LISA FIPPS

A novel in verse by the author of ***STARFISH***

AND THEN, BOOM!



Also by Lisa Fipps

Starfish

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LISA FIPPS

Nancy Paulsen Books

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CONTENTS

Dedication

Just Like Superman
Origin Story
Why the World Needs Comic Books
And-Thens and Booms!
Scratching an Itch
Prepare for Takeoff
Mom's First Takeoff
Make Me Choose
Pop!
Onomatopoeia
Oodles of Doodles
Power of a Word
From Poor to Poorer
The Mess with Mom
Wish I Didn't Have to Know
What I Know About My Dad
Two Halves ≠ Whole
Unhoused
The Fishbowl
Eating Crumbs
Out of Our Reach
Dirty
Ant-Man
It's Amazing
Life Preserver

The Overripe Banana
Nick
Three-Finger Rundown
Uncle Frankie
Frank-Mart
The Quilt
Grandmum’s Arms
Key
By the Front Door
Safe Space
The Grower
My Walk to School
Hakeem
Farbal
Math Matters
Juste Horrible
The Share Table and Corner Store
The Reticulated Python
Not Enough, but Plenty
Villains at the Table
Fair and Square
Sitgen
Tummy Troubles
Hunger
Wasted
Bowling Ball Pyramid
