Ms. Burns, ice cream, since she's just started chemo again.

John John Watson – John John is a member of the Low Cuts, a group of four Latimer Middle School students whose parents have cancer. He wears his hair shaved almost bald and is known as the nicest member of the group. However, all four Low Cuts concern the teachers: they're considered to be at-risk and Ms. Wockley often scolds them, seemingly for no reason. The Low Cuts are known for stealing pocket change, but they only do this because their parents' cancer treatments have made money tight at home—the money usually just buys extra food at lunch. In "The Low Cuts Strike Again," the kids use their stolen change to buy cheap candies and resell them for enough money to buy Bit's mom, who has recently begun chemo, ice cream.

Francy Baskin – Francy is a member of the Low Cuts, a group at Latimer Middle School comprising four kids whose parents have cancer. The teachers worry about the kids in the group, as they steal pocket change—so they're thought of as budding criminals and are often scolded for no reason. However, they only do this because their parents' cancer treatments have made money tight at home—the money usually just buys extra food at lunch. In "The Low Cuts Strike Again," the kids use their stolen change to buy cheap candies and resell them for enough money to buy Bit's mom, who has recently relapsed and begun chemo, ice cream. Francy is the best in the group at math. She's the only girl in the group who is teased for the almost bald hairstyle they all wear, though Bit has knocked boys out for teasing her.

Trista Smith – Trista is a member of the Low Cuts, a group of four kids at Latimer Middle School whose parents have cancer. While the teachers and kids already look down on the Low Cuts and believe the kids are all budding criminals (they steal pocket change), Trista also has a reputation as someone nobody should cross: she has a sharp tongue and knows tae kwon do. She's the group's unofficial timekeeper as the Low Cuts use their money to buy cheap candies and resell them for enough money to buy Bit's mom, who has recently begun chemo, ice cream. Usually, the Low Cuts just use their stolen pocket change for extra food at lunch.

Ms. CeeCee – Ms. CeeCee is the elderly candy lady who lives a few blocks away from the school. She's short and her face and ankles are perpetually swollen, and it's implied that she's somewhat elderly. She sells candy and has for years because the neighborhood doesn't have a nearby corner store. In

addition to selling more expensive modern candies, she also sells retro candies like Mary Janes and Squirrel Nut Zippers. Though everyone in the neighborhood (adults and children alike) knows and loves her, she never allows children in her house when they come to buy candy—she doesn't want any adults thinking she might abduct their children.

Pia Foster – Pia is one of only two female skaters who attends Latimer Middle School. She's quiet and shy, but people dislike her because she uses her skateboard, which she calls Skitter, as her voice—and when she rides Skitter in the hallways, it's like Pia is shouting at everyone to get out of her way. Pia loves skating more than anything else, especially school. Because of this, her main goal every day is to get out of school as fast as she can so she can remember her deceased sister, Santi, by skating at the skate park. In "Skitter Hitter," Pia becomes the victim of bullying from four boys who attend the nearby boys' school. Pia knows the ringleader, Marcus, because she gets her hair done at Marcus's mom's salon—and she knows that Marcus's dad is abusive. Because of this, she empathizes with Marcus, but this isn't enough to stop the bullying. Marcus breaks Pia's board and Pia runs home. The next day, in the book's present, Pia has no idea that one of the boys with Marcus, Stevie, has come to her school with Skitter to apologize. Because she doesn't know, Pia instead goes with Fawn to the cemetery.

Stevie Munson – In "Skitter Hitter," Stevie attends Brookshire Boys Academy, where he's a victim of vicious bullying at the hands of Marcus Bradford. Money is tight at Stevie's house, so Stevie's mom buys him too-big shirts that he'll grow into—but that give Marcus the ability to write profanities on Stevie's shirt without Stevie knowing. Marcus also engages in other verbal and physical bullying, which Stevie hides from his mom. He's afraid to tell anyone because Marcus has threatened him—so when Marcus offers Stevie an opportunity to make the bullying stop, Stevie takes it. However, Stevie must help Marcus bully Pia Foster, something that makes sensitive, kind Stevie sick to his stomach. Stevie stays quiet and does nothing to stop Marcus from pushing Pia down and breaking her skateboard. But after this, Stevie is so ashamed of his actions that he tells his mom about the bullying and what happened. She drives him to Latimer Middle School to apologize to Pia and return her skateboard, but he never gets the opportunity.

Marcus Bradford – Marcus is a hulking bully at Brookshire Boys Academy. His favorite target is Stevie; Marcus draws penises and writes profanities on Stevie's shirts, and he also physically bullies Stevie in other ways. While Stevie sees Marcus purely as a mean antagonist, Pia knows there's a reason that Marcus bullies others: his dad is physically abusive to Marcus's mom, and Pia's mom even suggests that Marcus's dad might kill his mom. However, the fact that Pia knows this and has been kind to Marcus in the past doesn't help or change anything when Marcus decides to target her one day after

school. Marcus pushes Pia down and causes her skateboard to roll into the street, where a car breaks it in half.

Fatima Moss – The protagonist of “How to Look (Both) Both Ways,” Fatima is a Latimer Middle School student who has only recently been allowed to walk home on her own. Fatima’s mom and Fatima’s dad have white collar jobs and live in a house in a wealthier neighborhood, and they’re extremely protective of Fatima—hence their hesitation to allow Fatima to walk home alone. However, Fatima is desperate for some independence, so when her walks home on the first few days of school are disastrous (Fatima falls and gets caught in the rain), she downplays her experiences when she tells her parents—she doesn’t want to give them any reason to get her a babysitter again. To help herself feel in control of her walk, Fatima thinks of her mom’s scientific experiments and begins writing about everything that’s the same or different each day about her trip home. This entails counting how many steps there are between different landmarks; counting signs, sidewalk cracks, and houses; and noting how her daily greetings and conversations with Ms. Post and Benni change. At first, Fatima is a little afraid of Benni, a woman who dances down the street singing and playing imaginary instruments. But the two gradually develop a friendship, and walking together for a few blocks becomes a normal part of Fatima’s routine. On the day the story takes place, Benni asks Fatima how she plans to change the world. Fatima considers how she might help people, but decides her small actions wouldn’t be enough to actually do anything.

Benni Austin – Benni is a woman whom Fatima encounters every day on her walk home from school. Though seeing Benni is a daily occurrence, Benni changes every day: she’s always wearing a different outfit, she’s always singing a different song, and she’s always performing different dance moves and playing imaginary instruments. Fatima implies that Benni isn’t a person her parents would approve of her speaking to and might even consider dangerous, since Fatima specifically keeps Benni a secret from her parents so they won’t forbid her from walking home from school. But over time, Benni and Fatima form a sort of friendship. She normally accompanies Fatima for several blocks, but on the day that “How to Look Both (Both) Ways” takes place, Benni accompanies Fatima further than usual—and insists on hearing how Fatima plans to change the world.

Fatima’s Mom – Fatima’s mom is an environmental scientist; she’s logical and methodical, and she encourages Fatima to think about things in the same way. Along with her husband, Fatima’s dad, Fatima’s mom is protective of her daughter and Fatima fears that if her mom knew about how difficult the walk home from school sometimes is, she’d forbid Fatima from walking home alone. Fatima’s mom’s science lessons inspire Fatima to begin keeping a notebook of all the things that do and don’t change on her way home from school each day.

Fatima’s Dad – Fatima’s dad is a flight attendant, so he’s not often home. Fatima adores him and his job: she has his safety

presentation memorized. He’s extremely protective of his daughter, and it’s framed as a big thing that he and Fatima’s mom are allowing Fatima to walk home from school on her own. This is why Fatima doesn’t tell her parents about Benni—she’s afraid they’d get her a babysitter again.

Bryson Wills – Bryson Wills is the second-best gamer at Latimer Middle School. Bryson’s dad encouraged Bryson to grow his hair into an Afro some time before “Call of Duty” takes place, so Bryson’s screen handle is AfroGamer. He’s friends with Ty, and they sometimes play their favorite game, *Call of Duty, World War II*, together on the weekends. Bryson is the only kid to stand up for Ty when Slim begins accusing Ty of kissing him and of being gay. Bryson insists that a kiss doesn’t matter, and that it wouldn’t matter anyway if Ty is gay—and to prove his point, he kisses Ty on the cheek. While this saves Ty from bullying at lunch, Slim and some other boys attack Bryson after school and beat him up. To mentally escape and not have to think about it, Bryson stays home the next day and spends his day playing *Call of Duty*. When Ty appears on his doorstep after school with a fistful of roses, Bryson accepts the roses and invites Ty in.

Ty Carson – Ty is the best gamer at Latimer Middle School. He’s very popular at school and is known for doing things like climbing the lockers or rolling down the hallway. However, Ty’s life turns upside down one day when he and Slim are fighting over the water fountain and Slim accidentally kisses Ty on the cheek. It’s implied that Ty has been thinking about his sexuality before this, and it’s a lot for him to think about as he decides that the kiss wasn’t that weird, and he wasn’t bothered by it. However, by lunch, Ty has become the victim of Slim’s vicious rumor: that Ty kissed him, and that Ty is gay. Bryson stands up for Ty at lunch and gets Slim to leave Ty alone, but Ty learns that night that the boys beat Bryson up after school in retaliation. Wanting to thank his friend for his sacrifice, Ty races to Bryson’s house after school on the day that “Call of Duty” takes place with a fistful of roses stolen from someone’s yard.

Slim – Slim is a boy at Latimer Middle School who bullies Ty and then Bryson for potentially being gay. It’s very important to him to make it clear to onlookers that he *isn’t* gay, something he believes is in question after he accidentally kissed Ty. But he starts a rumor that Ty kissed him, and he leads the group that beats up Bryson to retaliate against Bryson for standing up for Ty.

Kenzi Thompson – Kenzi is Simeon’s best friend and is the smallest boy in his grade (he’s the same size as Bit Burns). Except for his small stature, there’s nothing defining about Kenzi: he’s average in terms of everything from his intelligence and his attractiveness to his humor. Kenzi’s dream is to be a famous lawyer one day, but because he and Simeon live on Chestnut Street—a low-income and supposedly frightening part of town—nobody aside from Simeon takes Kenzi’s dream seriously. Indeed, many adults Kenzi encounters at school and

in his community suggest that Kenzi is doomed to end up like his brother, Marcus, who's in prison. Kenzi idolizes Marcus and carries Marcus's old blue handball everywhere with him. He wishes for nothing more than for Marcus to get out of prison and possibly teach him to play handball. He and Simeon regularly perform a secret handshake that they learned from Marcus and Simeon's older brother, Chucky.

Simeon Cross – Simeon is Kenzi's best friend and the biggest kid in his class. Though he's friendly and jokes with everyone, it's also implied that everyone likes Simeon in part because it's just a bad idea to annoy or offend anyone Simeon's size. A jokester and a born performer, Simeon is able to convince Ms. Wockley to not get him in trouble for carrying Kenzi through the hallways. He suggests that he'd like to be an actor someday, and he fully supports Kenzi's dream of becoming a lawyer. A caring and empathetic person, Simeon dedicates a lot of his time to protecting Kenzi and making him feel supported. His brother, Chucky, stole a car a few years ago, but Kenzi's brother went to prison for the theft—and the boys still perform their brothers' secret handshake.

Ms. Wockley – Ms. Wockley is an administrator at Latimer Middle School. She guards the hallways and enforces rules after school. Among the students, she's known for being too nosy and strict. She takes special offense to the Low Cuts and to Simeon carrying Kenzi around on his back. However, though the kids don't seem to pick up on it, Ms. Wockley does seem to have a soft heart: she enjoys Simeon's daily explanations as to why he must carry Kenzi, and she lets the boys go without punishing them.

Satchmo Jenkins – A student at Latimer Middle School and the protagonist of "Satchmo's Master Plan," Satchmo is terrified of dogs. This is because a few years ago, a rottweiler named Brutus bit him when he entered Brutus's yard to retrieve a ball. Since then, Satchmo has discovered that he's okay around small dogs, but big dogs make him exceedingly nervous. So it seems like Satchmo's world is ending when his neighbor, Mr. Jerry, gets a big dog. Satchmo comes up with a detailed plan to evade the dog, which he believes is definitely going to chase him and try to kill him. However, as he runs through his plan, the story reveals that Satchmo is also still upset that his friend Clancy didn't try to help him when Brutus bit him years ago. Ultimately, the story ends with the hope that Satchmo will get over his fear—Mr. Jerry invites him to come meet the dog, and Satchmo thinks the dog looks friendly.

Ms. Adams – Ms. Adams was a strange older lady who lived in Satchmo's old neighborhood. Unlike most old ladies, she wasn't friendly—she never asked kids about their parents, and she had a mean rottweiler, Brutus, whom she kept chained in her yard. She could often be seen chewing tobacco in her window and yelling at kids to get off her grass. There were rumors that she mixed her tobacco slime in with Brutus's food to make him even meaner.

Sadani – Sadani is a man who lives in Satchmo's neighborhood; he never appears in person in "Satchmo's Master Plan." After his car was stolen several years ago (potentially by Chucky, Simeon's brother), he began buying broken-down cars that are impossible to start so that people can't steal them. Satchmo plans to escape Mr. Jerry's new dog by climbing on and then getting into Sadani's latest car, which Sadani never locks.

Mr. Jerry – Mr. Jerry is one of Satchmo's neighbors. His wife recently died, and the day before "Satchmo's Master Plan" takes place, he adopted a dog. Mr. Jerry seems unaware that Satchmo is terrified of dogs (and his dog in particular), so when Satchmo passes his house after school, Mr. Jerry invites Satchmo to come meet his dog.

Cynthia's Mother – Cynthia's mother is her hero. She works as a barista during the day and attends graduate school at night, and she's been working on various degrees for Cynthia's whole life. Though Cynthia admires her mom, she also desperately wants her mom to pay attention to her and to be home sometimes.

Cynthia "Say-So" Sower – The protagonist of "Ookabooka Land," Cynthia is the class clown at Latimer Middle School. She jokes with everyone, and even has a deal with Mrs. Stevens that lets her perform during the last five minutes of class in exchange for behaving the rest of the period. Cynthia learned to joke and to perform from her grandfather, Cinder, who used to own a liquor store and perform for customers while at work. Cynthia idolizes her grandfather as well as Cynthia's mother, who works and attends night school. Many days after school, Cynthia puts on a comedy show at the park near her apartment complex. She holds it every day at 3:33 p.m.—which is to give her mom the opportunity to come and share a laugh, though Cynthia's mom never comes. None of Cynthia's classmates come either. Every day after her comedy show, Cynthia writes jokes, which she seals in envelopes and addresses to her own apartment. She gives them to Cinder, since he's losing his memory and later thinks that he wrote the jokes. This way, Cynthia can perform jokes that Cinder supposedly wrote at school and tell him that his jokes are still working. She also regularly picks up cigarette butts for Cinder, which she calls "giggles" since they make him laugh.

Cinder/Cynthia's Grandfather – Cynthia's grandfather, Cinder, used to own a liquor store next to her apartment complex. But in the present in "Ookabooka Land," Cinder lives with Cynthia's mom and Cynthia and doesn't work anymore, as he's losing his memory. His memory started to go in the year after he lost the liquor store, which happened not long after his girlfriend Miss Fran died. He and Cynthia have always been close; he took Cynthia under his wing when she was just a baby and taught her everything he knew about comedy—he used to give performances at the liquor store on overturned crates, and he believes that absolutely everything can be funny. To commemorate his impromptu performances, the park that was

built where his liquor store used to be includes a crate-sized “stage,” which is labeled “Cinder’s Block.” He spends his days scribbling words and bits of jokes on pieces of notebook paper, which he wads up and throws around his bedroom. Cynthia regularly brings him “giggles” (cigarette butts that remind him of Miss Fran) and letters. In the letters, Cynthia writes her own jokes—and due to his failing memory, Cinder believes he wrote the jokes and suggests them to Cynthia.

Miss Fran – Miss Fran was Cinder’s girlfriend; she was an old lady who died when Cynthia was seven years old. A mail carrier who always wore red lipstick, Miss Fran would often stick stamps on Cynthia’s cheeks and threaten to mail her to Ookabooka Land. To help Cinder remember her, Cynthia picks up “giggles”—cigarette butts, preferably smeared in lipstick—for him.

Gregory “Greg” Pitts – Gregory is the protagonist of “How a Boy Can Become a Grease Fire.” He has finally worked up the courage to ask his crush, Sandra, for her phone number—but Gregory is known for being extremely smelly. So his three best friends, Joey, Candace, and Remy, step in to help him prepare to speak to Sandra. Gregory mostly accepts their help without question, but he’s unconvinced that he actually needs to use lotion to impress Sandra. He’s trusting, earnest, and kind, though the note he reads Sandra to ask for her number suggests he might also be a victim of bullying—he notes that Sandra never says mean things to his face, suggesting that plenty of other kids do.

Remy Vaughn – Remy is described as a boy at Latimer Middle School who could easily be popular—if he stopped trying so hard to be popular. He idolizes his older brother, Justin, and takes Justin’s advice on how to woo girls to heart, despite the fact that his friend Candace regularly tells him Justin has no idea how to impress a girl. He’s friends with Bryson, but his best friends are Candace, Gregory, and Joey. He supplies the body spray in “How a Boy Can Become a Grease Fire” that is supposed to make Gregory smell better before he asks Sandra for her number. He’s a supportive friend, if dramatic and cheesy.

Joey Santiago – Joey is one of Gregory’s best friends; he helps Gregory prepare to ask Sandra for her number. In addition to being a verbally supportive friend, Joey is in charge of supplying lip balm—though instead of bringing Vaseline, Joey brings a baggie full of mentholated VapoRub instead. He reasons that since VapoRub contains Vaseline, it’s basically the same thing.

Candace Green – Candace is one of Gregory’s best friends; she’s also Bryson’s cousin. She helps Gregory prepare to ask Sandra for her phone number, and she’s an essential part of this endeavor because she used to be close friends with Sandra and is the only one of Gregory’s friends who knows where Sandra lives. Candace introduces Gregory to the importance of moisturizing and assures him that if he takes care of himself,

Sandra will be impressed.

Sandra White – Sandra is the object of Gregory’s affections in “How a Boy Can Become a Grease Fire.” Gregory likes her mostly because she’s smart and kind to him. She’s perplexed by Gregory’s greasy appearance and his use of body spray, and it’s left ambiguous whether she shares her number with him or not.

Canton Post – Canton Post is Ms. Post, the crossing guard’s, son. He sits against the stop sign while she works every afternoon, doing his homework and holding a broom head in his lap. This is because last year, Ms. Post ran into the street after a boy who ran in front of a **bus** and was injured—and Canton began experiencing panic attacks about his mom dying. Mr. Munch, the custodian, turned the broom head into a pretend emotional support dog by drawing eyes and a mouth and gluing ears on it. In the year before “The Broom Dog” takes place, Canton has mostly gotten over his anxiety surrounding his mom dying. Indeed, he seems ready to give up the broom dog altogether when his story ends.

Ms. Post – Ms. Post is the crossing guard at Latimer Middle School; she has a son, Canton, who attends school as well. She is insistent on doing her job well and on protecting the kids crossing **Portal Avenue**—so much so that a year before the stories in *Look Both Ways* take place, she ran in front of a **bus** to rescue a student and was injured when the bus clipped her. Ms. Post greets and checks in daily with many students, even those who don’t cross the street at her crosswalk. Because of this, all the students who mention Ms. Post speak of her favorably.

Mr. Munch – Mr. Munch is the custodian at Latimer Middle School. He steps into a mentoring role for Canton Post after Ms. Post is hit by a **bus** and injured, and after he finds Canton having a panic attack in the bathroom. To help Canton, Mr. Munch makes him a pretend emotional support dog out of a broom head. He was inspired by the emotional support dog he got for his wife, Zena, who became extremely anxious when their daughter Winnie went away to college. To Canton’s surprise, the pretend dog helps.

Mason – Mason is Kenzi’s older brother; he’s in prison for stealing a car. However, he didn’t commit the crime: his best friend Chucky did, but Mason took the fall. Kenzi misses Mason, who loved playing handball though people say Mason wasn’t good at it. Kenzi carries Mason’s old blue handball everywhere.

Stevie’s mom Stevie Munson’s mother. She works hard to send Stevie to the private Brookshire Boys Academy, and saves money buy buying Stevie large shirts that he will grow into over time, but which leads to Stevie getting bullied. When Stevie tries to escape getting bullied by bullying other kids, his mother drives him to go and apologize to his victim.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Brutus – Brutus is the rottweiler who, several years before

“Satchmo’s Master Plan” takes place, bit Satchmo on the leg. Though Brutus was huge and bit Satchmo, Satchmo also wonders sometimes if perhaps his owner, Ms. Adams, was the real mean one—if she was guarding Brutus, rather than Brutus guarding her.

Mr. Fantana – Mr. Fantana is the life sciences teacher at Latimer Middle School.

Ms. Macy – Ms. Macy is TJ’s “new mother”; she’s been his guardian for the last six years and became his guardian about the time he moved to Marston Street. Ms. Macy is kind to both TJ and Jasmine. She habitually asks them how school was, and what they learned each day.

Trey – Trey is a bully at Latimer Middle School whom Bit knocked out for teasing John John. Trey also joins in bullying Ty.

Ms. Broome – Ms. Broome is an English teacher at Latimer Middle School. On the day the stories take place, she’s assigned her students to write about what it would be like to be an inanimate object.

Ms. Burns – Bit’s mother, Ms. Burns, has cancer and has recently relapsed. On the day “The Low Cuts Strike Back” takes place, she’s just had her first chemotherapy treatment, so the Low Cuts have spent their afternoons selling candy to get money to buy her ice cream.

Ms. Lane – Ms. Lane is the guidance counselor at Latimer Middle School.

Fawn Samms – Fawn is the only other female skater at Latimer Middle School, aside from Pia. The girls don’t know each other well, but like Pia, Fawn is quiet and reserved.

Santi Foster – Santi was Pia’s sister; she’s deceased in the story’s present. Two years before the events in “Skitter Hitter,” Santi died when a boy pushed her into oncoming traffic because he was jealous of how good of a skater Santi was.

Marcus’s Mom – Marcus’s mom runs a hair salon where Pia occasionally gets her hair done. Her partner, Marcus’s dad, is physically abusive—at one point, two years before the events in “Skitter Hitter,” Pia’s mom encouraged Marcus’s mom to leave before he kills her.

Pia’s Mom – Pia’s mom only appears briefly in “Skitter Hitter,” but she seems to care deeply for the safety and wellbeing of people in her community. Reeling after her daughter Santi’s sudden death, Pia’s mom tries to encourage Marcus’s mom to leave her physically abusive partner before he kills her.

Bryson’s Mom – Bryson’s mom allows him to stay home from school the day after Slim and some other boys beat him up.

Bryson’s Dad – Bryson’s dad allows him to stay home the day after Slim and some other boys beat him up.

Mr. Davanzo – Mr. Davanzo is the social studies teacher at Latimer Middle School.

Fredo – Fredo owns the corner store on Chestnut Street,

which is dark and always smells terrible. He seems to have a genial relationship with Kenzi and Simeon, though he doesn’t speak as though he believes the boys are ever going to make anything of themselves.

Chucky – Chucky is Simeon’s older brother; he drives the ice cream truck in the neighborhood. Though he stole a car a few years ago, his best friend and Kenzi’s brother, Mason, went to prison for the crime.

Clancy – Clancy was Satchmo’s best friend before he moved a few years ago. The boys were playing football when Brutus bit Satchmo, and Clancy didn’t help or defend Satchmo at all. Years later, Clancy’s inaction still hurts Satchmo.

Satchmo’s Mom – Inspired by Brutus biting Satchmo, Satchmo’s mom is attending school to become a vet. She works as an office assistant at a vet’s office, encourages people to get dogs, and tries to teach Satchmo how to act around dogs.

Mrs. Stevens – Mrs. Stevens is a math teacher at Latimer Middle School. To keep Cynthia from interrupting and derailing class, Mrs. Stevens allows Cynthia to perform standup comedy during the last five minutes of the period.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



PERSPECTIVE AND ASSUMPTIONS

Through its 10 stories detailing 10 different middle school students’ walks home from Latimer Middle School, *Look Both Ways* highlights the importance of not making assumptions about people—or, as the collection’s title suggests, in looking at things (or people) “both ways,” from multiple angles. In many of the stories, kids initially seem to be one thing—such as “at-risk,” a comedian, or doomed to end up in jail—but the stories quickly discredit, or add more depth to, those initial assumptions. For instance, the Low Cuts, a group of four kids known for stealing pocket change, are thought of at school as being dangerous kids. Teachers worry about them, and classmates are afraid to cross them. But “The Low Cuts Strike Again” reveals that the Low Cuts are actually just scared and are trying their best to cope with their parents’ cancer diagnoses—and they steal not because they’re greedy, but because their families are struggling financially and can’t afford small luxuries like extra snacks at lunch or ice cream after school.

“Five Things Easier to Do than Simeon and Kenzi’s Secret Handshake” makes clear the damage that assumptions can do.

Simeon and Kenzi live in a part of town that scares most people and Kenzi's brother is in prison, and every adult they encounter on their walk home implies that they expect Simeon and Kenzi—who appear like normal, goofy, happy preteen boys—to become criminals themselves. Ms. Post asks if Simeon is staying out of trouble, implying that she *expects* him to be in trouble. Fredo, who owns the corner store, quips that he expects to see Simeon and Kenzi's faces in the paper every day, which may be a joke but nevertheless hurts the boys' feelings. And nobody believes that Kenzi legitimately wants to be a famous lawyer someday—they don't expect a kid like him to aspire to such a profession, let alone to actually succeed. In addition to showing how this hurts Kenzi, who tightens up and feels sad whenever adults speak to him this way, this also implies that adults' assumptions about him will hinder him from achieving his goal—without adults' support, the path to becoming a lawyer will be much more difficult. Making negative assumptions about someone, this shows, can hinder that person's ability to succeed.

The collection also encourages readers to check their own assumptions about the book by opening ominously, with the declaration that a **school bus** has just fallen from the sky and none of the characters have noticed it—and then going on to include snippets about falling school buses in nearly all the stories. This creates tension, as it's impossible to tell if the collection is suddenly going to become a tragedy. Finally, in the last story, the mystery of the falling school bus is solved: the bus is actually not a real school bus, but a broom head that kind of looks like a bus. The broom head is supposed to be a pretend emotional support dog for a boy named Canton, who tosses it into the sky, and it literally falls back to earth. So, rather than the falling bus being a tragedy, Canton acknowledging that the broom head does indeed look a bit like a bus shows Canton that he's moved on and healed from earlier trauma (he no longer needs a pretend emotional support dog). The broom, which can also be a dog or a bus, shows that objects and people can be all sorts of different things—but it's essential to approach them with an open mind, rather than making harmful assumptions about who or what someone is.



INDEPENDENCE, FREEDOM, AND IDENTITY

In *Look Both Ways*, 10 short stories detail what happens as 10 different kids or groups of kids walk home from Latimer Middle School. The walk home from school, the collection suggests, is a unique time of day for these kids: it's the one time of day when the kids are mostly independent. While at school the kids must obey the whims of teachers, principals, and overbearing hall monitors—and while getting home after the walk means having a parent or guardian in charge—the walk home offers kids anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour of unsupervised time where they can figure out who

they are and how their world works. For some kids, this time alone offers the opportunity to experiment with a new identity. Bit Burns, for instance, is seen as an “at-risk” pickpocket at school and a frightened son at home (his mom, Ms. Burns, has cancer). But during the hour he spends with his friends after school, he becomes someone else entirely: a confident hustler whose only goal is to turn the 90 cents he and his friends stole at school into enough money to buy his mom ice cream to make her feel better after her first day back on chemo. Similarly, Pia is shy and quiet at school, but once she's free of the classroom, she can experiment with being loud and belligerent on her skateboard. On their own, the kids can be scientists, schemers, heroes, princes, and comedians, just as easily as they can be bullies—and they can try out a new identity every day during this time. By purposefully glossing over what the kids experience during school hours or when they're at home with their parents or guardians, the collection highlights the importance of giving kids the opportunity to be independent and experiment, on their own, with who they want to be.



JOY, RESILIENCE, AND CHILDHOOD

Many of the stories in *Look Both Ways* present what the collection suggests is children's unique ability to find joy in everyday moments, even when their lives are difficult or scary. The collection opens with “Water Booger Bears,” which overtly explores this idea. The story's protagonist, Jasmine, has just returned to school after a month in the hospital with sickle cell anemia, a serious and extremely painful condition. And though the story implies that Jasmine has experienced some anxiety about her return to school, and the difficult prospect of making up a month's worth of homework, the majority of the story is about Jasmine walking home with her best friend TJ, talking, laughing, and arguing about boogers. Jasmine and TJ's happiness at being back together, resuming their routine of walking home together after school, is palpable—it transforms a story that could easily be tragic into one that's surprisingly happy. The collection implies that it's their youth and their relative innocence that allows them to take this view and enjoy their walk home as much as they do.

Other characters similarly manage to find joy in difficult circumstances. In “Five Things Easier to Do than Simeon and Kenzi's Secret Handshake,” best friends Simeon and Kenzi live in a low-income area of town that frightens most people, and Kenzi's brother is in prison. And while the narrator describes the “symphony” of their street as one that highlights how difficult life is for the street's residents, it also describes Simeon and Kenzi's “young voices” that carry over the top of the symphony, like flutes—highlighting the boys' youth, innocence, and their unbridled joy. Cynthia, the class clown, goes out of her way to make her grandfather, who suffers from dementia, think that he's the one writing her jokes for her—something that's

horribly sad, but that allows Cynthia to find joy performing for her classmates and then telling her proud grandfather about how “his” jokes were received. Through instances like this, the collection celebrates children’s ability to find happiness wherever they might be. There’s always joy to be found, the collection suggests, if only one is willing to see it as such.



FEAR, FRIENDSHIP, AND SUPPORT

Though many stories in *Look Both Ways* highlight how joyful childhood can be, it also pays close attention to the fact that children often feel powerless and afraid, and it shows how fear can rule children’s lives. This is most prevalent in “Satchmo’s Master Plan,” in which Satchmo—who’s terrified of dogs after being bitten a few years ago—devises an absurd, multi-step plan to evade a neighbor’s new dog who, he believes, will obviously pursue him all over the neighborhood and kill him. But while Satchmo’s story is explicitly about fear of dogs, pain, and being vulnerable, fear lurks in some form or another in nearly every story, suggesting that fear is a somewhat universal childhood emotion. In “The Low Cuts Strike Again,” the Low Cuts, a group of four kids whose parents all have cancer, formed their group essentially due to the shared fear that they’ll lose their ill parents. And at the end of the story, the narrator describes the group’s leader, Bit, turning from a swaggering hustler into “a scared son” as he offers his mom ice cream—an identity the story implies is always lurking beneath the surface, but that Bit tries hard to conceal most of the time. The collection also suggests that fear is sometimes the impetus for bullying; “Call of Duty” shows how several boys’ fear of being called gay and not being masculine enough spurs the group to beat Bryson up for the supposed crime of standing up for his friend, Ty, the group’s initial target of homophobic bullying. In “Skitter Hitter,” because Stevie is afraid of his bully, Marcus, he agrees to help Marcus bully someone else. Whether it’s the fear of being alone, the fear of being in pain, or the fear of not fitting in, everyone, the collection suggests, feels fear in some form or another.

However, the collection also offers hope that by leaning on one’s friends, neighbors, and other community members, it is sometimes possible to overcome, or at least be able to manage, one’s fear. Satchmo trusts his neighbor Mr. Jerry, which allows him to see that Mr. Jerry’s new dog isn’t a fearful beast—and it’s implied he’ll go on to get over his fear of dogs. Canton, son of the crossing guard Ms. Post, stops having panic attacks after his mom is hit and injured by a **school bus** when he allows the janitor, Mr. Munch, to make him a pretend emotional support dog out of a broom head and talk to him about how to deal with fear. And while the Low Cuts can’t singlehandedly save their parents from cancer, their close friendship helps them cope and manage their difficult emotions. So while the collection shows how universal fear is, it also shows that leaning on friends and

mentors can be one of the most effective ways to manage one’s fear.



BULLYING

Bullying in some form or another shows up in many stories in *Look Both Ways*, and the collection makes it clear how damaging bullying can be. Overt and violent bullying comes to the forefront in two stories, “Skitter Hitter” and “Call of Duty.” The stories show how kids bully others to exert control and to make themselves look cool: Marcus bullies Stevie in “Skitter Hitter” to gain power and make other kids fear him, which he does by threatening to hurt or even kill Stevie if Stevie tells an adult about the bullying. Meanwhile, in “Call of Duty,” a group of boys violently beats up Bryson for standing up for his friend Ty, whom the boys teased for potentially being gay. Bullying Ty, and beating up Bryson, is how the bullies assert their power and dictate what kinds of behaviors and identities are considered acceptable at school. Being bullied transforms Ty from a popular, well-liked kid into one who’s afraid to so much as be at school. Standing up for Ty, meanwhile, turns Bryson into Ty’s hero—as the title of the story suggests, Bryson heeded the “call of duty” and did what he knew was the right thing and stood up for one of his friends.

However, the collection also encourages readers to look at bullies not as one-dimensional antagonists, but as people with their own lives, struggles, and reasons for bullying. Bryson says to the gaggle of boys bullying Ty, “Those that are you scar you,” implying that the boys could be targeting Ty because they themselves are anxiously questioning their sexualities—something the story never confirms, but which suggests there’s perhaps more to the boys’ bullying than cut and dry homophobia. In “Skitter Hitter,” Pia—the girl Marcus and Stevie bully together—knows that Marcus bullies others because his dad is physically abusive to Marcus’s mom. And Stevie, for his part, only agrees to join Marcus because he believes it’s the only way to get Marcus to stop bullying *him*. While learning the backstories of the collection’s bullies in no way excuses their behavior or minimizes the damage they cause, it nevertheless shows that bullies are people too—and are people who need support and empathy, so they can stop taking their pain out on others.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE SCHOOL BUS

School buses appear in some form or another in almost all the stories in the collection, and their various forms represent the collection’s focus on the

importance of looking at things in multiple ways. In some stories, like in “How to Look (Both) Both Ways” and “How a Boy Can Become a Grease Fire,” the school bus appears as an actual school bus, a large, yellow vehicle that ferries kids to and from school. But in “How a Boy Can Become a Grease Fire,” Gregory Pitts also sees a pattern on Sandra’s shirt that looks like school buses falling from the sky—it’s a pattern of yellow rectangles on a blue background, but through Gregory’s watery and painful eyes, the pattern blurs and becomes falling school buses. This illustrates how a person’s perspective and experiences—such as Gregory’s watery eyes, and the fact that he’s crying because he put mentholated VapoRub on his lips—changes how people see things. In other stories, like “The Low Cuts Strike Again,” Bit tells Trista that he’ll write his assignment to imagine himself as an object about being a flying school bus, while Cinder and Cynthia laugh about a school bus falling from the sky in “Ookabooka Land.” In these instances, the bus exists in a person’s imagination as something more than it actually is—Trista even observes that if Bit writes about being a flying school bus, he’ll actually be a spaceship. The school bus becomes a jumping-off point to inspire characters to think outside the box and use their imaginations—another form of looking at something “both ways.”

This symbolism becomes especially clear in the final story, “The Broom Dog.” The first several pages of the story lists all the things a bus can be to kids, from a courtroom to a stage, a nurse’s cot to a science lab. Every kid who rides the bus sees it differently—and what the bus is changes depending on the day and what’s going on in its passengers’ lives. The story goes on to detail Canton’s process of healing from trauma after his mom, the crossing guard Ms. Post, was hit by a bus a year ago. The bus suddenly becomes something terrifying to Canton after this, but the custodian, Mr. Munch, makes Canton a pretend emotional support dog out of a broom head. At the end of the story, Ms. Post observes that the well-loved broom dog looks more like a school bus—and as Canton tosses the broom/dog/school bus into the sky and catches it again, he imagines that a bus is actually falling from the sky. Canton learns to look at the broom head—and school buses—in many different ways.



PORTAL AVENUE

Portal Avenue is the physical representation of kids’ transformation from supervised students at school, to unsupervised and independent kids on their walk home. Latimer Middle School is on Portal Avenue, and it’s the busy road that many kids who walk home either follow or cross to get home. Crossing Portal Avenue, or at least passing the Portal Avenue crossing guard Ms. Post while staying on the same side of the street, represents the point at which kids are effectively on their own after school until they get home to their parents or guardians. It is, in this sense, a portal that kids pass through, one that gives them the freedom and

independence to experiment with their identities.




QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Atheneum edition of *Look Both Ways* published in 2019.

1. Water Booger Bears Quotes

☝ That made Jasmine spit air. See, even though TJ was ridiculous and annoying and sometimes gross, she appreciated the fact that he always made her laugh whether she wanted to or not. He was always there to chip some of the hard off. Tear at the toughness Jasmine had built up over the school year. It had been a rough one for her.

Related Characters: Jasmine Jordan, Terrence Jumper “TJ”

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

TJ and Jasmine are walking home, and TJ is explaining his theory that people are actually just big boogers to Jasmine.

The conversation about boogers seems, on the surface, to be lighthearted, nonsensical humor—it’s just Jasmine and TJ being kids, thinking about the world around them, making connections, and laughing about what they come up with. However, this passage highlights that there’s a deeper purpose to this humor. TJ is using it to cheer Jasmine up and remind her that life is funny, even if her life has been difficult for the last year or so. Humor, and their friendship, is helping Jasmine get through a rough time without letting her challenges harden her and rob her of joy.

Just after this passage, the story explains exactly what Jasmine has been up against (her parents divorced, and she was just hospitalized for sickle cell anemia). By all accounts, it has been a rough year for her—things have been really difficult, and that grim, frightening undertone runs through the story. But TJ’s jokes, and the fact that he’s still able to make Jasmine laugh, showcase the kids’ ability to find humor and happiness even in these difficult times. Despite everything else going on, they can still laugh together.

There was a hole in the screen door that had been there for years. TJ's foot had done that. He said sometimes his feet get mad and do things like kick or stomp or run. Don't blame him, he'd say. And Jasmine would laugh because his jokes were always funny even though she knew they were almost never jokes.

Related Characters: Jasmine Jordan, Terrence Jumper "TJ", Cynthia "Say-So" Sower, Cinder/Cynthia's Grandfather

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 13-14

Explanation and Analysis

Jasmine and TJ sit on the steps of TJ's house, and the narrator describes the hole in TJ's screen door and how it got there. The fact that TJ sometimes loses control of himself and lashes out violently shows that, like Jasmine, TJ is also dealing with some difficult, traumatic things in his past. It's implied that TJ is in foster care, and the few asides he's dropped throughout the story made it seem as though his previous foster situations weren't positive. But TJ continues to use humor to ground himself and gloss over the difficult periods in his past, as he does here. Jasmine shows TJ how much she cares for and respects him by laughing at his jokes, despite knowing that there's more to what TJ says than humor.

TJ using humor to get through things like this also connects to something the narrator says in the story "Ookabooka Land" later in the collection. In the story, Cynthia makes jokes because her grandfather, Cinder, has taught her that life is always funny—even when things don't *seem* funny, it's still possible to find the humor in something. TJ takes that to heart here by continuing to make jokes about something that really isn't funny to him. He's struggling, and he can't or won't speak honestly about his true feelings, so he turns to jokes instead. But still, there's humor to be found, and Jasmine is doing TJ a service by laughing along with his jokes.

2. The Low Cuts Strike Again Quotes

But the Low Cuts don't take just take to be taking. They don't steal for fun. Actually, they don't even like doing it. But they do it because they have to. At least they feel like they have to. Before they named themselves the Low Cuts, they were part of another set that they had no choice but to be down with. The free-lunchers.

Related Characters: Britton "Bit" Burns, John John Watson, Trista Smith, Francy Baskin

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

After introducing the Low Cuts as a group of kids who are known for ruthlessly stealing pocket change, the narrator explains that the kids don't steal for kicks. Rather, they steal because their parents can't afford lunch money for them. Immediately, this encourages readers to see these four kids as kids, rather than as hardened criminals—which, throughout the story, seems to be how many of their teachers and classmates sees them. The Low Cuts, this passage makes clear, are children from families going through rough times, and they're turning to desperate measures just so they can get enough to eat at lunch.

However, this passage also suggests that the Low Cuts might be misguided; they might not even need to steal in order to get enough food at lunch. Noting that the kids steal because "they feel like they have to" implies that the kids might be able to go about getting more food in a different way. This highlights how young the kids are, and how limited their options seem exactly because they're children who feel powerless and out of control. They steal to feel more in control of their lives than they actually are, and since it seems to them like their only option, they're unwilling to consider other avenues.


"I hate that sound. Matter of fact, I'd be a school bus that could fly. That way I ain't gotta hit the brakes and make all that noise." Bit looked over at Trista. "How 'bout that?"

"All I'm gon' say is, I could totally see you, a school bus falling from the sky." Trista laughed to herself, but just loud enough for Bit to hear.

"Well, at least then I'd be a rocket."

Related Characters: Britton "Bit" Burns, Trista Smith (speaker), Ms. CeeCee

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis



As the Low Cuts walk to Ms. CeeCee's house, Trista tries to talk to Bit about their homework to imagine themselves as an object. Bit is only grudgingly playing along as he suggests he'd be a flying school bus.

In saying he'd be a flying school bus, Bit shows that he's using his imagination to try and come up with ways to fix things in his world that he doesn't like. He objects to the sound of a bus's screeching brakes, so the ideal fix, in his mind, is to make the buses fly and eliminate the need for brakes altogether. This exchange shows Bit and Trista thinking critically about their world and how they could change it to make it better, while also highlighting their youth and their ability to tap into their imaginations.

Then, bringing up the bus more generally—and a bus falling from the sky specifically—reiterates that buses are how the collection encourages characters and readers to look at things multiple ways. Bit sees conventional school buses as annoying, so he decides to transform them into something else: flying school buses. Though the first story in the collection references a falling school bus in a way that seems ominous, this conversation isn't ominous at all. It's lighthearted, and it's how Bit and Trista deepen their friendship while also thinking about their homework. And finally, as Bit says he'd be a rocket, this shows again how buses can transform into something entirely different from a rocket. A bus in this passage goes from being an annoyance to something far more useful and less obnoxious, and then it transcends being a bus and becomes something different. And all of this, the story suggests, is just a matter of perspective.

“Do I want to know what y'all up to?” she asked, and they just looked at her like she hadn't asked it. Like she hadn't said anything. So she acted like she hadn't said anything either. “Wait right here.”

Related Characters: Ms. CeeCee (speaker), Britton “Bit” Burns, Trista Smith, Francy Baskin, John John Watson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

The Low Cuts have just asked to buy candy from Ms. CeeCee, something that immediately makes her suspicious. The fact that Ms. CeeCee goes immediately to assuming that the Low Cuts are up to something nefarious speaks to

how the story implies many people in the community think of the Low Cuts. Even when they're doing something as seemingly innocent as purchasing cheap candy, people expect them to be up to no good. And this highlights the fact that most people, it seems, don't realize that the Low Cuts steal and come up with hustling schemes (like their current one to sell penny candy at a huge markup so they can afford ice cream) because they feel like they have to.

However, when the Low Cuts don't respond to Ms. CeeCee, and she plays along and doesn't press the issue, it also implies that the Low Cuts might have more allies than the story initially suggested. Ms. CeeCee isn't so concerned about what the kids are up to that she's not willing to sell to them, and she generally seems very interested in making sure the kids use their manners and otherwise behave. So, there may be some understanding among adults that these kids aren't all bad, but it's left somewhat ambiguous how many people feel this way about the Low Cuts.

●● The other Low Cuts watched Bit the hustler, Bit who could turn ninety cents into nine bucks—into ice cream—turn into a son. A son who was scared. A son who loved his mom.

Related Characters: Britton “Bit” Burns, Ms. Burns, Francy Baskin, Trista Smith, John John Watson

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

The Low Cuts have just gotten to Bit's house with four cups of soft serve to give to Bit's mom, Ms. Burns. Her cancer has come back, so she just had her first day of chemotherapy earlier.

As Bit proudly offers the ice cream to Ms. Burns, his friends witness a huge change in who Bit is. At school, Bit presents himself as a tough guy who is more than willing to punch anyone who picks on his friends, or who tries to keep him from stealing their change. On the streets this afternoon, Bit maintained that persona as he coached his friends through purchasing penny candy and reselling it at a premium so they had enough money to afford the ice cream. But now, Bit is showing his friends who he really is: a frightened boy who just wants to make his mom happy and help her feel better. This identity, the collection suggests, is lurking under the surface in Bit all the time. But few people ever have the opportunity to see it, so they never have the information that might help them humanize Bit and think



better of him.

Noting how frightened Bit is also highlights that right now, as his mom faces cancer again, Bit is ruled by fear: his life could change at any moment, depending on how his mom's treatment goes. He feels scared and powerless, and he tries to hide that so he can push through and get through the day. But underneath, Bit is scared and reliant on a parent who, if treatment doesn't go well, could easily die.

3. Skitter Hitter Quotes

“Not that I'm not glad you're washing your own clothes, but detergent and bleach ain't free,” she'd say. And what Stevie couldn't say was, *I'm sorry, but there's a boy in my school drawing on my clothes*, because then his mother would say, *I don't send you to private school for boys to draw private parts on your private uniform that you still have to grow into*, and *Do I need to call the principal?* and Stevie didn't want to hear none of that. Stitches, remember? Maybe even ditches. Besides, Mr. Brock, the principal, already knew. He'd seen the pictures and words and all he ever said was, *Boys will be boys*.

Related Characters: Stevie's mom (speaker), Stevie Munson, Marcus Bradford, Pia Foster

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator explains that Stevie washes his shirt, which Marcus draws on, every day and doesn't tell his mom why. He doesn't think she'd take him seriously, and he's afraid of retaliation from Marcus.

This passage highlights how the adults in Stevie's life don't take Marcus's bullying seriously, and how this then makes Stevie feel like he's on his own and powerless to change anything. Telling his mom, he believes, isn't going to do anything but make her angry at and disappointed in him for allowing the bullying to happen. This, of course, ignores the fact that Marcus has terrified Stevie by threatening to hurt or even kill him (the mention of stitches and possibly ditches) if he tells anyone. Further, Stevie also knows that his mom believes that the principal will not just be willing to put a stop to the bullying, but will be more than happy to do so. And this, Stevie insists, couldn't be further from the truth. Mr. Brock doesn't think Marcus drawing on Stevie's shirt or beating him up after school is anything to get concerned about. Her saying that “boys will be boys” implies

that it's normal and expected for boys to be cruel and violent to one another, and that childhood conflicts aren't something adults need to get involved with.

But on the whole, the story shows how Stevie not having any support from the adults who might be able to help him doesn't stop the bullying. Indeed, it only perpetuates the cycle and causes Stevie to decide to help Marcus bully Pia.

“Pia felt that same itch when she saw Marcus and the boys yesterday. When she saw the knots at their throats and felt a knot in hers. Because she knew Marcus. She knew where his mother's black eyes were coming from. Where her swollen jaws and forehead lumps were coming from. Because that same day Pia sat under the dryer two years back, after her wash and before the French roll was put in, she heard her mom ask Marcus's mom when she was going to leave Marcus's father.”

Related Characters: Pia Foster, Marcus Bradford, Marcus's Mom, Pia's Mom, Santi Foster

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator is explaining how Pia felt the same kind of itchy when she realized Marcus and his cronies were going to target her as she did when she had her hair done in a French roll in preparation for her sister Santi's funeral. The “itch” Pia feels seems to be a stand-in for feeling constricted, and as though she has no choice but to continue with whatever she's doing or whatever her mom wants her to do (such as get her hair done). This speaks to how powerless Pia feels much of the time.



Then, the “knots” in Pia and Marcus's throats suggest that bullying isn't actually fun for Marcus—it's something that makes him feel bad, even if it's also how he gains power. And more generally, this passage encourages readers to understand that Marcus doesn't bully others because he thinks it's fun. He bullies others because he witnesses his dad physically abusing his mom at home—to such a degree that soon after this passage, Pia's mom tells Marcus's mom that Marcus's dad is going to kill her if she doesn't leave him. Bullying others is how Marcus feels more in control of his life when, at home, he has little control over what happens to him or to his mom. This insight turns Marcus into a more sympathetic character. It doesn't excuse his behavior or the terrible things he does to Stevie and Pia, but it encourages readers to see him as three-dimensional and not just an evil


antagonist.

4. How to Look (Both) Both Ways Quotes

●● 27. SCHOOL CROSSING is the first sign. A picture of an adult and a child. I think. Weird, because kids cross by themselves.

Related Characters: Fatima Moss (speaker), Ms. CeeCee, Ms. Post

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

Fatima is walking home from school, recording everything that's the same and everything that has changed since her walk home yesterday. This includes counting the various signs she encounters on Portal Avenue, the first of which denotes a school crossing zone. Fatima's observation about the figures on the sign suggests that there's some disconnect between how adults might like to think of a kid's walk home from school, and what the reality of walking is. The sign suggests that kids are supervised on their walks home, and they walk home hand in hand with a trusted adult. In reality, though, while there are adults who supervise kids intermittently after school (like Ms. CeeCee and Ms. Post), kids are pretty much on their own after school until they get home to their parents.

As Fatima notes, kids cross the street by themselves—during this time after school, they're almost entirely independent. And however adults might feel about this, being independent gives Fatima and the other young characters in the collection the opportunity to figure out who they are, away from adults and the constraints of school and home. The fact that Fatima is walking down Portal Avenue as she writes this also highlights Portal Avenue's symbolism: as its name would suggest, it's a "portal" of sorts that ushers Fatima and other walkers from school to home, offering them a place and a time to be independent.

●● [...] but she left out the part about the woman in the pink pants because she knew if she told her mother, [...] that would be the end of walking. That would be the end of a babysitterless life. Back to cheese-toast snack time and other coughy kids whining about what they want to watch on TV. And she didn't want that because even though the first walk was rough, anything was worth trying again if it meant she could come home and be alone in her house, where she could microwave nuggets and pretend to be a flight attendant like her father.

Related Characters: Fatima Moss, Benni Austin, Fatima's Mom, Fatima's Dad

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

When Fatima tells her parents about her walk home on the first day of school, she omits telling them about running into Benni, a woman wearing a wild outfit who sang and danced. First, Fatima makes it clear that her parents are very protective of her. They want her to be safe, and encountering a strange dancing woman is something Fatima believes would make her parents think she isn't safe walking home alone. Benni didn't actually seem threatening, but as misguided as Fatima's parents might be in this regard, this illustrates that her parents support her and care about her well-being.

Fatima is getting to the age where she desperately craves independence and a "babysitterless life." She wants to be her own boss and to be able to decide what she wants for a snack in the afternoons and what she'd like to watch on TV. So, even if her walk home today wasn't great (she fell and skinned her knees, and she was a little concerned about Benni), she's intent on getting through this difficult transition period so she can enjoy her independence in the afternoons. She's moving away from her parents and is starting to protect time that belongs only to her, a sign that she's growing up.



●● 50. I look both ways.

Difference: Then I think about Ms. Broome's assignment. What could I be? What do I wish I could become to change the world? I think about telling Benni I might want to be wet cement to fill the cracks in the sidewalk. Not to hide. But to stop someone else from tripping. Or maybe I'd be an umbrella to keep rain from someone's head. Keep someone dry in a storm. But I don't say none of that to Benni, because I don't think either of those things would change the world. So I tell her I don't know.

I don't know. I don't know how to change the world.

Then I ask her if she'd maybe let me borrow one of her instruments to play.

Related Characters: Fatima Moss (speaker), Benni Austin, Ms. Broome

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

Fatima has told Benni about Ms. Broome's writing assignment (to imagine oneself as an object), and Benni's response is to demand that Fatima tell her how she's going to change the world.

Interestingly, the things Fatima considers being—cement and an umbrella—would change the world. On her first day walking home, Fatima tripped on a gaping crack, and on the second day, she got caught in a storm. Had someone repaired the sidewalk or been there to offer her an umbrella, Fatima's world would've changed. Indeed, Fatima's world changed because someone *was* there to offer her an umbrella: Benni. Benni has helped change Fatima's world by sticking around, encouraging Fatima to think, and showing her how fun it can be to be spontaneous and not care what other people think. And offering her the umbrella on the second day of school also made Fatima's walk home more pleasant. But Fatima is trying to think bigger than these small gestures right now, so fixing the sidewalk or being an umbrella don't seem as meaningful to her as the story suggests they really are.

However, though Fatima doesn't fully grasp what she's doing, she is changing the world by asking to borrow one of Benni's imaginary instruments. In doing so, Fatima solidifies her friendship with Benni by showing Benni that she's happy to exist in Benni's fantastical, imaginary world. Reaching out to her in this way broadens Fatima's understanding of how people can be, and it also makes Benni feel respected and secure. Fatima essentially chooses to become a respectful friend, and in doing so, she changes the world in a small way.

5. Call of Duty Quotes

●● And by lunch, Slim—whose real name was Salem—had twisted the story, told everyone Ty kissed *him*. So when Ty walked into the cafeteria, he walked into a minefield. A war zone. Everyone locked and loaded, firing at him.

Related Characters: Ty Carson, Slim

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator is explaining how Slim accidentally kissing Ty on the cheek while they fought over the water fountain morphed into a very different rumor that Ty purposely kissed Slim. By using violent, war-themed language, the story suggests that this rumor is going to make Ty a victim.

While the cafeteria is ostensibly just a place where students eat their lunches, it becomes something entirely different after Slim begins spreading the rumor that Ty kissed him. It's something that's going to explode in various places, without warning, like a minefield—potentially hurting Ty. And noting that everyone is “locked and loaded, firing at him” suggests that Ty doesn't have any allies in the cafeteria. He's totally on his own, and any of his classmates or peers could fire and take him down in an instant.

The fact that the cafeteria undergoes this transformation at all highlights that at Latimer Middle School, kids on the whole aren't comfortable exploring their sexualities. If anyone—like Ty and Slim—offer any indication that they might not be entirely heterosexual, the whole student body is going to turn on them. Ty, the story has implied, is genuinely considering his sexuality and wasn't bothered by the kiss. But Slim clearly is, and to protect himself, he turns Ty into the bad guy. This is bullying, but it highlights how afraid Slim is of being in Ty's place, and how vulnerable of a spot Ty is in now.

●● “Am I? I think Slim is. Matter of fact, I think all y'all are.” Bryson pointed at all the jokesters. “Like my father always says, ‘Those that scar you are you.’” He checked their faces, and it wasn't hard to tell that they had no idea what that meant. He looked at Ty, and Ty's face looked no different. A gem dropped in the mud. “The point is, I don't like boys. Not like that. But I like Ty.” He patted Ty on the back. “Matter of fact, I like him more than I like y'all, and for real for real, I don't see what the big deal is. A kiss on the cheek? That's what all y'all roasting him for? A kiss on the cheek? Really?”

Related Characters: Bryson Wills (speaker), Slim, Ty Carson, Bryson's Dad

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 88-89

Explanation and Analysis

When Bryson hears that Slim and other boys are bullying Ty for potentially being gay at lunch, he sits down with Ty and defends him. Another boy has just suggested that Bryson is gay, if he's so concerned about defending Ty.

Using his dad's advice, Bryson tries to get the bullies (and readers) to see that bullies don't always lash out indiscriminately. They target people because whatever their victims are doing makes them uncomfortable because they fear they might look or think the same way. So, what Bryson is saying is essentially a drawn-out way of suggesting that the bullies are only picking on Ty because they're anxiously questioning their own sexual preferences.

However, when this goes over the boys' heads, Bryson changes tack. He realizes that what matters here isn't necessarily seeking revenge on the boys. What matters is making Ty, "a gem dropped in the mud," feel better. In this sense, Bryson is doing as the story's title suggests and answering the "call of duty" to defend his friend. His approach is then to make it clear that as far as he's concerned, a person's sexuality isn't anyone else's business—the boys are wasting their time and making fools of themselves by focusing so intently on Ty's sexuality. But while this works in the short term to deflect boys' attention away from Ty, this also turns Bryson into a target later.

☝ Bryson shuffled his way over to the door, his body still feeling like garbled pixels. He looked through the peephole like his father taught him. Unlocked the dead bolt, turned the knob, pulled the door open.

"Ty?"

Ty stood there breathing heavy, holding three or four roses. It was hard to tell exactly how many because they were mangled. The human video game seemed to glitch in red streaks. The same red as the petals of the flowers was dripping from his shaking palm.

Related Characters: Bryson Wills (speaker), Ty Carson

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

After school, Ty races to Bryson's house with a fistful of stolen roses to thank him for defending him yesterday. Bryson has spent his day playing the video game *Call of Duty*, and he's so engrossed in the game that even though he's currently taking a break to get a snack, he still thinks of things in terms of the video game. His body feels like "garbled pixels," and it seems to him that the "human video game" is glitching when he notices that Ty is bleeding. More generally, though, this filter is how Bryson is trying to look at the world right now so that he can escape the truth of what happened yesterday: that boys beat him up for defending Ty. The video game offers an escape and a lens through which to see the world that makes things seem easier and less threatening.

As Bryson looks at Ty's bleeding hand, the video game language also highlights how difficult it is for Bryson to understand exactly what he's seeing. Ty picked the roses so that he can thank Bryson for defending him and for taking a beating after school on his behalf. Throughout the story, Bryson has minimized what he did in standing up for Ty. He did just what he thought he had to—he heeded the "call of duty." But now, with Ty in front of him, Bryson is forced to realize that he made a huge difference in Ty's life. And Ty is trying to thank him and make up for the pain Bryson has suffered in the only way he knows how.

6. Fives Things Easier to Do... Quotes

☝☝ She turned and added, "When you two grow up, I really hope you become more than horse and jockey, because people lose *a lot* of money betting on horse races."

"Not if they bet on us," Simeon zapped right back at her.

"Plus, I want to be a lawyer," Kenzi said, trying to control the sting in his throat.

Related Characters: Ms. Wockley, Simeon Cross, Kenzi Thompson (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

As Ms. Wockley sends Simeon and Kenzi away without getting them in trouble, she warns them that they won't be successful adults if they keep fooling around like they have been (she was going to get them in trouble for Simeon

carrying Kenzi on his back). Ms. Wockley’s assumption here is hurtful to Kenzi. The way she frames her wish—that she hopes they become more than horse and jockey—suggests that she doesn’t really expect them to become much more than that. She doesn’t believe in their potential, and this causes her to unwittingly hurt Kenzi’s feelings. The passage illustrates this idea by noting the sting in Kenzi’s throat, implying that he feels like he’s going to cry. It hurts him to hear time and again that the adults in his life don’t believe he genuinely wants to be a lawyer, or if they do, they don’t think he’ll actually achieve that dream. The collection never specifies what, exactly, Ms. Wockley’s role is at Latimer Middle School, but she’s clearly an authority figure with a lot of control over kids’ lives. So, her lack of support for Kenzi and Simeon deprives the boys of someone who, if she believed in them more, could be an important advocate.

●● A kingdom full of princes, like Kenzi and Simeon, princes no one ever bet on anyway.

Related Characters: Kenzi Thompson, Simeon Cross, Ms. Wockley, Ms. Post

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator is explaining that Kenzi and Simeon live in a lower-class neighborhood where most people are scared to walk—but to the boys, it’s a “kingdom.” Using this kind of language to describe the neighborhood makes it clear that Kenzi and Simeon aren’t afraid of where they live. It’s home to them, after all, and it’s where they can rule as “princes.” Referring to the boys as “princes” suggests that they do feel powerful in their neighborhood, as it’s where they can be themselves and dictate what they do with their lives. In this sense, the neighborhood is a kind of paradise for them.

However, being from this neighborhood has downsides, such as that nobody ever bets on the “princes” from the neighborhood. This helps explain why adults from Ms. Wockley to Ms. Post continually expect Simeon and Kenzi to be in trouble, or to fail. Nobody expects them to succeed, because they don’t expect kids from this neighborhood to be able to do much with their lives. So though Kenzi genuinely dreams of becoming a lawyer one day, the adults who might be able to help him achieve his goal don’t take him seriously because of where he comes from. This attitude could make his path to success more difficult,

essentially setting him up to fail.

●● Such silly things to take, a gossip newspaper and a lighter, as if Fredo ain’t own a store. One with a bunch of newspapers and matches and lighters behind the counter. But still, it was about the principle. The loyalty. The brotherhood.

Related Characters: Simeon Cross, Kenzi Thompson, Fredo

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

When Fredo insults Simeon’s weight, Kenzi snatches Fredo’s newspaper and lighter to impress upon the store owner that his comments to Simeon were inappropriate. Describing the things Kenzi takes as “silly” highlights how powerless kids can be to change things in their lives. Kenzi’s only recourse, he believes, is to take these small things that don’t really mean much. But more than that, Kenzi doesn’t have the time, power, or the willingness to come up with something that might actually make Fredo feel bad. After all, Kenzi is trying to be good and not get in trouble so that he can become a lawyer one day. This element makes it clear that despite Fredo’s insult, his relationship with the boys is generally positive and supportive. Kenzi takes these items trusting that Fredo isn’t going to call the police or otherwise get him in serious trouble—something that could hinder Kenzi’s plans to become a lawyer.



The fact that Kenzi is willing to defend Simeon in this way speaks to the strength of the boys’ friendship. They do everything together, including look out for each other. And this means stealing silly things to make a point or getting in trouble with Ms. Wockley for Simeon carrying Kenzi through the hallways. What matters most to them is supporting each other—their methods don’t matter as much as the point they make.

7. Satchmo’s Master Plan Quotes

●● Guess he was ready now. And not for a small one. Not for a furry football. But for a big, husky thing that looked like it was mixed. Some German shepherd. Some Labrador. Some rottweiler, some monster that Satchmo wasn’t sure was there or not, but decided it was so.

That was all he needed to start devising plans. Escape routes.

Related Characters: Satchmo Jenkins, Mr. Jerry, Brutus

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

Satchmo's neighbor, Mr. Jerry, has just gotten a dog a few months after losing his wife. Satchmo has been bitten by a dog before, so he's terrified and convinced that Mr. Jerry's dog is going to kill him. In general, this passage highlights how powerless kids can feel, and how that powerless can easily transform into fear that rules a child's life. Being bitten by Brutus years ago has given Satchmo one goal: to avoid any dog who might bite or kill him, which to him means all big dogs. Even though Satchmo hasn't met the dog or seen it up close yet, he's convinced that it's part "monster," which shows how he thinks of dogs: they're all evil creatures intent on hurting people. This belief is so strong that it leads Satchmo to come up with an elaborate plan to evade the dog after school in the story's present, showing again how Satchmo's fear of the dog is influencing his actions.

☝☝ *Where do you think Clancy is?*

What do you think he's doing right now?

Throwing Hail Marys?

Running the opposite way?



Not helping his teammates?

Why didn't he chase Brutus?

Why didn't he tackle him?

If he would've tackled him, you would've barked at it. Growled it so it knew what that felt like.

Related Characters: Satchmo Jenkins (speaker), Clancy, Brutus, Mr. Jerry

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

As Satchmo gets close to finishing running through his plan to evade Mr. Jerry's new dog, he starts to wonder why his friend Clancy didn't step in to help years ago when Brutus bit Satchmo. This reveals that perhaps a lot of Satchmo's fear surrounding dogs is also tied up in feelings that he was betrayed and abandoned. Clancy was Satchmo's friend, but

he wasn't there when Satchmo needed him most. And now, Satchmo is left to wonder if Clancy is just a bad friend and teammate. Football was the boys' shared love, and Satchmo figures that Clancy is still playing football. But it's hard for Satchmo to think of Clancy actually being a team player and helping his teammates when he wasn't there for such an important moment in Satchmo's life.

Then, Satchmo noting that he would've barked and growled at Brutus to show him what it felt like to be bullied highlights the power of friendship. This only would've happened if Clancy had stepped in and helped defeat Brutus, but he didn't, so Satchmo was left totally on his own and couldn't help the dog see that he was doing something hurtful and violent. Working together to evade Brutus, Satchmo believes, would've allowed Satchmo to feel more in control and more capable of encouraging the dog to be nicer, even if only in Satchmo's imagination.

8. Ookabooka Land Quotes

☝☝ That's all Say-So ever wanted. A love thing with her mother, the way her grandfather had with Miss Fran—through laughter. And since her mother was too busy to break, well then, anyone would have to do. A smile is a smile. A *ha* is a *ha*. So every day she'd rattle off her jokes at the end of class, bathing in her classmates' crack-ups.

Related Characters: Cynthia "Say-So" Sower, Cynthia's Mother, Cinder/Cynthia's Grandfather, Miss Fran

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator explains that Cynthia, the class clown, isn't a jokester just because she likes making people laugh. Rather, Cynthia makes jokes in school because at home, the one person she wants to laugh with her and at her—her mother—is too busy to spend time with her in a way that Cynthia would appreciate. This shows that Cynthia isn't as supported at home as she wants to be; in many ways, she's left to parent herself since her mom isn't around much. And she's left scrounging for laughs wherever she can get them. The laughs, moreover, are framed as something that Cynthia needs to get through her day. Saying that she "bath[es]" in them suggests that just like many people shower or bathe daily to clean themselves, Cynthia needs a similarly cleansing opportunity to make people laugh in order to feel good about herself.


This also casts a sad shadow over the entirety of “Ookabooka Land.” Cynthia is a jokester, so in theory, this should be a happy, funny story. But instead, because of the reasons why Cynthia likes comedy so much, the story is actually quite sad. It’s about all the ways that Cynthia feels neglected and unloved, and all the ways in which she tries to manufacture support.

☝ “What would happen if a school bus fell from the sky?” Cynthia thought for a second, a smile creeping onto her lips. “I mean...is it coming from Ookabooka Land?”
Silence.

Just that thought between them. Cynthia looking at her grandfather, her Cinderella, her cinder block. The man who taught her to perform. Taught her that life is funny most of the time, and the times it ain’t funny are even funnier. And there ain’t no forgetting that.

Related Characters: Cinder/Cynthia’s Grandfather, Cynthia “Say-So” Sower (speaker), Miss Fran

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 153

Explanation and Analysis

As Cynthia is leaving Cinder’s room, she asks what joke he’s working on that he mentioned earlier. His joke begins the question of what would happen if a bus fell from the sky.

Immediately, this reframes the falling school bus into something that’s not tragic at all. Indeed, if it’s a part of one of Cinder or Cynthia’s jokes, it must be funny, since both Cynthia and Cinder have a way of making everything funny. In this passage, this emerges in the mention of Ookabooka Land, an imaginary place that Cinder’s deceased girlfriend, Miss Fran, made up. Bringing her up like this could be sad, but instead, Cinder and Cynthia go on to laugh together about this.

As the passage goes on to explain, Cynthia and Cinder are able to find the humor in this because Cinder has taught Cynthia that absolutely everything can be funny if she only looks at it right. For instance, it doesn’t seem funny that Cinder is losing his memory and believes that he’s the one writing Cynthia’s jokes—when really, Cynthia writes the jokes herself and then lets him think he wrote them. And yet the jokes that they come up with are funny and entertain

Cynthia’s classmates on a daily basis.

Finally, this passage also highlights how much Cynthia idolizes her grandfather. Cinder is her “cinder block,” or her foundation. He taught her how to be, how to perform, and what’s funny. He taught her how to see the world. And he’s also her “Cinderella,” suggesting that he has also showed her that all sorts of fantastical transformations are possible if she continues to look for the humor in the world.

9. How a Boy Can Become a Grease Fire Quotes

☝☝ Gregory Pitts’s friends love him so much that they told him the truth. And the truth was, he smelled dead. Like, rotten. It wasn’t that he *was* rotten, but just that he smelled like his body had mistaken its organs for garbage and that he was essentially a walking, talking trash can. And on this, of all days, that smell just wasn’t going to cut it. So in an act of service and sheer desperation, Remar Vaughn, Joey Santiago, and Candace Greene—Gregory’s crew—decided to help him out. Because today was a day of romance.

Related Characters: Remy Vaughn, Joey Santiago, Candace Green, Sandra White, Cynthia “Say-So” Sower, Gregory “Greg” Pitts

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

The opening of “How a Boy Can Become a Grease Fire” introduces Gregory as a perpetually stinky kid, but one with extremely kind friends. Describing Gregory’s smell as “rotten” and likening what’s going on in his body to his body thinking its organs are garbage is meant to be funny, but it also obscures what could be a serious problem of why Gregory smells this way. It’s not clear, for instance, whether Gregory is just smelly no matter what he does, or whether he smells this way because he doesn’t have access to amenities that would allow him to bathe more often. In this sense, this passage does much the same thing that Cynthia Sower’s jokes do: the humor covers up what could be a sad situation. However, it’s impossible to tell what exactly is going on, and it’s left up to the reader to decide.

What shines through too is how good of friends Gregory has. Whatever his circumstances might be, Candace, Joey, and Remy are going to be there for him and help their friend prep for what’s going to be a huge day in his life: the day he asks Sandra for her phone number. His friends are going to

make this major step in his life possible, highlighting that Gregory has a robust support network at school.


Gregory's hands started shaking, the paper vibrating like dry leaves in the wind. He looked down and started reading his note of compliments again.

Halfway through, he glanced up. Sandra was smiling. And Gregory thought maybe it was the kind of smile that came just before laughing.

Then Gregory thought, *But maybe not.*

Related Characters: Sandra White, Gregory "Greg" Pitts

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 169

Explanation and Analysis

Sandra has just asked Gregory to explain why he's greasy and crying, but instead of answering, Gregory begins reading a list of compliments to her again. Gregory's friends are standing in the background, and this situation shows that his friends' support can only go so far. They've gotten Gregory fixed up and accompanied him to ask out Sandra, and they've built him up and told him he can speak to her. But right now, they can't help him problem solve in real time what he should say to her. And without that support, Gregory turns to the only help he has: his prewritten note full of compliments.



Then, Gregory can't tell in this moment whether Sandra is going to laugh at him, let him down gently, or give him his phone number. He recognizes that depending on how he interprets her smile, it could go either way. As he noted earlier, Sandra is nice to his face, so it seems likely she'll be nice to him no matter what choice she makes. This highlights how her smile, just like the school bus that appears in different ways throughout the collection, can change depending on a person's perspective. Sandra's smile could mean all sorts of things, but it's up to the reader in this case to decide what Sandra's smile means, and whether Gregory will get Sandra's phone number.

10. The Broom Dog Quotes

“It's...a...broom.”

“But I cleaned it. Promise. And yeah, it's a broom, until you do this.” He petted the wiry twine as if it were fur. As if he were scratching behind the ear of a Yorkie in desperate need of grooming. The straw popped back up when he was done, just like a dog's would.

Related Characters: Canton Post, Mr. Munch (speaker), Ms. Post

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

The day after Ms. Post returns to work after being hit by a bus, Mr. Munch presents Canton—who had a panic attack yesterday out of fear that his mom would be killed—with a pretend emotional support dog. The dog is made from a broom head, which is why Canton is so confused. He looks at the object and sees a broom, not a dog that's going to help him get over his fears.


Mr. Munch, though, encourages Canton to use his imagination and see the dog as a potential friend. The broom, he demonstrates, mimics perfectly the texture of some dogs' fur—so perhaps it doesn't matter that the object is actually a broom, if Canton can feel like he's petting a real dog. This again shows readers the importance of using one's imagination and of looking at something (or someone) from multiple perspectives. Canton is hesitant here, but sure enough, the dog goes on to help him get over the anxiety he experiences about his mom dying.

Canton shrugged, tossed it up in the air. Caught it. Tossed it again. Caught it. Again, and loose straw separated from the bunch. Again. And more loose straw, falling down on them. And more. Ms. Post laughed. “Look at that. A school bus falling from the sky.”

Canton smiled, knowing a school bus is many things. So is a walk home.

Related Characters: Ms. Post (speaker), Canton Post, Fatima Moss, Gregory "Greg" Pitts

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 188

Explanation and Analysis

Once Ms. Post's shift as a crossing guard is over, she and Canton walk home. Canton is tossing his pretend emotional support dog in the sky; he and Ms. Post are beginning to think he no longer needs it to feel secure. Ms. Post has also suggested that the broom dog now looks a bit like a school bus.

As Canton tosses the broom head into the sky, a school bus falls from the sky, just as the narrator in "Water Booger Bears" said it did. But it's not actually a school bus that falls from the sky—as this passage shows, what falls from the sky is a broom head that resembles a school bus, but it also resembles a dog when Canton needs the comfort of a furry friend. One's perspective, this shows, can entirely change how a thing looks.

The passage takes this a step further by noting that Canton realizes school buses can be many things. For several of the

kids in the collection, actual school buses hold bullies, like the boy on the bus who heckled both Fatima and Gregory. But the beginning of "The Broom Dog" insisted that buses can also be magical and restorative for some kids who ride them. Again, how one looks at a school bus depends on one's perspective.

Saying that a walk home can also be many things then brings the collection full circle. In its 10 stories, *Look Both Ways* has demonstrated that a walk home can be many things. For some kids, it's a time when they can be happily independent. For others, it's a frightening time of day when they're vulnerable to bullies, and for other kids it's the only time they have to spend with their friends without nosy adults policing their conversations. A walk home, the collection insists, isn't just a walk home. It's a time when kids can be independent and experiment with who they want to be, and it's potentially the only time of day when kids get to experience that kind of independence.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

1. WATER BOOGER BEARS

This story was going to start like the best stories: with a **school bus** falling out of the sky. But since nobody saw the bus fall, this story will instead start like the good ones, with boogers.

Jasmine Jordan tells her friend Terrence Jordan, or TJ, to get “them nasty, half-baked goblins” out of his nose, using the same tone her mother uses to tell Jasmine to take out her earbuds and listen—or else. TJ and Jasmine have been best friends for six years, since TJ moved three houses down from Jasmine on Marston Street. That’s basically forever.

When the bell rings, Jasmine and TJ leave their life science class with Mr. Fantana. Spinning the dial on his locker confidently, TJ teases Jasmine for already “starting with [him],” even though she’s only been back at school for two days. Jasmine says she has no choice given how nasty TJ’s nose is. She concentrates as she spins her lock, as though the combination could change or her fingers could stop working. If either of these things happened, TJ would be there to help. TJ only shrugs and tosses his textbook into his smelly locker. The bottom of his locker is filled with empty snack bags that Jasmine has slipped in over the last few days. The kids call them “friendship flags,” and they let Jasmine say she’s missed TJ.

TJ finally uses the bottom of his shirt to wipe the slime and boogers out of his nose. He then tips his face up and asks Jasmine if his nose looks better now. She studies his nose, totally unconcerned that he just used his shirt as a tissue. The fact that he did so is disgusting, but he’s done more disgusting things, like pick gum off of the bottom of their shoes or slap a mosquito and then lick up the slime. She paid him a dollar to do that, and it was worth it for both of them. Jasmine says she can see all the way to TJ’s brain, and there’s part of it missing. But he’s good on the booger front now.

From the start, this story creates tension by mentioning the school bus falling from the sky. It’s unclear if this story is going to be a tragedy because of a bus accident, and the story simply refuses to tell readers what’s going on when it segues into talking about boogers. The booger conversation, in contrast, is humorous and highlights how young TJ and Jasmine are. Their youth comes to the forefront again when the story mentions the kids having been friends for six years, which seems like “forever,” from a middle schooler’s perspective.



Again, the banter between TJ and Jasmine is good-natured and reflects their youth, as does TJ’s smelly locker. Readers might find the boogers gross, but the kids both clearly enjoying this conversation. Jasmine in particular relies on TJ’s support and friendship with the mention that he can help fix any issues with her locker. The “friendship flags” are a way for Jasmine and TJ to connect. The story also adds tension by noting that Jasmine can use them to say she missed TJ. It seems that she’s been absent from school, but this detail is left mysterious for now.



TJ and Jasmine’s lack of concern about cleanliness is another sign of how young they are, and of how willing they are to take joy in the simple pleasures their world has to offer. The note that TJ has picked gum off of Jasmine’s shoe as well as his own also illustrates another way that he takes care of her. This is something he can do to help her feel better, since he doesn’t think it’s gross. On another note, it’s not clear if Jasmine observing that part of TJ’s brain is missing is a serious statement (implying that he has a brain deformity or a developmental disability) or a joke regarding his unsavory habits.



Slamming his locker, TJ says all people are boogers anyway, so it doesn't matter. Jasmine says she's definitely not a booger as she and TJ switch backpacks. His is light, while Jasmine's is heavy with textbooks and makeup work, and TJ is worried about her muscles (she's still recovering from "the attack"). They head down the crowded hallway and TJ says he has a theory. Boogers are just water mixed with dust. At this, Jasmine interrupts and asks where TJ heard that (he might have heard it from Cynthia "Say-So" Sower, who does nothing but joke). TJ says he saw it online when he was trying to figure out why boogers taste salty. Disgusted, Jasmine puts a hand up, but TJ begs her to not hold his past against him.

TJ continues that his hypothesis that if boogers are mostly water and dust, and according to Mr. Fantana, humans are mostly water, and if according to church God made people out of dust, then people are basically boogers. Jasmine and TJ go to the same church and sing in the choir together, but while they both love to sing, TJ doesn't know he's terrible and Jasmine is aware she's a bad singer.

Having shared his theory, TJ looks pleased with himself. Jasmine says the theory is wrong, but TJ says she doesn't have to believe it. He insists he should start teaching, since while everyone else is concerned with figuring out if aliens are real, he's discovered that boogers are just "the babies form of babies." Jasmine can't help but laugh, as usual. TJ can always make her laugh, and she appreciates it, especially after such a hard year.

The year started with Jasmine's parents separating and her dad moving out. It wasn't a dramatic or ugly separation, but there was the uncomfortable conversation around the kitchen table, some cursing on Jasmine's part, and then the awkward weekend visits. Then, Jasmine had her "worst attack." She has sickle cell anemia, a blood disease that can affect every part of her body. Usually it doesn't give her much trouble, but this time, her entire body felt like it was on fire. She was in the hospital for a month with her parents hovering over her awkwardly (until the times when TJ showed up to break the ice and leave some friendship flags next to her bed).

The story introduces more tension with this mention of an "attack" on Jasmine and TJ's worrying about Jasmine's strength as she recovers. Something bad happened, but at this point, it's not clear what. What is clear is that TJ may enjoy pestering Jasmine, but he's also looking out for his friend and wants to make sure she gets home from school safely. And though TJ insists he heard about the makeup of boogers from a reputable source on the internet, Jasmine implies that TJ doesn't always turn to reputable sources for information—another indicator that he's still learning how to research and understand his world.



TJ's theory is outlandish, silly, and absurd, but it also shows that he's thinking critically about things he's learning about in various parts of his life. He's learning to make connections, a sign that he's growing up. The aside about the kids' experiences in the choir also suggests that TJ just likes to perform, without any cares as to whether he's good at what he's performing or not. It seems more important to him to entertain people and make them laugh.



The story confirms here that although TJ is genuinely thinking about things and making connections, his primary goal is to entertain Jasmine and get her to laugh. The way that Jasmine describes appreciating TJ's humor again suggests that she's had a difficult time. But she acknowledges that it's been easier to get through whatever's happened thanks to TJ's friendship and humor.



Finally, the story explains what Jasmine has been dealing with: her parents' divorce and her own sickle cell anemia. The "attack," this reveals, was Jasmine's body attacking herself, rather than an attack from another person. Furthermore, Jasmine has spent the year figuring out how to interact with her parents and their changing relationship. Being in the hospital, this implies, didn't help much—it brought her parents together to support their daughter, but the only way they really got through it was thanks to TJ's humor and his unwavering support. In Jasmine's case, she seems to rely more on her friendship with TJ than on her parents to get her through difficult times.



Jasmine just got back to school two days ago, and the kids who have only given her attention because she and TJ are friends and “boys and girls can’t just be friends” now want to know everything about her illness. And now she has to catch up on all her homework, since it hurt to hold a pen when she was sick. This is also why she knows she’s not a booger: she’s not “goopy enough.”

Back in the present, Jasmine jokes that maybe it’s just boys that are boogers. She and TJ cross the street and head down **Portal Avenue**. They’ve been walking this way forever, but TJ has been walking it alone for the last month. Today is the first day that Jasmine’s mom has let Jasmine walk home after returning to school. TJ asks Jasmine what she is if she isn’t a booger. As Jasmine thinks, she studies the houses on Marston Street. Her mom always says this is an old neighborhood. Unlike the new, nicer streets with houses that all look the same (and boring), on Marston, the houses are all different and look lived in.

Jasmine says she’s the thing that Mr. Fantana showed a picture of in class earlier, that kind of looks like a booger: a water bear. TJ laughs and says those creatures look like his “old mother,” with its long nails and its “weird” mouth. He says it’d be scary like his old mother if it weren’t so tiny. Jasmine says that Ms. Macy isn’t scary, but TJ says Ms. Macy is his new mother; he also has a scary old mother and he doesn’t know his “mother mother.” Shuddering, TJ asks why Jasmine wants to be something so tiny that nobody can see it. Jasmine says that according to Mr. Fantana, scientists think the water bear is the toughest living thing—it can survive extreme heat, cold, and pressure, and it didn’t care when they sent it to space. It just keeps crawling, like Jasmine does.

TJ scoffs that that’s great if Jasmine believes that, but Jasmine insists that if he believes God made people out of dust, she can believe Mr. Fantana about the water bears. She suggests they could be stepping on water bears right now and not even know. At this, TJ glances down and scratches his arms, as though his body and the sidewalk might be crawling with the creatures. Jasmine has never realized that TJ isn’t afraid of anything he can see—but maybe he’s afraid of the things that he can’t “smash or smear,” like bugs or dog poop.

It’s a challenge for Jasmine to suddenly be the center of attention, especially when the rest of the story seems to imply that Jasmine would rather forget that she’s been out sick for the last month. The story also suggests other kids saying that Jasmine and TJ can’t be friends borders on bullying, which would give Jasmine even more reason to avoid talking to these kids. The way Jasmine uses TJ’s humorous booger theory to describe her life with sickle cell anemia is also sobering: she can engage with his humor, but TJ doesn’t seem to understand that Jasmine is sensitive about the subject.



The strength of Jasmine and TJ’s friendship runs through this passage. It’s been hard on TJ, it seems, to walk home alone for the last month, and it’s a happy change for Jasmine to finally be joining her best friend on the walk again. They can finally go back to talking about silly things, like boogers. And it’s possible to read Jasmine’s observations about the houses on Marston Street as a metaphor for her friendship with TJ. They’re different from the other kids at school, they’ve been friends “forever,” and TJ makes Jasmine feel safe and secure.



As far as Jasmine is concerned, the water bear is a perfect metaphor for her: it just keeps going and surviving, no matter what happens to her. She bounced back after a sickle cell anemia attack and after her parents’ divorce, and she’s still here with TJ. This isn’t such a nice idea to TJ, though, because of how water bears look. It’s implied that he hasn’t had good experiences with any of his caregivers aside from Ms. Macy, who is presumably TJ’s foster parent. TJ’s past might have been traumatic and difficult too, but in a different way than Jasmine’s was.



Jasmine is seeing TJ in a new way here. She realizes that TJ feels in control when he can physically change the world around him (as when he smashes bugs). But the things he can’t control—like microscopic creatures, and perhaps his past living situation—frighten him. Again, though, he can rely on Jasmine to help get him through. Jasmine, for instance, doesn’t insist on talking about the water bears, which means that TJ doesn’t become even more uncomfortable.



TJ and Jasmine reach TJ's small house with the hole in the screen door that TJ's foot made. Sometimes, he says that his feet "get mad" and do things of their own volition, so nobody should blame him for what they do. Jasmine always laughs, though she knows it's not really a joke. They sit on the front steps and decide that maybe they're both "water booger bears." At this, TJ's mom of the last six years, Ms. Macy, steps onto the porch in her work uniform. She kisses both kids on the head and asks how school was. They both say it was fine—and then she asks what they learned. She always asks this question. Jasmine and TJ look at each other—there's a new booger in TJ's nose—and say together that they learned nothing.

The story shows again that TJ has come from difficult circumstances and sometimes struggles to control his emotions. Jasmine helps him avoid talking about his difficult past by treating what he says as a joke, even when she knows it's not funny—it's a sign that TJ has experienced trauma. Ms. Macy's kindness toward the kids suggests that TJ is safe and secure now, though. The "water booger bears" symbolize TJ and Jasmine's friendship: they've combined each of their imaginary identities into one wild creature. And saying they learned nothing is a way for TJ and Jasmine to assert their independence—what happened at school or on the walk home belongs to them, not to the adults who care for them.



2. THE LOW CUTS STRIKE AGAIN

The narrator warns readers that if they ever see John John Watson, Francy Baskin, Trista Smith, or Britton "Bit" Burns, who are known as the Low Cuts, the reader should watch their pockets—these kids are known thieves. They regularly steal the contents of the penny dishes at convenience store counters, and they often challenge classmates to "quarter wars." In a quarter war, two people spin quarters like tops, and whoever's quarter lasts the longest or knocks the other quarter over gets both quarters. If a person is going to enter a quarter war with a Low Cut, they're going to lose or get punched (and a quarter isn't worth a punch).

Introducing the Low Cuts in this way makes these four kids seem genuinely scary and concerning. They're thieves, and they're so intent on stealing pocket change that they're willing to hurt people just for a quarter. The narrator implies that most everyone at school knows this about the Low Cuts; this reputation is well-established, and it's just a fact of life that the Low Cuts are going to steal.



The Low Cuts don't steal for fun, and they don't like doing it. They feel like they have to. Before they became the Low Cuts, they were part of another group: the "free-lunchers," or the kids who got free lunch because their parents couldn't afford lunch money. The Low Cuts didn't feel anything special about needing free lunch, but other kids teased Bit. Bit made sure those kids didn't tease him again.

Now, the story starts to offer more backstory into why the Low Cuts steal—encouraging readers, at least, to see them as three-dimensional people. They steal because their families aren't well-off, and Bit, at least, has such a gruff exterior because kids bully him for being poor. In a way, the very people who see the Low Cuts as terrible, unfixable thieves have made the Low Cuts that way by bullying them.



Bit, John John, Francy, and Trista aren't the only kids at school who get free lunch, but they are the only kids whose parents are cancer survivors. Ms. Lane, the guidance counselor, started a support group for the four of them where they could talk about watching their parents' bodies wither during treatment and their hair fall out. They talked about whether their parents would survive and what the kids would do if their parents didn't, but they never talked about how the treatments destroyed their families' finances.

The fact that the Low Cuts' parents all have cancer adds even more depth to their backstories. The descriptions of the support group highlight that these four kids are all afraid—their lives could change in an instant if a parent died. But while the group discussed the possibility of parents dying, it seems as though the adults perhaps tried to protect the kids by not talking to them about the financial impact of the cancer treatments. The fact that the costs come up here in this way, though, shows that the kids found out and have perhaps taken matters into their own hands.



The kids only learned about their parents' finances because Bit's mom, Ms. Burns, told Bit everything, Bit told his friends, and when they asked their parents about it, their parents didn't want to lie. This is why the kids started the Low Cuts and cut their hair almost bald. They started stealing loose change. Usually they use the money for extra food at lunch, but it's for something else today.

When the end of day bell rings, it's like a starter pistol. Bit, Trista, John John, and Francy hurry from their classes to their lockers, and then to their meeting spot out front of the school. They pass a uniformed boy holding a broken skateboard and Gregory Pitts and his friends on the way to their bench, which Bit chose as their meeting spot. Bit is the smallest member of the Low Cuts, but he's the most confident and has the worst temper—he's known for knocking people out. He once knocked out a kid named Trey when Trey made fun of John John's patch of gray hair. Fortunately he did so in the crosswalk by school, and the crossing guard, Ms. Post, was there to help Trey.

Bit also knocked out boys for Francy when they teased her about having short hair, but Trista doesn't need Bit's help with anything. Her dad put her through tae kwon do, and everyone has seen her kicks. Together, the Low Cuts are the kids the teachers worry about. The teachers mark the kids as being "at risk," and Ms. Wockley shakes her head at them no matter what they do. The fact that they're "a braid of brilliance and bravado" concerns all the adults.

His foot on the bench, Bit asks Trista, John John, and Francy if they're ready. Trista is talking to a boy who looks scared, but she turns around and announces that it's 3:16 p.m. Francy adds that "the truck" comes in an hour, so John John holds out his hand for his friends' loose change. The change has come from unsuspecting boys' pockets, vending machines, or Mr. Munch's piles of dust. Trista counts 90 cents, and Bit spits that they'll have to make it work. He leads his friends toward **Portal Avenue**, the main road.

The Low Cuts become more sympathetic given their parents' cancer diagnoses, and given that they usually spend their stolen change on extra food. They're just hungry kids who want more food than the school can supply—so although they're doing something illegal, their actions are morally complex. Ending this passage by noting that the kids are going to do something else with their money today creates tension. There's no telling what they'll use the money for, and if it'll be just as innocent as buying extra food.



Describing the final bell as a starter pistol creates a sense of urgency: whatever the Low Cuts are up to, it needs to be done as quickly as possible. Bit seems like a loyal and loving friend, but as with the stealing, he's doing a noble thing in a questionable way. The story also highlights how important support figures like the crossing guard are in a school setting: Ms. Post was there to clean up Bit's mess and make sure Trey was okay.



The way the teachers talk about the Low Cuts suggests that they sympathize with the kids, but they're concerned by how brash and violent the kids are. The Low Cuts are smart, but the teachers object to the fact that they're trying to do everything themselves rather than asking the adults for help. In a sense, the Low Cuts have grown up long before the teachers expected them to, and this concerns the teachers.



Trista announcing the time, and the fact that the kids have an hour to be ready for "the truck," continues to build tension and urgency. Whatever they're doing with their 90 cents, they don't have much time to do it. Bit's "spitting" and his attempts to rally the group highlight that he's the leader; whatever they're planning is his idea, and he's going to make sure it happens.



Francy is anxious, so she's talking on and on to John John about a classmate named Satchmo, and what Satchmo might be short for. The conversation annoys Bit, but so does Trista's attempt to talk to him about their English homework. Ms. Broome wants students to write about being something else. Bit snaps that maybe he'll write about being a **school bus** as a bus screeches to a stop near them. Bit covers his ears, says he hates the sound of bus brakes, and says he'd be a flying school bus so he doesn't make noise. Trista laughs; she can see Bit as a school bus, falling out of the sky. Bit snaps that he'd be a rocket in that case.

Even though these kids are supposedly criminals, they read like normal kids here: Francy is worried about whatever is going to happen (suggesting she might not be fully on board), while Trista seems pretty intent on doing her homework for a hardened thief. These details highlight that these kids aren't just thieves—they have richer lives than their classmates perhaps give them credit for. When Bit mentions being a flying school bus, it recalls the mention of the falling bus at the beginning of "Water Booger Bears." But in this case, the school bus is entirely imaginary, and it might not even be a bus. Bit illustrates that with a bit of imagination, a school bus can easily become something entirely different, like a rocket ship.



After six blocks, the Low Cuts turn on Crossman Street and stop at the first house on the corner. The house is a mess, but this is where the neighborhood candy lady, Ms. CeeCee, lives. She's been the candy lady for decades and everyone loves her, since she's the closest thing to a corner store the neighborhood has. She's also open 24 hours. Bit leads everyone through Ms. CeeCee's yard and then rings the bell several times. Francy tells Bit to calm down, and soon they hear Ms. CeeCee calling for them to be patient.

Juxtaposing Ms. CeeCee's messy house and yard with the fact that she's also the beloved neighborhood candy lady is another lesson in not prejudging people—the appearance of Ms. CeeCee's house doesn't make her less valuable or beloved in the neighborhood. Bit's anxiety keeps things moving, though he'd rather things be going even faster. Francy, though, insists that they have to show Ms. CeeCee respect, or they're not going to get candy from her. They're still just kids, and there's still a power dynamic between them and Ms. CeeCee.



Ms. CeeCee opens the door. She's a small lady with a black wig and a turquoise cut-off sweatsuit. She asks what the kids want, and John John, the nicest of the Low Cuts, starts to answer. But Bit interjects that they need candy, and they're in a hurry. Bit only calms down when Trista tells him to. John John says they have 90 cents and need as much candy as that can buy. Ms. CeeCee studies the kids and asks if she wants to know what they're doing, but nobody answers, so she pretends she never asked.

Whatever the Low Cuts are doing is clearly extremely important to Bit, since he's the one hurrying things along. But again, his friends remind him that they have to respect adults like Ms. CeeCee, or they're never going to get the help they need. Ms. CeeCee, for her part, seems to feel similar to how the teachers at school do about the Low Cuts. She seems to imply that she expects the kids to be up to no good, and if they won't tell her exactly what's going on, she's going to absolve herself of any responsibility by pretending not to care.



The Low Cuts wait on the steps as Ms. CeeCee disappears into her house (kids can't go inside; that's the start of every abduction story and Ms. CeeCee doesn't want to worry parents). She returns a few minutes later with a card table on which she places boxes of candy. Pennies, nickels, and dimes, she says, will buy "the old stuff." Bit whines that nobody wants stale candy, but Ms. CeeCee says it's just old styles of candy, like the Michael Jordan sneakers the kids keep paying for. She says it used to cost a penny, but she's applying an "attitude tax" of four cents. Anyway, things always cost more over time. Francy notes that this is inflation, and Bit mutters quietly to himself.

Things take a humorous and far more innocent turn when the narrator notes that Ms. CeeCee goes out of her way to make sure parents won't worry about their kids buying candy from her. The only way she can continue to supply candy to kids like the Low Cuts is by respecting the community she serves and by making sure she helps protect kids. In this passage, she serves as a mentor, reminding Bit to use his manners and to show adults respect. Francy is making connections between what Ms. CeeCee is saying and what she's learning in school when she identifies inflation at work, showing again that the Low Cuts are perhaps taking school more seriously than their teachers believe.



Ms. CeeCee points out the candies: Mary Janes, Tootsie Rolls, Squirrel Nut Zippers (which always makes Bit laugh), Life Savers, and so on. The Low Cuts examine the candy. Francy asks Bit what they should get—he knows best how to “use it.” Ms. CeeCee moans that she doesn’t want to know, but Bit asks what candy was her favorite when she was a kid. She says she loved the Mary Janes for the peanut butter, and the Life Savers for the pure sugar. Bit asks for as many of those two as they can get. Ms. CeeCee takes the coins from John John and counts out nine of each candy. Bit scoops it up and walks away. Ms. CeeCee calls after him that she’s praying for the kids’ mamas and says the kids will always be “knuckleheads” to her.

Once again, Ms. CeeCee moaning that she doesn’t want to know what the Low Cuts are going to do with the candy implies that she believes they’re going to do something sinister with it. However, this seems questionable given what the kids normally do with their money (buy extra food at lunch). And the fact that Bit is finally willing to let his guard down and ask Ms. CeeCee for her advice also shows that he’s willing to rely on the adults around him for help—on occasion, when it’s convenient for him. Ms. CeeCee’s role as a mentor to the kids also shines through here. She’s looking out for them when their parents can’t, and she’s trying to keep them out of trouble.



Back at **Portal Avenue**, John John pulls out a wad of plastic baggies and asks Francy to do the math. She says they bundle the candies in threes and sell them for a dollar each, earning six dollars. John John says that’s not enough, and Bit says he knows the guys they’re selling to. They don’t carry change, so if the Low Cuts charge \$1.50, they’ll get \$2. Bit says to speed things up, they should do three bundles of six candies, ask \$2.50, and they’ll walk away with \$9. The group races to Placer Street, bags the candy, and Trista says they have 15 minutes.

The Low Cuts seem like they’re only going to try to resell the candy—though Bit’s knowledge of “the guys they’re selling to” suggests that they might be walking into something that’s way over their heads. They’re dealing with a type of adult that the other kids, at least, aren’t familiar with. But they trust Bit, so they’re willing to take his advice and do as he says.



The Low Cuts stop outside of a building with a sign that reads “Placer Pool.” Bit leads Trista, Francy, and John John into the smoky pool hall filled with old men. A man behind the bar tells Bit the kids can’t be in here, which Bit knows—but he also knows he can make money here. He tells the barman that he and his friends are selling candy. The man does know Bit from the neighborhood; he fixed Bit’s mother’s car once. Bit supervised him the whole time, just in case he was going to try to cheat Ms. Burns.

Bit is intent only on making money. And just as when he steals pocket change at school, the rules that are supposed to govern his conduct don’t matter to him—here, he’s willing to go into an establishment that’s presumably only for people 21 and over to accomplish his goal. Meanwhile, the barman establishes that Bit is devoted to and protective of Ms. Burns. Again, Bit steps out of his role as a dependent child to make sure his mom is okay.



Francy holds up the bags and says they have Mary Janes and Life Savers. At the mention of Mary Janes, a man in an eye patch perks up—he hasn’t had Mary Janes in forever. He and several other men discuss the old candies they used to eat. Bit interrupts: he’s not supposed to be here, so do any of the men want to buy? The baggies contain three of each candy and are \$2.50. One old man says the candies used to cost a penny, but Bit and John John shrug that gas also used to cost a dollar. One man says he doesn’t want to pass on the Mary Janes, so he gives Bit three dollars when Bit says he doesn’t have change. Two other men buy the next two bags moments later.

Bit might have resented Ms. CeeCee marking up the candy only 15 minutes ago, but now he’s essentially shrugging and citing inflation as he sells the candy for way more than Ms. CeeCee did. So, although Ms. CeeCee probably didn’t realize it at the time, she was helping Bit figure out how to sell his candies and make the price seem reasonable. And the story shows that Bit was right about these old men not carrying change, and about them being willing to lose 50 cents for the candy—he’s a skilled businessman who knows his customers.



The Low Cuts hurry out of the pool hall. Trista doesn't have to check her phone to know they're late: the ice cream truck is pulling away from its spot on Placer Street, where it waits until 4:02 p.m. She leads Bit, Francy, and John John toward the truck at a run, screaming for it to stop. It finally stops and the young man opens up the window. Bit orders four soft serves with sprinkles and gives the man the entire nine dollars; one dollar is a tip.

Just as when the Low Cuts buy extra food at lunch, the kids aren't doing anything nefarious with their nine dollars, just buying ice cream. This explains why Bit has been hurrying everyone along the whole time—there's a small window of time to catch the ice cream truck. The fact that Bit tips the ice cream man also cuts into the perception that he's a bad kid who only cares about himself.



Bit leads his friends a few houses down and unlocks his door. He calls for his mom, Ms. Burns. She comes down the stairs to four kids holding untouched ice creams. She recently relapsed, so she's pale. Bit shrugs his mom off when she asks how school was and instead asks how her first day back on chemotherapy was. Ms. Burns says she's okay, but nauseous. Bit says he thought she might be, so he brought her ice cream. Trista, John John, and Francy watch Bit transform from a hustler into a scared son who loves his mom. Ms. Burns smiles.

Bit and his mom's interactions allow readers to see how Bit steps into an adult role so he can try to take care of her. What happened at school—his day-to-day life—isn't important to him. What's important to him is how Ms. Burns is feeling, and that he's gone out of his way to make her feel better. Noting that Bit transforms into a "scared son" highlights just how much fear rules Bit's life. He's trying to make his mom feel better because he loves her, but also because he fears he might not be able to do nice things for her for much longer.



3. SKITTER HITTER

Perhaps if Pia Foster had known yesterday that today would be different, she wouldn't have grabbed her skateboard right after school and skated out, as usual. Maybe she would've apologized to her classmates when she ran into them, or maybe she would've stayed late and talked with Fawn Samms, the other skater girl at school. Maybe they would've skated in the parking lot after school, and maybe they would've watched videos of Santi doing skateboard tricks in a dress and heels. Maybe Fawn would've listened to what Pia said. Maybe Pia would've made different choices if she wasn't so quiet and didn't use her skateboard to yell for her. Her board's name is Skitter, and Skitter uses feminine pronouns.

Writing this story in the conditional tense (saying that if Pia had known, things might be different) creates tension, but it also feels resigned. Something has happened, and it doesn't seem like whatever happened was good. Indeed, whatever happened, the narration suggests, might have made Pia treat her classmates better. Pia, for her part, seems like a loner. She has a potential friend in Fawn, but it's impossible to tell at this point who Santi is. Pia relies on her identity as a skater to speak for her, and with Skitter's help, Pia feels bold and in control of her life.



Maybe yesterday, if Stevie Munson had known Skitter had a name, or if he'd known Pia's name or known about Santi, he would've done something. Instead, the bell rings at Brookshire Boys Academy. All the boys' shirts are stained, but Stevie's is stained thanks to Marcus Bradford. Marcus writes on the back of Stevie's shirt every day, since Stevie's mom can't afford a new uniform every year, so Stevie has to grow into his too-big shirt. His shirt is so big on him that Marcus can write on it without Stevie noticing.

Stevie is a regular victim of bullying, but it's not quite clear how he's connected to Pia—he goes to a different school than she does, after all. By noting that Stevie's shirt is stained like his classmates', but that it's stained for a different reason, distances Stevie from his peers. It's also possible that Stevie is different because of his economic situation—he and his mom are, perhaps, not as well off as the other families who attend Brookshire. It's unclear, for instance, whether Stevie is the only kid who can't afford a new uniform every year.



Had Pia known Stevie's name yesterday, maybe she would've shaken Stevie's hand and introduced herself. Maybe she would've seen how afraid he was, or maybe he would've noticed how scared *she* was. But either way, Pia would've put her house keys between her fingers like knives, just in case.

Stevie might not have even been "there" yesterday with Marcus and Marcus's friends if he hadn't decided to try to get Marcus to stop writing on his shirt. Stevie knew he couldn't tell—Marcus had reminded him that "snitches get stitches and sometimes ditches" the other day after drawing a penis on Stevie's shirt. But Stevie's mom caught him bleaching his shirt and mentioned that bleach isn't free. Stevie couldn't tell her about Marcus, because his mom would scold him and threaten to call the principal. The principal knows what Marcus does and doesn't care, as "boys will be boys."

In any case, Pia still would've taken that route home. She still would've ignored everyone, including Ms. Wockley yelling at her, and enjoyed her freedom. Pia never even listens to the crossing guard's whistle, since on her skateboard, she doesn't have to follow rules. In school, she spends her days dreaming about skateboarding while she scribbles Santi's name on her desk. Rolling an ankle is better than, say, being called on in class to say something about a story Pia was supposed to read, but didn't read because she doesn't care. So Pia is always ready to leave school and skate down "Santi's sidewalk."

Stevie, on the other hand, is never ready to leave school, since that means he has to get past Marcus and his friends. Once, they pulled Stevie's tie so hard that Stevie had to cut it off his neck. He told Stevie's mom he lost it instead and she got angry. Another time, Marcus threw a cup of water on Stevie's crotch and then shouted that Stevie wet himself. Stevie was so embarrassed he actually almost wet himself. Marcus has also practiced his wrestling moves on Stevie after school while other boys record videos that go viral. But yesterday, Marcus and his cronies offered Stevie "freedom."

Whatever happened yesterday is frightening, for both Pia and for Stevie. But noting that Pia would've stuck her keys between her fingers suggests that what happened was scarier for Pia than it was for Stevie.



It's not entirely clear why Marcus bullies Stevie, but he's able to continue doing so for several reasons. First, Stevie is afraid of what will happen if he tells an adult: noting that "snitches" sometimes get "ditches" is a death threat. Then, Stevie also wants to impress his mom and not seem weak in front of her. Perhaps most importantly, though, the administration at Bradford doesn't see Marcus's bullying as a big deal. This leaves Stevie on his own to deal with what's happening and to try to make it stop. And it seems likely that feeling so alone is what led to the bad outcome yesterday.



While Stevie sees the adults around him as ineffective and not worth asking for help, Pia sees adults as worthless figures who stand between her and her happiness and independence. When Pia skates, she's in control and feels free—school is, for her, the exact opposite. The highlight of her day is when Pia gets to leave all that behind and skate. Part of this has to do with skating connecting her to Santi, though again, it's still unclear what Santi's relationship is to Pia.



When school is in session, Stevie is safe—Marcus doesn't bother him in front of teachers, unless he's writing on Stevie's shirt. The worst bullying Stevie experiences happens after school, where there aren't as many authority figures who could check Marcus's behavior. Again, Stevie is clearly afraid of looking weak, which is why he doesn't tell his mom what's going on. It's easier, he reasons, to take the abuse and lie to his mom than it is to admit he needs an adult to step in and help him.



Yesterday, Pia saw the boys, like she always does. The three boys usually step aside so she can skate past, but this time there were four in their green uniform jackets. Had Pia not known Marcus, she would've thought private school boys were good, with nice houses and green grass. But Marcus's mom owns the salon where Pia gets her hair done, when Pia's mom forces her. That's usually just on holidays, and Pia only behaves if she can take Skitter with her and skate in the parking lot. She used to have to flip through the magazines that smell like Santi's perfume, and once, Pia vomited from the smell.

Pia used to skate around the lot and once, Marcus came outside and asked to ride Skitter. He promptly fell off and Pia didn't laugh. She tried to help him up—but he couldn't hide the split in his pants, dry his eyes, and take her hand at the same time. The only other time he came outside was two years ago. Marcus just sat and watched Pia angrily grind around the parking lot. That was the day Pia was getting her hair done in a French roll for Santi's funeral. The hairstyle was itchy—and yesterday, Pia felt the same kind of itchy when she saw Marcus and his boys. This is because she knows Marcus. Two years ago, while Pia's hair was drying, Pia's mom asked Marcus's mom when she was going to leave Marcus's abusive dad.

Yesterday, Stevie realized the girl skating toward him, Marcus, and Marcus's friends—Pia—was the target, and he immediately felt sick. Marcus said they were just playing a game, but Stevie refused to do anything to Pia. Marcus said that they're not going to do anything to Pia—they're going to take her board. So the boys lined up, and Pia chose not to hop the board into the street. It's too dangerous to skate into oncoming traffic. She stopped in front of Marcus and flipped Skitter into her hand.

Pia doesn't enjoy getting her hair done; she'd rather be skating and enjoying her freedom. Being stuck in a salon chair seems repressive for her. But it does give her insight into who Marcus is, though that's not yet entirely clear to readers. Further, knowing who Marcus is helps Pia check her assumptions about private school boys: she seems aware that Marcus isn't a nice kid, despite attending private school. The salon also seems to remind Pia negatively of Santi, if Pia vomited from the smell of Santi's perfume.



Describing Marcus's attempt to ride Skitter makes it seem as though Marcus hasn't always been a bully. Once, he was willing to try new things. But the story implies that it was more important to him to dry his eyes and hide his split pants than it was to accept Pia's help, which drove a wedge between them (and suggests that Marcus prizes looking powerful, since accepting Pia's hand would mean admitting he needed help). But the story also shows that Marcus doesn't bully people just for his own satisfaction: he is, perhaps, lashing out because of the violence he sees and maybe even suffers at home, since his dad is abusive. Then, the story reveals that Santi is dead. Pia perhaps hates the smell of the salon and the itchy sensation so much because she associates these things with Santi's death.



The price of the "freedom" that Marcus offered Stevie earlier seems to be helping him pick on Pia. This is abhorrent to Stevie, as he suffers enough bullying from Marcus and doesn't want anyone else to have to suffer. Pia, though, seems resigned to her fate. She seems to reason that it's easier to face the bullies than it is to risk her life skating into traffic. Knowing more about Marcus may also make her feel like she can come out on top of this situation.



Marcus asked Pia to borrow the board so Stevie could show them a trick. When Pia said Stevie didn't look like a skater, Marcus stepped forward and dragged Stevie with him. Then, he grabbed Skitter, let go, and pushed Pia to the ground. Skitter flew out of her hand and into the street, where a car drove over it as the boys howled excitedly. When the car drove over it, it felt like Pia's voice was breaking in half. Pia got up and ran, thinking of Santi—Santi died when a selfish boy, jealous that Santi was a better skater, pushed her into oncoming traffic. Stevie chased Pia for a while, but eventually stopped.

Maybe, if Stevie had known what Marcus would tell him to do, he wouldn't have come yesterday. Or maybe he would've stood up for Pia. But instead, Stevie picked the skateboard up out of the street. Marcus had already left. Maybe if Pia knew that Stevie had gone home and told Stevie's mom everything—about Marcus, the bleach, his tie, his slipping grades—things would've been different. Stevie's mom held back a scream, punished him, and helped him tape the board back together.

Then, today, Stevie's mom pulls Stevie out of school early after speaking to the principal. She's too busy lecturing him to hear a radio announcer say that a **school bus** fell from the sky. She makes Stevie wait outside the school for Pia. Maybe if Pia had known that Stevie would be there to apologize, she wouldn't have gone out the back door with Fawn. The girls walk to the cemetery to visit Santi's grave, and Pia asks "hard questions" about boys.

4. HOW TO LOOK (BOTH) BOTH WAYS

On her way home from school, Fatima Moss only speaks to one person. She also keeps a checklist of all the things that stay the same, or that have changed, on her journey home.

Pia is immediately aware that Marcus doesn't want Skitter for innocent reasons; she realizes she's a target. As far as Marcus and his cronies are concerned, Skitter getting run over is an exciting turn of events. But Skitter is one of the things that connected Pia to Santi. Skitter also allowed Pia to feel like she could advocate for herself and yell at people—now, she's silenced. And this whole incident recalls how Santi was killed, which makes it even more traumatic for Pia. Boys, she's seen, are jealous and petty, and they don't think of how it might affect others when they do something like push a girl. This can be deadly, as Pia knows all too well. Stevie is, in Pia's mind, guilty by association, which is why she runs from him. She has no reason to trust that he won't try to hurt her even more.



This traumatic experience has brought about a change in Stevie: he's finally decided to be truthful with his mom about what happens to him at school. Telling her is the only way he knows to try to make amends for doing nothing while Marcus hurt Pia. But as the narration acknowledges, Pia has no way to know what Stevie has been suffering, or that he's now trying to make things right. This means that Stevie doesn't have the opportunity to fix anything.



The ending of this story is tragic: Stevie doesn't get to apologize to Pia, so neither of them get closure. But it does offer hope that things might improve at school for Stevie, since he's now asked his mom for help in making the principal take Marcus's bullying seriously. And the fact that Pia is reaching out to Fawn for support and advice also suggests that Pia might now see the wisdom of building herself a support network—one that can help protect her from the boys who seem not to care about her and the other girls and women she loves.



Fatima's list of things that change may help her to look at things in different ways. It's a way for her to feel more in control of her environment.



The checklist begins with the bell ringing for five seconds and the 29 students who rush out of Ms. Broome's classroom. Today, Trista and Bit hurry ahead of everyone else. Fatima follows her classmates into the hallway that's so noisy she can't hear herself think. It takes her two tries to open her locker, where she keeps this notebook (writing in the notebook helps Fatima hear herself think). Unlike usual, Fatima has homework today: Ms. Broome wants students to imagine themselves as objects.

Then, Fatima walks the 81 steps to the open double doors, where Ms. Wockley is, as usual, yelling at Simeon Cross for running with Kenzi Thompson on his back. There are the normal six **school buses** and two lines of cars in the parking lot, and after about 84 steps to the corner, the crossing guard, Ms. Post, greets Fatima. Her son, Canton, is sitting at the stop sign with a broom with no broomstick—which is weird, but not abnormal because he's always there with his broom. Fatima continues straight, not crossing the street, and walks slowly. She counts the signs, hydrants, big cracks in the sidewalk, and the houses. Fatima's house is the 20th, and she's certain it's the same as all the others: boxy, beige carpet, and big windows.

Fatima reaches the first sign, which is a school crossing sign. The icon on it is an adult and a child, which is odd, since kids cross alone. Fatima looks both ways, notices the one-way and speed limit signs, and counts the stop signs at the end of each block. Each block has five houses on it, and Fatima knows none of the residents. Maybe they count her every day, and maybe the houses are empty like hers—people have to work to pay for the fancy houses and the green lawns. One difference today is that someone clearly snatched some roses out of the eighth house's yard. Fatima has counted six big cracks and has perfected the art of looking up and down at the same time. She meets Benni at the usual spot, and Benni is doing what she always does: singing.

The list pauses as the narrator explains how Benni and Fatima met on the first day of school. Fatima's parents had told her to walk straight down **Portal Avenue**, speaking to no one and looking up the whole way—which is why Fatima tripped on a big crack and fell. She fell and skinned her knees just as a **school bus** pulled up to the stop sign and kids lowered the windows to tease her for falling. Fatima noticed one boy on the bus who held a notebook in front of his face and was very clearly not laughing. Just as she got up and the bus pulled away, Fatima heard a deep voice singing. The voice was coming from a woman—Benni—who was singing and dancing down the street. Fatima was nervous and flinched when Benni shouted, "Get ready!" at her. Fatima's flinch stopped Benni in her tracks.

Fatima doesn't know why Trista and Bit are in such a hurry, but readers do: they're on their way to procure ice cream for Ms. Burns. Fatima doesn't express any emotion or judgment about this because she doesn't have any backstory. The fact that Fatima mentions not being able to hear herself think suggests that she feels somewhat out of control in the noisy hallway, as though she's not totally in control of her thoughts unless she has the notebook.



The way Fatima describes the Ms. Wockley's normal shouting, and Canton's weird but normal broom gives the impression that the after-school rush proceeds like a well-practiced performance. Even things that might otherwise seem negative (like Ms. Wockley yelling at kids) are comforting to Fatima, because they happen so regularly. But while she seems to enjoy the regularity at school and on her walk home, her tone when she describes her house being like all the others is perhaps a bit resigned. She may crave some more novelty in her life, but as a kid who isn't in charge of where she lives, she doesn't have a way to change much.



Fatima's observation about the school crossing sign encapsulates the idea that a kid's walk home is often one of the only times they're truly independent. Adults might like to think kids are supervised—as the adult figure on the sign suggests—but in reality, as Fatima notes, kids are on their own after school. The way Fatima describes the neighborhood again implies that she's not too enamored with the lifestyle associated with this neighborhood. It seems sterile to her. Benni then stands in contrast to this with her singing. She's predictable, like the houses, but she's also loud and asserting her existence.



The advice Fatima's parents gave her seems, at first, to be fine advice: to pay attention to her surroundings and to not speak to strangers. However, Fatima quickly discovers that looking up means ignoring what's below her feet, something that has disastrous consequences. And her fall also makes her an easy target for kids' taunts and bullying, making the walk home even more unpleasant. Fatima also seems afraid of Benni, though it's unclear if Benni is just a bit frightening on her own, or if Fatima is nervous because her parents told her not to speak to anyone. The fact that Benni stops so suddenly when Fatima flinches, though, shows Fatima that treating strangers all as enemies has consequences: she's negatively impacting Benni by expressing her fear.



When Fatima’s parents got home from work that night, Fatima had already cleaned and bandaged her knees. Fatima told Fatima’s mom that she tripped and kids laughed at her, but she didn’t mention Benni—if her parents heard about Benni, they might not let Fatima walk anymore. And a difficult walk, Fatima reasons, is worth it to be home by herself in the afternoons instead of with a bunch of other whiny kids and a babysitter. Home alone, she can pretend to be a flight attendant like Fatima’s dad, running through the pre-flight safety presentation that she’s had memorized since she was little.

What Fatima wants more than anything is to feel independent and to convince her parents that she’s ready for the responsibility that comes with walking home alone. This is why she deals with her knees all by herself. Fatima isn’t at all interested in giving her parents the chance to deem the injury too serious to risk repeating and then forbid her from walking home again. And though Fatima was nervous around Benni, she also doesn’t seem to see Benni as a real threat now that she’s had some time to think about it. Her parents might, but again, Fatima’s desire for independence wins out over her desire to please her parents.



So, Fatima took Fatima’s mom’s advice to look both ways and “all ways,” even down, to heart the next afternoon. She looked at the ground with such concentration that she didn’t notice the clouds gathering until they started to pour rain on her. Again, the kids on the **school bus**—except for the boy with the notebook—laughed at her. And again, Benni came dancing and singing toward Fatima, this time wearing a tuxedo and carrying a closed umbrella. Benni extended the umbrella to Fatima and asked if she played the guitar. Fatima was confused, but she took the umbrella, opened it, and kept walking. Benni walked along beside her, encouraging her to keep playing her guitar solo.

Fatima is figuring out how to navigate her world, this time by focusing all her attention on staying upright. As she discovers, this means she misses all sorts of important information, such as the impending rain. But this time, Benni isn’t frightening—she’s Fatima’s rescuer with an umbrella, even if talking about Fatima’s guitar solo is a bit confusing for Fatima. It’s only Fatima’s second day walking, but she’s already starting to trust Benni and to see the woman as an integral part of her walk home.



That night at dinner, Fatima’s mom, an environmental scientist, told Fatima that no big things change: houses stay the same and the cracks won’t move. Fatima’s dad said that “Routine lessens risk,” which spoke to Fatima. She needed the walk to be safe and predictable, so she thought of the boy with the notebook. The notebook seemed to make the boy less exposed, so Fatima decided to start her own notebook, in which to observe the things that change and the things that stay the same. She’s doing just what her mom does with her science experiments. Benni has been exactly the same since then, in that she’s wearing and singing something different every day.

This passage confirms that Fatima wants to feel in control of her environment. She gains some control by observing everything on the walk home so closely, and this makes her feel safe and secure. It turns the walk home into a science experiment in its own right, and Fatima into a scientist. This helps Fatima feel adult and independent as well. Benni seems like the only element of the walk that changes meaningfully every day, but this no longer makes Fatima nervous. Rather, Benni’s differences show Fatima that it’s not bad when things change.



Returning to the list, Fatima writes that Benni is wearing a black wig, a blue dress, and boots, and she’s singing a new song and performing different dance moves. Benni calls Fatima “Fatima the dreamer,” and says she saw a **school bus** fall from the sky (which is typical of Benni). When Benni asks what’s different today, Fatima tells her about Trista and Bit, about her homework, and about Ms. Broome’s writing assignment. She points to the missing roses, half expecting Benni to pull the roses from behind her back to use as a microphone.

The falling school bus references the bus that fell in the beginning of “Water Booger Bears.” But Fatima expects Benni to say nonsensical and outlandish things, so she brushes Benni off—readers, however, are left wondering whether to believe Benni. This mystery, though, is one the collection will return to later. Benni and Fatima’s conversation shows that the two have formed a friendship over the last few months. Fatima lets Benni into her life by telling her the things that have changed, and she appreciates Benni’s spontaneity and happiness.



Benni nods—and then starts mumbling, and then screaming, “But how you gon’ change the world?” Fatima ignores Benni and walks for several more blocks. She ignores the passing **school bus** too (she doesn’t want to know if anyone is laughing at her or Benni), and Fatima can barely hear herself think. Benni usually leaves Fatima at house 15, but today, she leans on a stop sign and asks again how Fatima is going to change the world. Fatima looks both ways and considers Ms. Broome’s assignment. Could she change the world by becoming cement to fill the sidewalk’s cracks so nobody trips, or by becoming an umbrella to keep someone dry? Fatima doesn’t think those things would do much, so she says she doesn’t know how to change the world. Then, she asks Benni if she could borrow an instrument.

Fatima now realizes that she has some power over the kids on the school bus: if she ignores them, their teasing doesn’t matter as much, and she can pretend it isn’t happening. Benni encourages Fatima to think of Ms. Broome’s assignment as an opportunity to figure out how she’s going to give back to the world. But it’s interesting that Fatima doesn’t think it would change the world to help keep others from tripping, or to keep them dry. These things would have helped Fatima’s first few days walking, after all, so Fatima is underestimating the power of small actions like fixing sidewalks and offering someone an umbrella. However, Fatima does cement her friendship with Benni by asking for an imaginary instrument. She’s now willing to play and be silly with Benni, which speaks to Fatima’s comfort in her own skin and in her own neighborhood.



5. CALL OF DUTY

Today, Bryson’s mom lets Bryson stay home from school. This isn’t because of Bryson’s black eye, swollen face, and other scrapes, but because Bryson’s mom thinks it’s best to let things cool down at school. Before she leaves for work, she tells Bryson that she loves him, that she’s proud of him, and that he should do something besides play video games today. Soon after, Bryson’s dad tells him much the same thing, but leaves out the bit about not playing video games. He then kisses Bryson’s cheek over and over until Bryson grunts something his dad interprets as “I love you too.” Bryson rolls over and suddenly becomes aware of his aching body.

It’s not clear yet what happened yesterday, but it seems like Bryson has been beaten up, and his parents are both proud of him. Bryson’s parents read as affectionate and involved in their son’s life, since Bryson is getting this kind of support at home for whatever happened at school. This story’s opening also introduces Bryson as someone who’s very interested in video games, something his mom doesn’t seem to appreciate nearly as much as his dad does.



Hours later, Bryson gets up and, through his pain, makes himself oatmeal for breakfast. He plans to play video games today, no matter what Bryson’s mom said. He doesn’t want to think about school, the walk home, or what happened yesterday, but he can’t help it. He replays the beating he took yesterday afternoon. Bryson has seen the videos on social media of him trying to stay standing as long as possible. His mom made him delete the apps from his phone so Bryson has time away from the kids who don’t speak at school, but who skillfully write catchy, cutting captions for videos online. To forget, Bryson plans to “go[] to war” and play *Call of Duty* on the Xbox. He turns the system on and “crawl[s] into World War II.”

Video games, in Bryson’s mind, represent a much-needed escape from the beating he took yesterday. His walk home yesterday, this passage implies, wasn’t a good one: his independence left him vulnerable to the bullies who beat him up. The passage also suggests that unlike some of his classmates, Bryson might not speak up in school and then isn’t able to articulate himself quite as well on social media. In any case, Bryson is ready to not have to interact with any of his classmates today and to pretend he’s fighting in World War II instead.



Ty Carson, on the other hand, *is* at school today. All day, he feels like his classmates are watching him. There's a new rumor today that overtook the old one from yesterday, but Ty still can't shake the belief that his classmates keep looking away, or cutting their conversations short when he walks by. He feels so paranoid and like even the building is laughing at him. He wants to be small, like a penny that Mr. Munch would sweep into a corner. Since Ty can't literally make himself small, he acts like a turtle. From the safety of his shell, he tries to figure out how he feels, why he behaved the way he did yesterday, and whether what he did was wrong.

Yesterday, Ty was just himself: cool, well-liked, and dramatic. He always acts like he's in a video game. He's known for crawling up the lockers or rolling down the hallway, or for wearing his backpack on his chest to pretend it's armor. He's a nationally ranked gamer and everyone knows it—he's even been trying to convince Ms. Wockley to help him start a gaming league at school (she isn't interested in another "distraction").

The other gamers at school always want Ty to play on their gaming squads, but Ty only plays with the second best: Bryson Wills. Bryson wears his hair in an Afro and owns the look. His gaming handle is AfroGamer, and Ty's is TYred. Ty insists it's pronounced "tired," but since he's such a good gamer and "s[ees] red" when he plays, most people think it's "Ty Red." The boys live close enough to play together on weekends. Bryson likes visiting Ty's house, since Ty lives on the same street as Ms. CeeCee. But Ty likes Bryson's bigger house and bigger TV.

Ty and Bryson both love *Call of Duty*, *World War II*, which bothers Ty's parents. They try to convince him that Pac-Man or Super Mario Bros are better games, while Ty tries to portray *Call of Duty* as educational—he's learning about World War II. Ty's mother, though, insists that Ty has no idea what it's like to fight in a war against Nazis. On some level, Ty gets this. He knows he doesn't actually have a rifle or a helmet. But Ty also knows that he's in some sort of war that makes no sense to him. He hears sounds in his head that make his heart beat oddly and his stomach do weird things, and he knows what it's like to feel anxious and confused about a battle.

Like Bryson, Ty also seems like he craves a break from his classmates, but he's not able to stay home today. He's clearly afraid of what his classmates might be saying or thinking about him, and he wants nothing more than to hide. Rumors, the story shows, have turned Ty's life upside down, though the content of the rumors is still mysterious. However, whatever gossip is circulating is making Ty wonder if he's in the wrong, suggesting that Ty might feel guilty about whatever he did.



School is, for Ty, just an extension of the video games he plays at home (though teachers and administrators, like Ms. Wockley, seem to resent this fact). Establishing that yesterday Ty was popular suggests that today, Ty is no longer popular. Whatever happened yesterday has fundamentally changed the social dynamics at school, and now Ty feels vulnerable and afraid of his classmates.



Ty and Bryson's friendship is based on a shared love of video games and respect for each other's skills. The two come from different backgrounds, though. The story implies that Bryson's family is wealthier than Ty's, as evidenced by the bigger house and TV, and because economically disadvantaged Bit Burns lives in Ms. CeeCee's neighborhood.



Ty's parents seem to object to the violence in Call of Duty. They also seem to dislike that the game glorifies war, even against Nazis. But the game is helping Ty find the words to describe some other internal battle that he's fighting. Ty is grappling with some piece of his identity, something that's close to his heart—but at this point, he hasn't yet made sense of whatever he's feeling. He's just anxious about this part of himself. This is highlighted by the fact that the story doesn't say outright what Ty is thinking about—readers can come up with all sorts of possibilities, but there's no way to confirm anything unless Ty is able to coherently express what he's thinking about.



Ty knows this because yesterday, a boy named Slim kissed Ty after first period PE. They were fighting over the water fountain, and Slim kissed Ty on the cheek—but “close enough to his mouth to count.” It was odd and Ty was surprised—but he was also surprised that he wasn’t mad about it. It was weird, but not that weird. But someone saw the kiss and by lunch, everyone knew. By lunch, Slim twisted the story so that Ty kissed him. When Ty entered the cafeteria, he entered a warzone—everyone had their guns trained on him.

The kiss sounds like it could have been an accident, but it causes Ty to think more about whether he’s perhaps attracted to boys. His conflicted inner monologue suggests that he thinks he should be bothered and he should find it weird that he kissed a boy, but he doesn’t. And while in other circumstances Ty could just keep thinking about this privately, the rumor mill at school means that everyone else is now thinking about Ty’s sexuality. Whether or not Ty actually likes boys is beside the point—he now feels like a victim who must defend himself from kids eager to tear him down.



Bryson hears the rumor from Remy Vaughn, who would be cool if he didn’t try so hard to be cool. At their lockers, Bryson and Remy argue about whether Ty is gay. Bryson insists a kiss doesn’t make a person gay, and even if it did, who cares? Trying to figure out why Remy seems to care so much, Bryson asks why he’s so concerned. Remy insists he doesn’t care, so Bryson asks how many girls Remy has kissed. Remy scoffs and lies that he’s kissed lots of girls. Bryson doesn’t see the point in lying (he hasn’t kissed anyone either). And according to his cousin Candace, who’s Remy’s best friend, Remy is a bit pathetic. So Bryson teases Remy, tells him to mind his own business, and walks away.

Bryson coolly insists that a person’s sexuality doesn’t matter, and that it’s not something that he, Remy, and the rest of the school need to waste their time worrying about. Indeed, Bryson is more interested in figuring out why Ty possibly being gay is so important to Remy. The implication is that perhaps Remy is so interested because he himself is gay, but the story again suggests that Remy’s sexuality isn’t actually that important. (It is, of course, important to Remy, but the story suggests it’s not important for everyone else to worry about it). What’s more important to Bryson, it seems, is making sure that people aren’t bullying Ty (or Remy) based on rumor and speculation.



In the cafeteria, lots of kids are sitting with Ty to tease him to his face—including Slim. They crack terrible, biting jokes, call Ty all sorts of names, and bend their wrists like they just shot basketballs. Bryson walks right into it. He scoots in next to Ty and asks what everyone is talking about. Slim says Ty kissed him and that Ty is gay like it’s an insult. Bryson says that’s interesting, since he heard *Slim* kissed Ty. Relieved, Ty says that’s the truth—it feels almost like Bryson is backing him up in a video game. Slim, though, says loudly that he’d never kiss a boy.

As Bryson sits down and starts defending Ty, he reiterates that Ty’s sexuality is Ty’s business, not something everyone else needs to worry about and insult him for. Bryson’s backup makes Ty feel like he’s not totally alone to defend himself—he can’t hold his own against so many kids and their cruel jokes. And the jokes themselves are a way for these bullies to dictate what kinds of behaviors and identities they think are appropriate at school. Being gay, they show clearly, isn’t something that’s going to be tolerated.



Putting his hands up, Bryson says it wouldn't matter if Slim did kiss a boy. Though maybe next time, he should ask permission instead of sneaking the kiss. The other boys at the table don't know how to respond to this, but Trey says that Bryson must like boys too. At this, Bryson laughs. He says he's not gay, but perhaps all the other boys at the table are. As Bryson's dad always says, "those that scar you are you." It's clear nobody knows what this means, so seeing that Ty still feels terrible, Bryson says he doesn't like boys, but he does like Ty. And he thinks it's ridiculous that everyone is so upset about a kiss on the cheek. To prove his point, he pecks Ty on the cheek and announces that he's still alive.

Bryson confuses the other boys by taking issue not with the fact that a kiss between two boys happened, but with the fact that the kiss wasn't consensual. This is confusing for the others because it totally shifts the focus of the conversation and suggests that Slim actually violated Ty. Bryson also suggests that the bullies are so caught up in hurting Ty because they themselves might be questioning their sexuality—they want to define themselves as totally different from Ty and make themselves seem as straight as possible. Bryson highlights how absurd this is when he kisses Ty and notes that a peck on the cheek isn't a big deal. He's trying to make the other boys look ridiculous and obsessed with the wrong things, though their silence and confusion makes it seem questionable whether he's succeeding.



Bryson and Ty stop paying attention to the other boys at this point, but the other boys don't let the issue rest. Instead, over the rest of the afternoon, the rumor changes to Bryson kissing Ty, and the "mighty snake of gossip" changes from a small garter snake into a deadly python. Bryson ignores it, but as he starts his walk home after school, he realizes Slim and other boys are trailing him. Slim doesn't live in this direction, and the boys' yells feel like staples in Bryson's back. The moment Bryson turns onto Burman Street, Slim and the boys race after him. Bryson just turns around, hands up, and "d[oes] his best."

At first, Bryson feels like he's done his job: he deflected attention away from Ty and helped his friend feel better. However, Bryson can't singlehandedly control the school's gossip mill, which transforms his bid to help Ty into something that's going to end up hurting Ty. This shows why Bryson's parents are proud of him when they tell him goodbye in the morning in the story's present: they're proud that he stood up for Ty, even if it meant he got hurt. As the story's title suggests, Bryson heeded the "call of duty" to defend his friend against homophobic bullying, just as Call of Duty: World War II asks players to answer the call to fight against Nazis. And again, Slim and his fellow bullies are just trying to make themselves look powerful and dictate what kind of behavior is okay at school.



That all happened yesterday. Today, Ty hears the gossip, and now it feels like a boa that's strangling him. Ty saw the videos online last night, and he heard the rumors that Slim and his cronies jumped Bryson. So as soon as the final bell rings, Ty races out of class, out of school, past Ms. Post, and down **Portal Avenue** until he has to walk. He briefly rests in front of one of the big beige houses with big windows, a green lawn, and gorgeous rosebushes. Ty looks both ways and then snatches roses off the bush, ignoring the thorns stabbing his fingers. He runs a few more blocks, turns left on Burman, and reaches Bryson's house, which isn't as grand as the houses on Portal Avenue.

Ty feels like he's being strangled because, in a way, Bryson did save him—Ty wasn't the one who took a physical beating, after all. And this weighs on him. In addition to feeling paranoid and as though everyone is still talking about him, he also feels like he owes Bryson something for standing up for him. Ty snatching the roses explains where the missing roses that Fatima observed went: Ty is taking them to Bryson as a thank-you. Highlighting that taking the thorny roses is painful shows how much emotional pain Ty is in as he does this.



Bryson has been fighting computerized Nazis all day, listening to bombs in his headset to drown out the school rumors. He's been ignoring Bryson's mom, who suggested he read instead of make his painful hands work the controller. He pauses the game to make a sandwich, and this is the only reason he hears the doorbell. Bryson's body still hurts as he shuffles to the door and sees Ty through the peephole. He opens the door.

Ty is panting, holding a few mangled roses, and his hand is dripping blood. Bryson asks Ty if he's okay. Ty says he's fine and asks if Bryson is okay. Bryson says he will be. Trying to make it less awkward, Ty asks if Bryson is playing *Call of Duty*. Bryson smirks that he is as Ty holds out the roses and says they're for Bryson. Ty's eyes start to get wet and a lump rises in his throat. There are things he and Bryson need to talk about, but they don't need to say anything now. Bryson takes the flowers, sniffs them like he's seen Bryson's mom do, and ignores that they make his nose itchy. He opens the door wide and says they should clean up Ty's bleeding hand.

It's just luck, the story suggests, that Bryson isn't engrossed in Call of Duty when Ty shows up. This means he's able to open the door and see Ty and not make Ty feel even worse (if he didn't open the door). The story also makes it clear that both boys are in pain, physically and emotionally. Bryson is healing from the physical beating, Ty's hand hurts due to the thorny roses, and Ty also feels internally conflicted because of Bryson's sacrifice yesterday.



Ty is very emotionally fragile: he desperately wants things to go back to normal, but he can't pretend that nothing has changed. Bryson seems to pick up on this when he simply allows Ty to act like things should be normal (such as by talking about Call of Duty). And taking the flowers and treating them like a much-appreciated gift, even if they aggravate allergies, is a gift to Ty: it tells Ty that his apology and his thanks are understood and accepted. For now, they don't have to actually voice any of what they're thinking. Bryson can show Ty he cares, and that everything is going to be okay, by inviting him in and insisting that they do what they can to ease his physical pain.



6. FIVE THINGS EASIER TO DO THAN SIMEON AND KENZI'S SECRET HANDSHAKE

The first thing that's easier to do than Simeon and Kenzi's secret handshake is getting through the hallway after the bell rings. This is because Simeon is big for his age, and extremely happy. So as soon as the bell rings, Ty races out of Mr. Davanzo's class (probably because Mr. Davanzo doesn't believe in bathroom breaks during class) and Simeon gives everyone else a high-five as they leave. He then approaches Mr. Davanzo and they do their secret handshake—which is “elementary” compared to his handshake with Kenzi.

Kenzi Thompson is tied for the smallest kid in the class with Bit. He doesn't have a nickname like Bit, and if anyone tried to give him one, Kenzi would do nothing but tell Simeon. Simeon would also do nothing, but this is because at his size, a look is more than enough. Except for his small stature and the blue bouncy ball he carries everywhere, Kenzi doesn't stand out. He's not that tough, weird, or smelly. He's friends with everyone—though that's perhaps not entirely correct. Kenzi is friends with Simeon, and Simeon is friends with everyone, since being Simeon's enemy isn't a good idea. So, Kenzi “walk[s] the middle of every line” until the bell rings.

The list format of this story creates the sense that Simeon and Kenzi's handshake is immensely complicated. Ty leaves class quickly because, as “Call of Duty” showed, he has to get out of school and thank Bryson. But Simeon doesn't know this, and his perspective colors why he thinks Ty is in such a hurry. Simeon also establishes himself as a good-natured kid who's friends with everyone, teachers and students alike.



Simeon might be a good-natured kid, but this passage also implies that he's not someone people want to cross—his size in and of itself is a threat. So, being Simeon's friend is a big help to Kenzi, since Kenzi so small and nonthreatening. Being Simeon's friend is essentially how Kenzi manages to survive at school. He may avoid bullying because he has Simeon to protect him, and he has no reason to bully anyone else because, again, Simeon is there to make things easier for him.



While Kenzi's classmates hurry out of Mr. Fantana's class, Kenzi stays put. He knows he can't get to his locker with all the bigger kids and their pointy elbows. He's been hit before and has even had his lip split open by kids gesticulating wildly. So, Kenzi waits until Simeon bursts into Mr. Fantana's room, awkwardly greets the teacher, and gives Mr. Fantana a handshake. Only then does Kenzi even get up from his desk. The boys put their hands out, but Mr. Fantana tells them to please not do their handshake here. It takes too long, and he has a life. Simeon pretends to take offense and squats so Kenzi can leap onto his back. Then, they're off. The crowds part as Simeon runs with Kenzi.

While other kids at school, like Ty, fear verbal violence, Kenzi is afraid that he's going to get stepped on because he's so small and his classmates simply don't notice him. His friendship with Simeon ensures, essentially, that Kenzi is going to be noticed and therefore is going to be safe. Kenzi and Simeon's handshake is apparently well-known around school, if Mr. Fantana is begging them to not do it here and now. Simeon shows again how much of a jokester he is when he pretends to take offense. However, it's possible that on some level, he is offended. Mr. Fantana is, after all, not allowing the boys to fully express their friendship by forbidding the handshake.



The second thing easier than Simeon and Kenzi's handshake is convincing Ms. Wockley to not get the boys in trouble for pretending to be in a horse race. Simeon insists to Ms. Wockley that they weren't pretending to be in a horse race, but Ms. Wockley's whole job is to get kids in trouble for things. Very seriously, Ms. Wockley says that Kenzi was on Simeon's back yelling "yee-haw" and miming spinning a lasso. She repeats the motion, and the boys try not to laugh. Ms. Wockley says the boys must keep their feet on the ground. Kenzi asks why Pia gets special treatment, since she rides her skateboard through the halls. Ms. Wockley says this isn't about Pia, and since the boys never listen, it's time to get serious.

Ms. Wockley is a powerful, feared authority figure. But given that kids seem to laugh at her pretty often, she seems less frightening than she might otherwise. Kids see her more as a caricature of an emotionless authority figure rather than a real person. Kenzi tries to appeal to Ms. Wockley by encouraging her to be fair when he brings up Pia. But Ms. Wockley implies that she's had to tell Simeon not to carry Kenzi on his back multiple times, and she's tired of their horseplay. The fact that convincing Ms. Wockley not to get the boys in trouble is easier than the handshake, though, offers hope that Simeon and Kenzi won't be punished too harshly.



Simeon begs to explain himself before Ms. Wockley gets him and Kenzi in trouble. Ms. Wockley has heard Simeon's excuses before, but it's always entertaining, so she's happy to listen one more time. She sighs. Simeon says that Kenzi is small, and he'd get hurt if Simeon couldn't protect him. Ms. Wockley asks how Kenzi gets to his classes (Simeon doesn't carry him between classes). Simeon says he doesn't know, but it must be terrifying. Kenzi says it's horrible—a kid knocked him into his locker the other day. Simeon says Ms. Wockley certainly doesn't want Kenzi to be invisible, which he'd be without Simeon's help.

There's more to Ms. Wockley than the kids give her credit for: she seems to genuinely find Simeon and Kenzi engaging and entertaining, even if they refuse to follow the rules. Put another way, she's not just an emotionless authority figure. She does like the students, and she doesn't want to just ruin their lives. Simeon also shows that he's breaking the rules for a good, noble reason. He feels he has to protect his friend when he can, and Kenzi makes it clear that he needs Simeon's help to not get hurt.



Ms. Wockley's face starts to relax. She cuts Simeon off before he can make his next point and tells him to go home and be ready to follow the rules tomorrow. As she walks away, she calls that she hopes Simeon and Kenzi don't become a horse and jockey when they grow up, since people lose money betting on races. Kenzi's throat stings, but he says he wants to be a lawyer. Lawyers are smart, he notes, and they know that cowboys, not jockeys, say "yee-haw."

Ms. Wockley might find Simeon and Kenzi entertaining, but she implies here that this is all she thinks the boys will ever be. This is extremely hurtful to Kenzi, given how his throat tightens up. It's offensive to him that Ms. Wockley doesn't take his dream of becoming a lawyer seriously. His friendship with Simeon, though helpful when it comes to getting through the hallways, isn't helping adults like Ms. Wockley take Kenzi seriously.



The third thing easier than the handshake is getting to the neighborhood. Simeon and Kenzi exit the school, and Simeon compliments Kenzi for his zinger about cowboys. He also notes that he's a friend, not a horse. The boys approach Ms. Post, the crossing guard, and she hugs Simeon like she does every day. Ms. Post asks if Simeon is staying out of trouble, and Simeon says he's going home to do his homework. He tells Ms. Post that her son, Canton, has homework too. Canton ignores Simeon; he's used to Simeon's antics.

Simeon and Kenzi are doing their best to ignore others' assumptions about them—their friendship is all that matters to them. Ms. Post asks Simeon if he's staying out of trouble like it's a neutral question. But the assumption is that she almost expects Simeon to be in trouble—again, adults are underestimating these two boys for no apparent reason. Simeon, for his part, tries to make it clear that he's engaged in school by talking about his homework, though he keeps up the jokester persona by teasing Canton.



Ms. Post then asks Kenzi if he's staying out of the street. Kenzi says he's trying and holds his blue ball up. Then, Simeon asks if Ms. Post is staying out of the street. She says she's doing her best as she puts her whistle in her mouth and steps into the street. Kenzi and Simeon wave goodbye to Ms. Post and turn right, where not many kids go. This leads to Portal Ave, rather than **Portal Avenue**, and it leads to Chestnut Homes. Since Simeon and Kenzi are the only kids who walk this way, their path is clear. They can be Simeon the Grand and Kenzi the Great, and they can enter their kingdom. In their kingdom, it's encouraged to carry someone on your back. The kingdom is full of princes like Kenzi and Simeon—"princes no one ever bet on anyway."

It's impossible to tell if Ms. Post is asking Kenzi if he's literally staying out of the street, or if this is a different way to ask if, like Simeon, Kenzi is staying out of trouble. Either way, the implication is, again, that Ms. Post expects the boys to misbehave. The fact that Simeon and Kenzi live in Chestnut Homes, a "kingdom" where nobody ever bets on the "princes," helps explain why. Describing Chestnut Homes this way suggests that this is a low-income area, where kids who are considered at-risk live. It implies that the kids here aren't ones that adults expect to succeed, and so adults don't support them.



Simeon picks up their conversation before they spoke to Ms. Post. He reiterates that Kenzi is his family. Kenzi agrees. To the boys, Chestnut Street is paradise. The lamp posts are palm trees, the bus stops are like hammocks, and every corner store is a bungalow. The air smells like "exhaust and exhaustion," "cooked food and cooked hair." Life is "thick" here, and there's a symphony in the air saying, "so good" and "so what." Kenzi and Simeon's young voices are like flutes cutting through the music. Most people tighten up when they walk down Chestnut Street, but this is where Kenzi and Simeon can be themselves. They can balance on fire hydrants and say hi to every business owner—they know them all, and the owners always ask after Kenzi and Simeon's parents. Fredo's, though, is the best place.

Simeon and Kenzi see their neighborhood very differently than their teachers do. While school is a place where they have to behave and follow silly rules, in their own neighborhood, they can be themselves, play, and experiment. The sounds of the "symphony" suggest again that life is difficult in this neighborhood, but that the people who live here also love it. Describing the boys' voices as flutes that cut through characterizes the boys as perhaps unusually young, innocent, and hopeful in a neighborhood where there maybe isn't as much hope.



The fourth thing easier than the handshake is choosing a snack from Fredo's Corner Store. Walking into Fredo's is always like walking into a dungeon. It's a dark store with no windows. It's filled with snacks and nothing else, and it smells like incense smoke. Kenzi and Simeon walk in as though they own the place, and Fredo calls the boys "Wreck-It-Ralph and Tiny Tim." He's looking through the newspaper and says he hopes every day that he won't see the boys' faces. Kenzi says they won't end up in the paper unless it's for a good reason, like Kenzi becoming a famous lawyer or Simeon becoming an actor and playing a lawyer on TV. Simeon studies the snack cakes and checks the expiration dates—Fredo keeps merchandise way too long.

Fredo's might be "the best place," but its description suggests this is mostly because it's a funky spot that Simeon and Kenzi love. Fredo, though, shows that like Ms. Post and Ms. Wockley, he expects Simeon and Kenzi to get in big trouble every day—he might be joking, but saying he hopes not to see the boys' faces in the paper still shows that he assumes the worst of these two. This continues to hurt Kenzi's feelings and makes it seem like there are few, if any, adults to help him achieve his dream of becoming a lawyer.



Fredo quips that it's more likely that a **school bus** will fall from the sky. Simeon acts hurt, and Fredo says he hopes Simeon and Kenzi are successful. That way, he can sell them the store and retire so he can watch *Law and Order* all day. Simeon says they'd have to change the store's name as the boys approach the counter with their snacks. Kenzi has chips and Simeon has a MoonPie. Simeon offers to buy Kenzi's chips and pulls out a handful of change, which he painstakingly begins to count. Kenzi giggles. Bit is known for stealing change, but he'd never try to steal from Simeon.

As Simeon counts, Fredo asks how his brother is. Simeon says his brother is no doubt driving the ice cream truck, pretending to be a real ice cream man. Fredo asks after Kenzi's brother and, pointing out Kenzi's blue handball, he says Kenzi's brother wasn't even good at handball. At this, Simeon snaps that he lost count of his change and needs to start again. Exasperated, Fredo scoops the correct change off the counter. When Simeon teases Fredo for having somewhere to be, Fredo says he's going to go ask Fredo's mom how many times she dropped him as a baby. Fredo jokes his mom only dropped him into a vat of gold, but Fredo says she also dropped him in a vat of gravy. Simeon doesn't laugh, so Kenzi steps forward.

To punish Fredo for his rude comment, Kenzi snatches Fredo's paper. This gets no response, so Kenzi grabs Fredo's lighter and tells him to stop smoking. Simeon tells Fredo to stop burning the nasty incense too as he and Kenzi leave the store laughing. The things Kenzi took are silly—especially since Fredo owns a store that sells newspapers and lighters. But Kenzi did it because he's loyal to Simeon. They're brothers.

The fifth thing easier than Kenzi and Simeon's handshake is making wishes. Kenzi and Simeon joke about Fredo the whole way to their building, where they've lived their whole lives. They make fun of him for selling snacks and for having a name like Fredo. When they reach their building's steps, Simeon watches a metallic balloon blow in the wind. They sit and Kenzi offers Simeon some chips. Simeon refuses and asks for the lighter. Kenzi hands it over, but he's concerned—jokes are fine, but he can't be a lawyer if Simeon is going to burn something down.

Fredo continues to make it clear that he doesn't think Simeon and Kenzi are going to do anything good with their lives. He makes it seem like he's never going to be able to retire, and he's never going to be able to sell the boys the store. For now, though, Simeon and Kenzi let the issue rest and focus on purchasing their snacks. It's gratifying for Kenzi to think about how powerful Simeon is at school. Bit might be frightening, but Simeon's size makes him an impossible target.



Fredo is somewhat rude to Simeon and Kenzi, but as the narrator noted earlier, he's a shop owner who will always ask about the boys' families. Simeon's note that his brother is an ice cream man suggests that Bit may be purchasing ice cream from him right now—Bit and Simeon might be more connected than they think. But Fredo is again insulting to the boys; the story implies that Kenzi is carrying around his brother's handball to feel close to him, something that Fredo insists is silly. And Fredo then insults Simeon's intelligence and weight. Simeon's response shows that this is a step too far. Kenzi, though, demonstrates his loyalty by stepping up.



All Kenzi seems to want is to feel a little bit powerful. He wants Fredo to feel bad for insulting Simeon, and as a kid who doesn't really want to get in trouble, stealing these small things while Fredo watches seems like the only way to do this. It allows him to show Simeon he cares and is willing to stand up for him, just like Simeon stands up for Kenzi.



Joking about Fredo is a way for Kenzi and Simeon to blow off steam after Fredo was rude and dismissive. It doesn't do anything bad, but it does make the boys feel closer to each other and able to protect each other. This passage then highlights that Kenzi is serious about being a lawyer, and he knows he can't get in serious trouble if he expects to achieve his dream. Again, it seems like the adults in the boys' lives don't take Kenzi's ambitions seriously, which means Kenzi isn't getting the support he needs from adults. Simeon is all he has.



Simeon studies the paper (the front-page story is about a **school bus** falling from the sky), and then he rips a smaller piece from the front page and rolls it into a paper worm. Then, he pulls the MoonPie out of its wrapper, sticks the worm in it like a candle, and dramatically sings “Happy Birthday” to Kenzi. He lights the candle as Kenzi says it’s not his birthday. Kenzi blows out the candle anyway with Simeon’s prodding, and he also makes a wish when Simeon tells him to. Simeon asks what the wish was—but Kenzi refuses to say, since that’ll make the wish not come true.

Simeon announces that that’s true. He’s heading up to work on Mr. Davanzo’s homework about “environmental something.” As he splits the MoonPie in half and offers half to Kenzi, he notes that he’ll be able to see more of his apartment window. Kenzi eats his half of the MoonPie and puts his ball in his bag. It’s time for the handshake, and he needs both hands. The boys grab hands, shake, point to themselves, fist bump, rub their ears, mime rubbing a ball, and end with a big hug. They say they’re brothers.

Kenzi and Simeon’s handshake is the same one they watched their older brothers do every day. They ride the elevator up, and Simeon knows what Kenzi wished for. Kenzi wished the paper candle’s smoke could carry a message miles away, through stone and bars and into his brother’s ear. Kenzi wishes he could tell his brother, Mason, that he wishes he didn’t have to walk home from school. He wishes Mason could pick him up in a car like the one Simeon’s brother Chucky stole two years ago. Mason went to prison to save Chucky. But in Kenzi’s wish, Mason is driving a different car. He can take Kenzi for a ride and show Kenzi how to play.

7. SATCHMO’S MASTER PLAN

Today, Satchmo has worked out a plan that will save his life. He wishes he came up with it a long time ago, like back when he was seven years old and the rottweiler bit a chunk out of Satchmo’s leg, creating a scar that looks like a sad face. It was a freak accident, because Satchmo never misses when someone throws a ball at him—but he missed that time. Clancy threw the football and Satchmo stretched for it, but it bounced into Ms. Adams’s yard anyway. Her chained-up rottweiler, Brutus, leapt for the ball, tail wagging, and tried to play with it, but he knocked the ball just out of his reach.

Singing “Happy Birthday” to Kenzi when it’s not Kenzi’s birthday may seem silly at first. But it’s a way for Simeon to show his friend how much he cares—it brings a smile to Kenzi’s face, after all. The fact that Simeon is only using the lighter to light a makeshift candle shows that even Kenzi makes assumptions about people (since he was afraid initially that Simeon was going to do something nefarious with it). Burning the story about a falling school bus recalls earlier mentions of a falling school bus and encourages readers to wonder again what this means, though again, this is a mystery that the collection leaves for later.



Simeon shows Kenzi again how much he loves and supports him by offering him half of the MoonPie. And he shows that he truly is taking his education seriously when he says it’s time to go work on Mr. Davanzo’s homework—he’s not getting into trouble, and the adults were wrong to worry so much about him. The complex handshake allows both boys to affirm their friendship and show each other that they’re willing to engage in this ritual.



Finally, the story reveals that the handshake is so important to Kenzi and Simeon in part because it connects them to their older brothers. It also reveals why adults might assume that Kenzi is going to just get in trouble: his brother is in prison, and people expect Kenzi to emulate his brother. It’s unclear if adults realize that Mason wasn’t the one to commit the crime, which further highlights how adults’ assumptions are both incorrect and harmful. All Kenzi wants is to be a lawyer and to be physically close to his brother again. But though he can’t have either of those things now, he does have a friend in Simeon, who understands completely how Kenzi feels. This understanding enables him to support Kenzi better than anyone else can.



Satchmo’s plan seems to be influenced by this dog bite he suffered years ago. The fact that the bite scarred in the shape of a sad face suggests that Satchmo’s life since the bite has been negatively ruled by this bad experience—he perhaps lives in fear of dogs now. When Satchmo missed the ball, it showed that he wasn’t entirely in control of his life. This is especially true since missing it led to the bite, the memory of which makes him feel powerless and vulnerable.



Clancy told Satchmo to get the ball quick, before Ms. Adams saw him. She's an older lady who sits in her window and yells at kids to get off her lawn. She chews tobacco and rumor has it that she mixes her tobacco slime with Brutus's food to make him mean. Ms. Adams isn't a normal old lady. Instead of asking after Satchmo's mother, she just nods a bit. Satchmo figures the inside of her house is like an old boxing gym, smoky and hanging with punching bags. Maybe Ms. Adams punches and kicks the bags all day. Satchmo even wonders if maybe he's wrong and Ms. Adams is actually Brutus's "guard lady."

But on that day, Clancy shook his head at Satchmo—Ms. Adams wasn't in the window. Satchmo hurried into Brutus's yard, greeting the dog in a whisper. The ball was far enough away from Brutus that Brutus couldn't get Satchmo, so there was nothing to be afraid of. Brutus wagged his tail in a confusing way. It was like he was saying yes, no, and that he wanted to play—but a different game. Satchmo picked up the ball and held it up to show Clancy, just as Brutus started to jump and bark. Satchmo ran—and Brutus's chain broke. Satchmo is named after Louis Armstrong, a jazz musician whose nickname was Satchmo because he had a big mouth. Satchmo Jenkins, though, doesn't have a big mouth. But that day, he discovered he could use it to shout for help.

Satchmo and Satchmo's mom moved to Marlow Hill four years later, as Satchmo's bite inspired Satchmo's mom to go back to school to become a vet. She took a job in a vet's office and tried to teach Satchmo how to behave around dogs. Her teaching didn't matter, though: Satchmo is terrified of dogs. They're dangerous. His mom always argues when people say that anything with teeth will bite. When sad commercials urging people to adopt dogs from shelters come on TV, she gets mad when Satchmo says that maybe the dogs belong in the shelter. She insists Brutus only bit because Satchmo was tense—he just wanted to play.

Satchmo isn't afraid of small dogs, just big ones. And lucky for him, there aren't any dogs in Marlow Hill—until yesterday. Yesterday, on Nestle Street, Satchmo realized that Mr. Jerry had gotten a dog. Immediately, Satchmo was terrified. Mr. Jerry's wife died a few months ago, and Satchmo's mom has been urging him to get a dog. Mr. Jerry said he wasn't ready at first, but now he clearly is. This dog is big, a mix between a husky, German Shepherd, rottweiler, and a monster. The sight of it spurred Satchmo to hatch his plan.

Even though Brutus is presumably the dog who bit Satchmo, Satchmo acknowledges that he might not be correct in thinking the dog is so terrible. It may be that Brutus is actually a nice dog whom Ms. Adams encouraged to be aggressive. Still, entering Brutus's yard is a scary prospect because the fact remains that he's a dangerous dog, at least as far as Satchmo is concerned. Ms. Adams doesn't want people in her yard, and she has no issue snapping at kids or frightening them with her dog to get her way.



Clancy implying that Ms. Adams isn't in the window reiterates that he and Satchmo go into this believing that Brutus isn't the real scary one here—Ms. Adams is. And to his credit, Satchmo interprets Brutus's body language as wanting to play, something that suggests he might not be so mean after all. However, the fact that Brutus wants to play a "different game" and then goes on to bite Satchmo shows Satchmo that the real danger is the dog, not Ms. Adams. As Satchmo realizes he can advocate for himself and yell for help, he also realizes that there are other people who can help him if only he asks for it.



Though adults presumably came to Satchmo's rescue after Brutus bit him, in the last four years he's been at odds with his mom. She seems to not take it seriously how afraid Satchmo is of dogs—and neither of them can agree that the other has a point, and dogs can be both unpredictable (and potentially dangerous) and wonderful. Satchmo's mom believes in giving all animals the benefit of the doubt. But because of Satchmo's experience with Brutus, it seems like a better plan to just assume that all dogs are dangerous. If he can't rely on his mom to take his fears seriously, this may seem like the best way to keep himself safe.



Marlow Hill has, until yesterday, made Satchmo feel safe and secure because there weren't any dogs in the neighborhood. Now, though, his beloved neighborhood is dangerous and scary. The fact that Satchmo insists that the dog is part monster suggests that he might be exaggerating the animal's size or aggressiveness. He's terrified, and his fear may be causing him to make assumptions.



After Satchmo's last class, he goes to his locker and sticks his head in to take a few deep breaths. Hopefully he won't end up with a smiley-faced scar to match the frowning scar on his leg. John John calls to Satchmo and tosses him a textbook that Satchmo left in class. Satchmo pretends to be okay and thanks John John. He then tosses the book, and an invitation to Cynthia Sower's comedy show slips out. But Satchmo isn't interested in comedy. He puts the book in his locker, leaves school, and thinks through the plan as he walks.

Satchmo tells himself that he's prepared, and he won't get bitten or eaten. If—when—the dog jumps the fence, Satchmo can't panic. Instead, he'll head right and climb into Mr. Jerry's pickup truck, where he can scream for help. But if Mr. Jerry's truck isn't there, then Satchmo should run right to the Carters' house. They supposedly have a pool in the back (Satchmo has heard moms gossiping about the pool), and Satchmo should dive in. If the dog follows, it probably won't jump in the pool—but if it does, Satchmo should jump out instantly. Dogs can't be vicious and paddle at the same time.

After jumping out of the pool, Satchmo should have a head start on the dog. Next, he'll jump the fence designed to keep kids out of the pool (assuming the pool, and the fence, actually exist; he's never seen them). He'll need a running start to get over, since he'll be wet and heavy. If he can't get over, he must quickly strip to his underwear. His life matters more than his modesty.

At this point, the dog should be too tired to jump the fence. But if the dog is somehow waiting for Satchmo when he gets back to the street, Satchmo might die. Satchmo corrects himself: he'll jump on top of the old car in front of Sadani's house, since Sadani only buys broken-down cars after his car was stolen a few years ago. He won't mind Satchmo climbing on the hood. If the dog follows Satchmo onto the hood, Satchmo will climb on the roof, and the dog should slide off. While the dog is busy slipping, Satchmo will leap off the car and confirm that the doors are unlocked (Sadani never locks his car doors, since his cars are impossible to start and are therefore impossible to steal).

What Satchmo fears is physical pain, a fear that plenty of people share. But more than that, Satchmo is afraid of not being able to relax and feel secure in his own neighborhood. John John giving Satchmo his forgotten textbook adds more depth to John John's character. He's a Low Cut and, as "The Low Cuts Strike Back" explained, most people think he's a budding criminal—but he seems like a normal, compassionate kid here.



Satchmo's plan is absurd. He's thought of everything that might go wrong, and he's assuming that everything will go wrong. But the absurdity isn't necessarily humorous in this story. Rather, it highlights just how terrified Satchmo is, as this situation is deadly serious to him. It might be funny to think of a dog trying to be vicious and doggy paddle at the same time, but it shows that Satchmo is far too afraid to realize that he's being ridiculous.



Satchmo's plan also highlights how tuned in he is to the gossip in the neighborhood. Where gossip destroyed Ty and Bryson in "Call of Duty," adult gossip is going to be what saves Satchmo—assuming, of course, that the gossip is right and the pool exists. And again, the thought of Satchmo stripping to escape the dog is so absurd as to be humorous. But he doesn't see the humor, which shows just how terrified he is.



That Satchmo briefly thinks that he'll just die illustrates how high the stakes are in his mind. He genuinely believes that if his plan doesn't work, he might die—a terrifying thought. But again, Satchmo knows his neighborhood inside and out, so he's able to come up with this far-fetched plan to use his neighbors' quirks to his advantage. It's also possible that Chucky, Simeon's brother, stole Sadani's car, creating another connection between stories that suggests the characters in each story have more in common with one another than they might realize.



Satchmo can get in the car and he'll be safe, since the car doesn't have electric windows. He can crack a window and scream for help. If the door is locked, Satchmo will throw saved sausage patties at the dog. The dog will obviously go for the sausage, but if it doesn't, Satchmo will just have to zig and zag and run. It'll be just like when he and Clancy pretended they were playing in the Super Bowl. Where is Clancy? Is he playing football right now, and is he helping his teammates or running away? Why didn't Clancy chase Brutus? If Clancy had tackled Brutus, Satchmo would've barked and growled at the dog to show him what it feels like.

Satchmo reminds himself that that's not important. He must make sure he's ready to run right and then left to throw the dog off. Dogs aren't as nimble since they have four feet, right? In any case, when Satchmo gets to his house, he'll run to the side door that he left unlocked, even though he knows Satchmo's mom will kill him if she finds out. But if the side door is locked, Satchmo will just have to pray for a miracle, like a **school bus** falling from the sky.

Satchmo is ready to carry out his plan as he approaches Mr. Jerry's house on the far side of the street. He creeps past Mr. Jerry's door and the side yard, feeling like his body is turning into rawhide, chew toys, and dog treats. Then, Satchmo hears what sounds at first like a bark—but it's Mr. Jerry yelling for Satchmo, not the dog barking. Kneeling next to the dog, which is happily licking his cheek, Mr. Jerry calls Satchmo over to meet his new friend. Mr. Jerry's face is happy, like he's just made a touchdown.

8. OOKABOOKA LAND

Cynthia "Say-So" Sower invites her classmates to gather round and let her make them laugh. She invites her teacher, Mrs. Stevens, to listen too. Mrs. Stevens is at her desk. Giving Cynthia the last five minutes of class to put on her show is the only way to keep Cynthia from derailing the entire class. If she doesn't get this time, Cynthia inevitably starts in on a humorous monologue that's tangentially related to math class. One was about how negative numbers deserve empathy, since "no one should ever feel lower than zero." Every monologue ended with Cynthia racing out of the classroom dramatically to return a moment later as if nothing happened. Mrs. Stevens chased her and threatened to write her up at first, but she likes Cynthia's jokes. So she and Cynthia struck this deal.

Finally, the story shows that Satchmo's fear of dogs is magnified by his feeling that Clancy abandoned him. Brutus's bite was traumatic, but it was made more traumatic because Clancy didn't try to help Satchmo—he just disappeared from the narrative after throwing the ball into Ms. Adams's yard. A friend's support, Satchmo acknowledges, would've made him feel safe and secure enough to try to teach Brutus to be more compassionate. He talks about Brutus's growling and barking as though Brutus is bullying others, and thinking about it in this way suggests that if Brutus only knew how much damage he was causing, he'd stop.



Thinking about Clancy, Satchmo decides, is just making things worse—he doesn't need to relive his feelings of abandonment as he evades a dog he's certain will try to murder him. And again, it illuminates just how real Satchmo's fear is when he's willing to give his mom a reason to get upset with him just to keep himself safe. He feels like she's abandoning him right now, so he has to take matters into his own hands.



Finally, Satchmo is ready to run—and in his mind, he's nothing but a big dog treat for the taking. But Satchmo also trusts Mr. Jerry, so he's willing to take a moment to look at the scene in front of him and try to think about it differently. Suddenly, the once-frightening dog doesn't look so terrible. It looks happy, and Mr. Jerry calling the dog his friend suggests that the dog isn't a fearsome beast at all. The fact that Satchmo trusts Mr. Jerry offers hope that he'll be willing to trust his neighbor and meet the dog—and perhaps begin to overcome his fear.



Mrs. Stevens shows how important supportive teachers are: she supports Cynthia's love of performing comedy, and in exchange, she gets to hear Cynthia's jokes. She also gets to teach everyone about math without being interrupted. The fact that Cynthia's tangential monologues seem to line up with the lesson's subject matter also show that Cynthia isn't just goofing off. She's taking what she's learning from Mrs. Stevens and is looking at the information in a different, humorous way.



Back in the present, Cynthia asks her classmates to agree with her that “shirt” is a strange word. She heard that long ago, a clothes maker invented the garment and he initially called it an arm-belly-chest cloth. But that was too long, so he shortened it to ABC—but then the ABC song came out and it was too confusing. One night, at a dinner party, the clothes maker’s friends all tried the garment on and loved it, but they all hated the name. The clothes maker was an anxious eater; he started shoving bread in his mouth as his friends asked him what he wanted to call the garment. Finally—Cynthia pauses for dramatic effect—the clothes maker said, through a mouthful of bread, “*Shirt*, I don’t know!” Mrs. Stevens tries not to laugh as she says that Cynthia’s time is up.

Cynthia’s mom works during the day and attends night school. She used to read to baby Cynthia from her night school textbooks. She’s Cynthia’s hero, though Cynthia’s mom is too busy to save Cynthia, or even laugh at Cynthia’s jokes. Cynthia’s grandfather, on the other hand, is her superhero. Cynthia believes he’s incredible. Most people think of him as just an ex-soldier who used to own the liquor store. He used to flip over crates and put on comedy shows in his store.

Cynthia is named for her grandfather, whose name is Cinder. He’d always say he’s Cinder as in “cinder block,” not like Cinderella. But really, he has elements of both Cinderella and cinder blocks in him. He’s tough, but also soft. He adored baby Cynthia, made the babbling little girl his sidekick, and gave her her nickname, Say-So.

Cinder’s girlfriend, Miss Fran, was a mail lady. She’d always stop by his store in the middle of one of his routines, and her laugh—and the obvious love between her and Cinder—made men in the store jealous. On her Saturday visits, she’d always catch Cynthia marching around. Miss Fran would stick stamps on Cynthia’s cheeks and threaten to mail her to Ookabooka Land, which made Cynthia scream. Miss Fran died when Cynthia was seven, and after her death, Cinder’s mind started to float away. Maybe his spirit went underground with her body; he could see her grave from his apartment window. He lived five doors down from Cynthia and Cynthia’s mom.

Today, though, Cynthia gets to tell a joke that has nothing to do with math, so she has more options in terms of subject matter. But again, she shows that she’s making connections between different things that she’s learning about, from the alphabet to where her clothes came from. And the punchline of this joke also ties in with some of the ideas that other stories in the collection explore, such as how fear can lead to humor. Just as Satchmo’s plan to escape the dog was funny, in a way, the clothes maker’s exclamation also becomes humorous.



Outside of school, Cynthia also has a robust support network. Her mom demonstrates grit and resiliency by applying herself to school for Cynthia’s whole life. However, it doesn’t seem as though Cynthia always appreciates her mom’s hard work, since the tone here is somewhat sad—Cynthia wants her mom to laugh at her jokes. This is why she’s so close to her grandfather: they both love comedy.



Describing Cinder as both tough and soft—and as a constant caregiver for his granddaughter—adds more depth to his previous description as a liquor store owner. In addition to owning his business, he’s also dedicating himself to his family and allowing Cynthia’s mom, who’s either his daughter or his daughter-in-law, to attend school.



The descriptions of Cynthia’s early years spent in her grandfather’s store paint a picture of a happy, supported childhood filled with laughter and love. However, things started to shift when Miss Fran died, which helps explain why in the present, Cynthia’s life doesn’t seem quite as idyllic. In part, Cynthia is grieving for the grandfather she knew as a kid, the one who was hilarious and madly in love. The passage implies that with his mind and his memory starting to fail, their relationship isn’t quite the same anymore.



Not long after Miss Fran's death, Cinder closed his liquor store. Soon after, the city knocked the store down and the apartment complex built a playground on the site. They included a small concrete platform, about the size of a crate, and stuck a plaque on it reading "Cinder's Block." Cynthia always hoped Cinder would stand on it and joke, but he never did. Soon after the playground went up, Cinder started forgetting things, like how to use the microwave. He'd always call Cynthia to his apartment to help him remember things, like how to turn on the TV.

Not long after that, Cynthia and Cynthia's mom moved in with Cinder. Cynthia and her mom technically share a bedroom, but Cynthia sleeps on the couch because her mom thrashes in her sleep. She spends her nights dreaming about making her mom laugh and let go of some stress. The stress on her mom's face looks like she's wearing the wrong color of makeup. Cynthia wants nothing more than for her mom to be around and to love and joke with her, the way that Cinder and Miss Fran loved and joked with each other. But Cynthia's mom is too busy, so Cynthia jokes with everyone. A laugh is a laugh and Cynthia takes them where she can get them, like at the end of Mrs. Stevens's class.

Back in the present, Cynthia stands in Mrs. Stevens's doorway handing out flyers handwritten on notebook paper. They state that Cynthia is giving a live show on Cinder's Block at 3:33 p.m. Finally, Cynthia heads down the hall herself, stops at her locker, and pauses at the door to tease Gregory Pitts for smelling like an armpit, which she does every day. He knows it's a joke, so he flaps his arms to waft the smell toward her. Instead of going the usual route (up to Ms. Post and walking around the long way), Cynthia cuts across the grass behind the school to the shortcut. She didn't take the shortest shortcut—leaving out the back door—because then she couldn't tease Greg, and Cinder taught her how important traditions are.

Cynthia walks along the brick school building to the line of trees at the back. She tiptoes through the trees, since this area is always muddy, and then looks both ways before crossing Carigan Street. Cynthia enters the Southview Cemetery—the shortest way home is to go through it. She's also on the lookout for "giggles" for Cinder. Giggles are cigarette butts, and Cinder collects them. People always smoke as they walk through the cemetery. Cynthia named them giggles soon after Miss Fran died, when she was helping Cinder clean the apartment. He'd told her to get rid of stamps and envelopes (Cynthia pocketed the stamps instead) and then Cynthia had asked about an ashtray full of cigarette butts, all of them smeared with Miss Fran's red lipstick. Cinder picked up one of the cigarette butts, studied it like it was a bullet—and giggled.

Including Cinder's Block in the playground speaks to how integral Cinder and his comedy shows were to the community. The apartment complex tries to keep that tradition alive and honor Cinder—but with his memory faltering, Cinder struggles to appreciate the gesture. And his memory problems also mean that Cynthia steps into a more adult role sooner than she might otherwise, since Cinder needs her help to perform basic tasks.



Cynthia wants nothing more than to make people happy and to have a close and affectionate relationship with her mom. But the narration makes it clear that Cynthia isn't getting that; in that regard, her life is lacking. So, her comedy shows at the end of Mrs. Stevens's class aren't actually just for fun—they reflect that Cynthia isn't getting the support she needs at home. The jokes themselves also obscure how sad Cynthia is underneath her jokester persona.



What makes Cynthia feel secure and more in control of her life is holding tight to these routines, like giving a show on Cinder's Block and teasing Gregory every day after school. It's one way she can honor her grandfather as well as create stability in her life. In this sense, she's doing much the same thing that Fatima does with her notebook, though rather than simply observing what changes, Cynthia makes a point to try to keep things the same. Mentioning Ms. Post like so many other kids have continues to establish the crossing guard as an important figure who makes kids feel secure.



Again, the fact that Cynthia goes through the cemetery in part because it's the best place to find giggles for her grandfather highlights how devoted she is to him. The story of how giggles got their name also starts to suggest that Cinder has a unique ability to find humor in everything, even in things that might hurt him emotionally. Being faced with Miss Fran's ashtray could have been emotionally devastating; it was a reminder that she lived and enjoyed her life by smoking cigarettes. This is why the butt he picked up was like a bullet. But instead of mourning her loss, Cinder instead chose to laugh and focus on the fact that Miss Fran did enjoy her life.



Cynthia finds no giggles in the cemetery. There are people visiting graves or walking their dogs, and there are two girls sitting on a skateboard by a tombstone. They look familiar, but Cynthia doesn't want to stare and make it weird. Cynthia only has seven minutes to make it to Cinder's Block, hopefully with a giggle for Cinder—and she finally finds one smeared with lipstick on Miss Fran's gravestone. It seems like a sign.

At the other side of the cemetery, Cynthia crosses Southview Avenue to the playground. There's a small girl playing happily on the swings, but nobody else. It's 3:31. Cynthia sits on Cinder's Block and pops her back. Sleeping on the couch is making her feel old. Giggling, Cynthia says to herself that couches are called couches "because of the ouch part." A minute later, a pigeon—gray but beautiful—lands next to Cynthia. Cynthia tells the pigeon that she always wings it anyway. Then, she says she wonders what it's like to be a pigeon, with wings to fly anywhere it wants. But it's such a letdown that when a pigeon gets to where it wants to be, it doesn't have the hands to grab things. Cynthia giggles again as 3:33 arrives.

Nobody ever comes to Cynthia's shows. Occasionally other Southview residents, like Gregory Pitts, Remy Vaughn, Joey Santiago, and Candace Green come. People probably don't come because they have other places to be, or things to do. Or maybe people don't think Cynthia is serious about her shows being at 3:33. Really, though, the shows are at 3:33 for Cynthia's mother. Cynthia's mom finishes work as a barista at three and starts graduate school at 4:15. She always goes straight from work to class—but if for some reason she decides to take a day off, Cynthia will be on Cinder's Block, waiting to make her hero smile just like Cinder taught her to. But Cynthia's mom never takes days off.

Cynthia pulls a notebook out of her backpack, rips out a page, and scribbles her joke about birds not having hands on it. She continues that it'd be great if birds had hands—but then they'd be angels, and angels with beaks would be scary. Laughing to herself, Cynthia pulls out an envelope and a stamp from a special pocket in her backpack, seals her joke in the envelope, and writes her own address on it. She stamps the envelope and then approaches the swinging girl and offers her a sticker. When the girl holds out her hand, Cynthia slaps a Charlie Chaplin stamp onto it.

The two girls on the skateboard are presumably Pia and Fern. That all three girls wind up in the cemetery after school to visit loved ones' graves suggests again that students at Latimer are more connected than they might think at first, simply because they all live in the same neighborhood.



It appears as though nobody understands how important these shows are for Cynthia. Seeing how she formulates her jokes, though, gives some insight into how Cynthia sees the world. Everything has the potential to be funny, if only she can look at things in the right way. Even something as painful as sleeping on the couch can become humorous. And discussing the pigeon's lack of hands shows too that Cynthia is thinking critically about the world around her and how it works. Again, she goes out of her way to identify the funny parts.



The story acknowledges that because Cynthia is a known jokester at school, kids—potential audience members—might not take her seriously about the shows. Her coping mechanisms might not be helping her as much as she'd like them to. Even sadder, though, is that Cynthia is really only putting these shows on for her mom, and not even her mom comes to the shows. This shows how alone and unsupported Cynthia feels.



Cynthia might feel isolated, but she's not willing to let that get in the way of her comedy. She's still able to find the humor in being all alone at her show, and the pigeon continues to provide material. Then, Cynthia shows that she'd like to support other kids and help them feel less alone by giving the girl on the swing a sticker. It's a way for her to embody Miss Fran, who gave stamps away with wild abandon.



Once Cynthia gets into her apartment, she knocks on Cinder's door and says she got mail. He doesn't answer, so concerned, Cynthia opens the door. Cinder is sitting on his bed and writing in a notebook. Balls of paper cover the floor, which is normal for him—he writes random sentences written on them as he tries to put his thoughts on paper. Some of the paper balls, though, are in Cynthia's handwriting. For a moment, Cinder doesn't seem to recognize Cynthia, but then he comes to and says he's trying to write a good joke for her to tell at school tomorrow. Cynthia joins him on the bed, kisses his cheek, and sees "eardrums" written on the paper. He says the joke isn't working, wads up the paper, and throws it on the floor. He's working on something better.

Cinder asks if Cynthia told the shirt joke today. Cynthia says it was great; her teacher didn't get mad about the implied profanity at all. Then, Cynthia says she found a giggle and drops the cigarette butt into Cinder's palm. Cinder smiles and puts it into a bottle containing 100 more giggles. Cynthia adds that mail came for him, and she offers him the envelope she stuffed, stamped, and addressed at the park. Cinder puts it on the table, but Cynthia knows what will happen: he'll read it later, forget he read it, and then believe he wrote it. He'll suggest she try the joke in Mrs. Stevens's class, and she'll be able to tell him after school that his jokes are still working.

As Cynthia heads back for the door, she asks what other joke Cinder was mentioning working on. Cinder asks what would happen if a **school bus** fell from the sky. Cynthia asks if it's coming from Ookabooka Land. In the silence that follows, Cynthia stares at the man who taught her that life is funny pretty much all the time—and that even when it isn't funny, it's still possible to find humor. Cinder stares back, and then they both start laughing hard enough to shake the bottle of giggles.

9. HOW A BOY CAN BECOME A GREASE FIRE

Gregory Pitts's friends—Remy Vaughn, Joey Santiago, and Candace Green—love him so much that today, they tell him the truth. The truth is that he stinks like he's dead. And today Gregory cannot stink, so his friends, desperate to help him, intervene. Today is "a day of romance."

In the story's flashbacks and in Cynthia's memory, Cinder is a towering figure capable of doing anything. But seeing him in the flesh makes him seem extremely vulnerable; he's clearly struggling to remember things and to simply organize his thoughts. Because of this, Cynthia is again forced into a more adult role. It falls to her to check to make sure her grandfather is okay and to encourage him to keep writing. However, he's still focused on humor if he's trying to write jokes for her to tell at school. This is why he and Cynthia are still so close: they both love comedy more than anything.



Again, the story's focus on humor obscures a much sadder story underneath: that Cynthia is going out of her way to help Cinder believe that he's still a master joke writer, when really she's doing all the writing herself. She's stepping into a more adult role to help make him happy and keep herself happy. She does this too by continuing to search for giggles for him; whether he still connects them to Fran or not, the sight of them still makes him smile and feel appreciated.



Finally, the story crystallizes its main idea: that even things that don't initially seem funny can be funny depending on one's perspective. What Cynthia feels she must do for her grandfather probably seems sad rather than funny to most readers. But it allows her to continue to have a strong, loving relationship with him based on a shared love of comedy. Meanwhile, Cinder's mention of the falling school bus suggests that the school bus mentioned at the start of the collection might not be tragic at all—it may, as it is here, be funny.



Gregory clearly has honest, supportive friends if they're willing to tell him such a difficult truth to help him presumably win over his crush. However, Cynthia has been teasing Gregory for some time because he smells, so perhaps Gregory only agrees to take action about it when his close friends tell him.



Before they begin, Joey asks if Candace is okay—her cousin, Bryson, was beaten up yesterday. Candace says Bryson is fine and anyway, since they're walking near his house, she's going to stop in and see him when they're done. This settled, Remy says that first, they have to make Gregory smell better. He says he has "the stuff," and Gregory asks why his friends are talking about it like this. But he adds that he doesn't really care, as long as it works. Joey says it'll work as Remy digs a can of body spray out of his backpack. According to his brother, Justin, it's "deodorant for your whole body." Remy sprays Gregory from head to toe, spinning him. The spray smells like burnt flowers and burnt rubber, but it's better than what Gregory normally smells like.

Ms. Wockley shouts at Remy to stop spraying; spraying isn't allowed in school. She's frustrated because kids are always spraying perfume or cologne in the hallways, and it always makes the stench worse. Gregory, though, is a special case, and Ms. Wockley's anger is funny enough to make Gregory, Candace, Remy, and Joey all laugh. They all mock her, Gregory chokes, and they begin to walk away from the school.

Normally, Gregory, Remy, Joey, and Candace head for the Southview Apartments, but today they're walking to Sandra White's house on Rogers Street. Gregory has been trying to work himself up to telling Sandra he likes her and asking if he can be her boyfriend. He hates how that sounds—he'd rather they just be "together"—but his friends don't care about the terminology. They're just here to support him, beginning by making sure he doesn't smell awful. Candace is also the only one who knows where Sandra lives, since they used to be close when they were kids.

Remy drops one of his hallmark corny lines—that he hit Gregory with "ooh," and now Gregory is ready for "some la la." He always says stuff like this because Justin has told him this is how you win girls. Candace has been trying to tell him otherwise without success. Candace jokes that Gregory stinks, but really, Gregory does smell better. So now it's time for Candace to impress on Gregory "the importance of moisturizing." She pulls out a massive bottle of lotion, and Gregory's eyes go wide with fear. As Ms. Post ushers the group across **Portal Avenue**, Candace explains that she stole the lotion from her mom.

Again, the kids in the various stories are all connected; Bryson was beaten up in "Call of Duty." But at the same time as that much sadder story is taking place, this much happier and more humorous story is unraveling alongside it. And this passage (and the story) are so funny because Gregory and his friends are very earnest about their project to fix Gregory's smell—this is deadly serious to them. But body sprays don't do much when applied on top of body odor, so it's doubtful that Gregory's friends are actually going to be able to help him improve his hygiene.



The omniscient narrator here reiterates that the sprays kids tend to use never help—another indicator that perhaps the crew's methods are misguided. But they're on a mission, and since school is out, they don't feel like they have to listen to Ms. Wockley anyway. The short period of time when they're totally free from adults has begun.



The story again drives home just how supportive Gregory's friends are of him. It either hasn't occurred to them or they don't care that Gregory dating Sandra might put distance between the friends—all they care about is doing whatever it takes to help Gregory achieve his dreams. And to do this, they have to help Gregory change his perspective and realize that his natural aroma isn't going to impress a girl. The final aside about Candace being the only one who knows where Sandra lives is also humorous, but it highlights again that Gregory can't do this on his own.



Recall that in "Call of Duty," the narrator suggested that Remy would be cool if he only stopped trying so hard. Here, the story explains why he's trying so hard: he clearly admires his older brother and takes everything Justin says as fact. But while this might make Remy feel close to his brother, it just backfires as far as everyone else is concerned. Candace tries to do the same thing for Remy as she does for Gregory and help him learn how to actually impress a girl, but Remy is far less interested in taking her advice.



Once they're across the street, Candace asks Gregory, Remy, and Joey to stop; she can't "walk and lotion at the same time." She pumps enough lotion into her hand to fill her entire palm and then grabs Gregory's right hand. She works her way from his hand, up his forearm, and then stops at his elbow. She says that elbows are very important. He doesn't want Sandra to think that his arm is going to break in half because it's so dry, does he? Gregory says that won't happen, but Joey and Remy say nothing, so he asks again. Joey says "wow," and Remy scoffs that he's heard stories of "dry boys" breaking up into paint chips when they try to be romantic. Candace reiterates that elbows are important and attacks Gregory's elbow. Then she lotions Gregory's other arm.

Gregory pulls away once Candace is done with his elbow. The attention is embarrassing, and people are staring. However, he does feel different; his fingers feel like they've just had casts come off. Candace says she's not done yet, making Gregory squawk. Remy says talking to Sandra won't do any good if Gregory's arms are shiny, but his face looks like chalk attacked him. Agreeing, Candace fills her hand with lotion again and then slaps the lotion onto Gregory's cheeks. She massages his whole face and then his earlobes (which confuses even Remy and Joey, but they trust Candace and say nothing).

Just then, a **school bus** pulls up and a boy drops his window. The boy shouts that Candace is never going to be able to rub Gregory's face off. Candace retorts that this is a good thing, since Gregory's face might look like the boy's underneath. Remy insults the boy too and Joey searches for a rock to throw, but the bus pulls away before he finds one. Candace polishes Gregory's forehead for another few minutes and then says he looks "not bad."

Gregory nervously asks if he's ready now, but Joey says there's one more thing: Gregory needs something for his lips. Gregory backs away, shocked, but Candace says that chapped lips are disgusting. Joey asks what will happen if they get to Sandra's house, Gregory tells her everything, and then Sandra asks for a kiss? Candace interjects that Sandra won't do that, but she might think about kissing Gregory one day if it looks like he takes care of himself. Remy teases Gregory about getting his first kiss as though he's kissed girls (he hasn't).

Candace is essentially trying to get Gregory to understand that he'll be more attractive to Sandra if he looks like he takes care of his body, such as by using lotion. However, things again take a humorous turn when Joey and Remy state that "dry boys" literally crumble if they try to be romantic without moisturizing first. This is particularly true when Gregory seems at first to believe that Sandra might actually fear his arm will break in half. This highlights his youth and his inexperience with romance, as well as how much he trusts his friends to tell him the truth.



Gregory wants to feel somewhat in control of his afternoon by rejecting more lotion, though he also can't ignore how much better the lotion makes his hands feel. His friends' insistence on making him look good and on moisturizing his face highlights how much they genuinely care about his success. Helping him is fun and humorous, and they want Gregory to succeed—if only because this is wildly entertaining.



Though Gregory's friends have been very kind and good-natured about pointing out Gregory's flaws, the boy on the bus engages in cruel bullying by insulting Gregory. Again, though, Gregory's friends step up to defend him in various ways, so the bully's cruelty doesn't end up ruining Gregory's afternoon.



Candace, Joey, and Remy again come together to teach Gregory what they see as an inarguable truth: that chapped lips aren't going to get him anywhere with Sandra. This causes Gregory to look differently at his body and to consider how a love interest might see him, which is also part of growing up and becoming sexually mature. And Remy continues to try to make himself seem cool by pretending to be more mature and experienced than his friends.



Joey starts to say that Gregory won't be kissed with as awful as his lips look right now, but Candace cuts him off. She tells Gregory to stop licking his lips. It's nasty and makes him smell like spit, which makes the body odor stench even worse, and as his friend and a girl who likes boys, she needs Gregory to know it's a dealbreaker. Gregory thanks Candace for her honesty as Joey pulls out a plastic baggie filled with goop. He says he took it from his mom's room, but he couldn't take the whole container or she'd kill him. And he couldn't risk dying before Gregory gets his kiss.

Gregory asks if he really has to use all the goop. Both Candace and Remy say no, and Joey warns that this is medicated, so Gregory should be careful. He opens the bag and a menthol smell wafts out. Gregory says if it's medicated it should be good for him, and he starts rubbing a huge glob on his lips. Joey's jaw drops, and a second later, Gregory's eyes water. He says it burns. Remy snatches the bag and sniffs it. He offers it to Candace, who asks if Joey seriously gave Gregory VapoRub. Joey says his mother didn't have Vaseline, but the VapoRub has Vaseline in it so it's the same. Remy says his mom puts VapoRub on his chest when he's sick and it makes his body cold, but Joey confirms that Remy's chest is indeed greasy afterward. Candace reiterates that VapoRub and Vaseline are not the same.

Gregory, meanwhile, says "burning" over and over as Candace and Remy fan his mouth. Joey and Remy teasingly remind Gregory of his goal: Sandra. After a few minutes the group continues on, reminding Gregory the whole way of how great he is and assuring him Sandra will love him. Finally, they all stop in front of Sandra's house. Remy, Candace, and Joey hang back, and Gregory pulls a piece of paper out of his pocket. He approaches Sandra's house, rings the doorbell, and then runs back down the steps. Candace told him girls don't like guys in their space. She nudges him forward again.

Sandra opens the door, clearly confused. Gregory's eyes are still watering thanks to his burning lips, so her sweatshirt with a pattern of yellow rectangles on a blue background looks like **school buses** falling from the sky. She greets the group and Remy prompts Gregory. Candace says Gregory has something to say. At this, Gregory unfolds his paper and reads that it's good that Sandra always gets questions right in class. She never says anything bad about him to his face, so could he have her phone number? Candace, Joey, Remy, and Gregory exchange looks: they can't believe Gregory actually did it.

Candace is again tasked with sharing some difficult truths with Gregory here: the way he's grooming himself isn't cutting it, and if he continues as he has been, he's never going to get a girlfriend. However adult Gregory might think he is as he prepares to ask a girl out for the first time, Joey's aside about not wanting to give his mom a reason to kill him reminds readers that these characters are just kids, which makes their serious preparations even funnier.



As far as Gregory knows, anything medicated is good—a sign of his innocence and inexperience. The scene becomes even funnier with the revelation that Gregory just smeared too much mentholated VapoRub on his lips, especially when Joey shares his reasoning for choosing to bring VapoRub. The point, he reasons, is to make one's lips "greasy"—but as Gregory's tears suggest, that's not actually the goal of lip balm, and using it shouldn't make a person cry. This comedy of errors is funny, but the situation again emphasizes that Gregory's friends are fully committed to helping him. They're not experienced with romance themselves, though, so their advice is perhaps not the best.



Now that Gregory has been made over, it's time to actually go speak to Sandra. His friends continue to build him up and remind him that he can do this, and he shows how much he's taking their advice to heart when he runs back down the steps so as to not crowd Sandra. Gregory reads as humorously young and innocent, though. Candace clearly thinks he's taking her advice way too far.



The falling school buses again show readers the power of perspective: it's Gregory's burning and watering eyes that make Sandra's sweatshirt, which actually has nothing to do with school buses, look this way. Gregory's friends realize that their support and help paid off, as Gregory actually worked up the courage to speak to Sandra. However, Gregory's note also suggests that he's bullied often at school. Saying that Sandra never says anything bad to his face suggests that plenty of kids are mean to his face—and he's aware that many others are mean behind his back.



Sandra walks right to Gregory. Her nose twitches and Gregory's shiny forehead seems to almost blind her. She asks what he's doing looking like he's blowing kisses (he's pursing his lips due to the VapoRub). His voice breaking, Gregory says his lips are burning. He says he put VapoRub on his lips, but when Sandra asks why, he says that's hard to explain. Gregory says it's also hard to explain why he's greasy and why he smells like he does. She asks him to try. At this, Gregory starts to read from his paper again. He's shaking. But when he glances up, Sandra is smiling. Maybe it's the kind of smile that means she's going to laugh—or maybe not.

Sandra's reaction to Gregory's makeover suggests that Candace, Remy, and Joey might have been a bit off base in what they had Gregory do. And now, even though his friends are still behind him, Gregory is on his own and has to figure out by himself how to respond to Sandra. Leaving Sandra's response ambiguous highlights that all the prep in the world doesn't mean that Sandra has to respond in a particular way. And for now, it's up to Gregory and the reader to decide whether she's going to laugh at him or accept his invitation.



10. THE BROOM DOG

A **school bus** is all sorts of things, from a teacher's lounge for students to the nurse's cot. It can be an office, a command center, or "a tank reshaped," since "hot dogs and baloney are the same meat." It can be a science lab, a war zone, a safe zone, or a concert hall. It can be a courtroom, a stage, or a spelling bee. In some neighborhoods, a school bus is a spaceship. Mail passes through it in the form of notes on candy wrappers and middle fingers. It's a recliner in the kitchen—uncool, but sensible. It's a dirty fridge, cheese, and a ketchup packet with a hole in it on a seat. School buses are delightful and uncomfortable, they're talent shows, recording booths, and orchestra pits. They're movie sets and masterpieces that people pretend to understand.

Finally, the collection begins to crystallize its insistence that school buses can be anything, based on a person's perspective. For some kids, the bus is a refuge where they can sleep and hang out with their friends in a comfortable space. But for others, it's a weapon in and of itself, or a place where they're bullied or humiliated. The narration implies that the only people who really understand what a school bus is are the kids who ride it every day, and the school bus can be something different to each kid each time they ride. It's not just one thing; its significance is constantly changing.



Canton has heard kids talk about their wondrous journeys to and from school on the **school bus**, but to him, school buses are also weapons. One almost destroyed him and took his mom. His mom, Ms. Post, has been the crossing guard at Latimer Middle School since before Canton was born. He's been running around in her vest and blowing her whistle since he was tiny. He believes crossing guards, his mother in particular, are magic: they can stop moving things and create a safe spot for people to cross the street.

While the previous passage demonstrated many of the different things that buses can be, buses are something very specific to Canton: weapons. They're not fun for him, since they almost turned his life upside-down. As in stories like "The Low Cuts Strike Again," this shows how fear can rule kids' lives and change how they see the world. If a bus almost killed Ms. Post, it follows that her crossing guard "magic" couldn't actually protect her.



Canton thought that until a year ago, when a blue ball bounced into the street and a small boy named Kenzi Thompson ran after it. Ms. Post had turned her back for a moment and Kenzi was already halfway across the street before she turned around. There was a **school bus** heading for him. Ms. Post chased after Kenzi, who stopped when he noticed the school bus. She threw herself at him, pushing him out of the way of the bus. The bus barely bumped her, but buses are big. She broke her shoulder and bruised her hip.

Canton essentially lost some of his innocence a year ago when the bus hit Ms. Post. Now, he realizes his mom is fallible and can die, just like any other person. But this also ignores the fact that Ms. Post was injured doing something extremely noble and selfless: saving Kenzi from certain death. The fact that she's able to save him, meanwhile, drives home the importance of figures like crossing guards in kids' lives. They might not hold the same sway that a teacher or a parent does, but they still protect and guide kids.



This was devastating for Canton. He usually helped the custodian, Mr. Munch, clean things after school (though mostly, Canton just listened to Mr. Munch complain that boys make such a mess in the bathroom). But on that day, Jasmine Jordan and TJ ran back into school shouting that Ms. Post was hit by a bus. Canton felt like his brown skin was turning yellow, the color of a **school bus**.

Ms. Post returns to work a week later, normal except for the sling on her shoulder. But Canton can't go back to normal. Mr. Munch finds Canton in the bathroom that afternoon, sitting on the disgusting floor with his head on his knees. Mr. Munch realizes Canton is crying, and that he can barely breathe. So Mr. Munch squats next to Canton and walks him through breathing exercises until Canton can breathe and stand. They walk outside to the crosswalk, where Canton throws his arms around his mother and doesn't let go. Realizing Canton isn't going to let go and let Ms. Post work, Mr. Munch takes over, uses his fingers to whistle, and glares at the cars while he ushers kids across.

Mr. Munch meets Canton outside his last class the next day and invites Canton to walk with him. As Mr. Munch sweeps up dust, hair, hair ties, coins, and candy wrappers with his push broom, he tells Canton about his wife, Zena. She got so nervous and afraid when their daughter Winnie went to college. Zena was afraid Winnie was going to get into trouble and need help. She was up all night, terrified. Mr. Munch says he eventually bought her a dog. By this time, he's at the custodian's closet. As he unlocks it, he explains how he started to research emotional support animals after Winnie suggested it. Emotional support dogs are supposed to make people feel better.

Inside the office-sized closet, Mr. Munch shows Canton pictures of Zena, Winnie, and the dog, which is so ugly it's cute. Canton thinks the dog is cute, but he can also think of lots of things he likes better than dogs, like ice cream, skateboards, and good jokes. Canton asks what Mr. Munch's point is. He wonders if Mr. Munch is trying to be an "emotional support human" and just take Canton's mind off his worries that a **school bus** is going to run Ms. Post over. Mr. Munch opens a locker and says he made Canton an emotional support dog. He explains that dogs aren't allowed in school, and Ms. Post might not be okay with a real dog, but he thought this might help.

Noting that Canton's brown skin feels like it's turning yellow speaks to how life-changing it is for Canton to almost lose his mom. His skin color is a huge part of his identity—as is his relationship with his mom—and in an instant, it feels to him like both of these things could be taken from him.



Just like crossing guards protect kids from cars, Mr. Munch demonstrates that custodians can also play a big part in students' lives. He's around to offer Canton much needed support as he talks Canton through his crushing anxiety and delivers him to his mother. Taking over for Ms. Post is also how Mr. Munch offers Canton (and Ms. Post) support. Nobody wants to make Canton let go of his mom, so the only option is to step in and allow Canton to stay right where he is. That way, he feels safe, and the kids crossing the street are safe as well.



By telling Canton about Zena and Winnie, Mr. Munch helps Canton realize that he's not alone. He's not broken for feeling so much anxiety about his mom, and there are perhaps ways that Canton can get a grip on his fear. Moreover, suggesting a way that Canton can begin to move on from his fear offers hope that Canton, unlike Satchmo, won't simply let a fear rule his life. So, while Satchmo couldn't get past seeing dogs as terrible violent beasts, perhaps Canton will have the support he needs to realize buses are more than just weapons, and that his mom is safe.



Canton is happy to let Mr. Munch talk to him and to admire pictures of Zena, Winnie, and the dog. But he understands completely that Mr. Munch has an ulterior motive here, and he's right: he wants to give Canton his own emotional support dog. The fact that an emotional support dog exists in the collection shows again how important perspective is. Dogs terrified Satchmo, but here, dogs are presented as a source of comfort that can help people get over their fears.



Mr. Munch pulls out a broom head, detached from a broomstick. It's straw, and it's mangled, and Mr. Munch has drawn eyes, a mouth, and then glued dustcloth ears on top. Canton says it's a broom, but Mr. Munch assures Canton he cleaned it. Canton is confused and asks if this is really going to help. Smirking, Mr. Munch says that the worst thing that could happen is that Canton sweeps the street with it. So the next day, Canton takes his broom dog to the corner to watch Ms. Post work, to "guard the crossing guard." Sitting against the stop sign, he runs his fingers through the broom dog's hair every time Ms. Post steps into the street. Strangely, it works. Canton names the broom dog Dusty.

It's been a year since Mr. Munch gave Dusty to Canton, and a year since Canton had his first panic attack. Things are better now. Now, when the end of school bell rings, Canton stands up in Mr. Davanzo's class. Simeon, a big kid, stands at the doorway giving high fives as usual, and Mr. Davanzo shouts for the kids to do their homework: to write about "Human environmental interaction." Canton grabs Dusty from his locker, passes Ms. Wockley scolding Simeon and Kenzi, and notices a strange kid in a green suit sitting outside. Candace—Canton's crush—is with her friends, so Canton won't talk to her. And on the next bench, Bit and the Low Cuts are gathered. Trista, the toughest girl, greets Canton, but Canton just waves and keeps walking. He has to get to the corner before the first kids cross.

At the corner, Ms. Post is just pulling on her vest and putting her whistle lanyard over her neck. She hugs Canton, asks how school was, and asks if he has homework. He explains Ms. Broome's assignment to imagine themselves as an object, and Mr. Davanzo's assignment to "record human environmental interaction." Ms. Post asks what that is, but Canton just says that he's going to work on it. They make faces at each other, and Canton sits down against the stop sign. He pulls out a notebook and puts Dusty in his lap.

Canton makes notes of all the things he sees, including **Portal Avenue**, Ms. Post, cars, people going, hugging, laughing, and moving. He studies the people crossing the street and listens to bits of conversation. Gregory likes Sandra, Satchmo is afraid of a dog, and Cynthia is putting on a show later. Everyone is curious what Fatima is writing, and some kids are talking about boogers. Ms. Post seems like a ballet dancer, stepping into the street to get **buses** to stop and usher kids across.

At first, Canton struggles to take Mr. Munch seriously—he's not willing to use his imagination and see the broom as a dog. But to his surprise, Canton finds that the broom dog, despite being a questionable approximation of a dog, is actually really effective. This suggests that Canton has been able to look at the dog through a different lens and see it as something capable of helping him face his fears. This allows Canton to let go of his fear, trust that his mom will be okay, and concentrate on other things.



As Canton leaves Mr. Davanzo's classroom, the collection draws connections between several different stories and shows how Canton's perspective changes these people. Simeon is just a big friendly kid, while Trista is tough like the narrator described her in "The Low Cuts Strike Again." However, recall that the narrator suggested that Canton walking past looked afraid—presumably, of Trista. Here, though, it becomes clear that if Canton is afraid of anything, it's of not getting to the corner before his classmates.



This story continues to make connections between the other stories in the collection. The collection as a whole is about "human environmental interaction," or how people engage with their worlds. In each story, readers have learned how kids see their neighborhoods, their classmates, and their teachers on their walk home. Now, readers get to see what Canton sees.



This passage solidifies Portal Avenue's symbolism: it's a "portal" of sorts that ushers kids from school to their homes. Here, kids reach the point at which they're independent once Ms. Post ushers them across the street and until they get home. And again, Canton gives his perspective on the protagonists of various stories, showing again how a person's perspective influences how they see someone.



Finally, when all the kids have gone home, Ms. Post takes off her vest and asks Canton if he's ready to go. Canton stands and Dusty falls from his lap—he forgot the dog was there. Ms. Post picks the broom dog up, observing that it's in rough shape these days. The ears are gone now. She notes that it kind of looks like a **school bus**; the eyes are like headlights, and the mouth is the grille. Canton hasn't noticed this. The broom dog has transformed into just a thing he has when he needs it. But Canton hasn't needed it in a long time now. He agrees that it's faded as he and Ms. Post look both ways before crossing the street.

Ms. Post asks Canton if he still wants the broom dog. Shrugging, Canton tosses the broom dog into the air and catches it several times. The straw from the broom comes loose and falls on them. Ms. Post laughs that a **school bus** is falling from the sky. Canton smiles. He knows school buses are many different things—just like a walk home.

As Canton has become less anxious over the last year, Dusty has transformed from a beloved emotional support animal into what it used to be: a broom. Now, Ms. Post is looking at the broom in a different way by suggesting it looks like a school bus. This realization drives home that Canton has healed from the trauma he experienced when Ms. Post was hit by the bus. Because he's healed, he can look at the broom through new eyes.



As Canton tosses the broom/dog/bus into the air, a school bus of sorts falls from the sky—bringing the collection full circle (the collection opened with a school bus falling from the sky). Now, readers know that the school bus was never a real school bus—it was something else entirely, and it wasn't at all dangerous. Noting that walks home can similarly be many different things shows again how important a person's perspective is in dictating how they see their world.





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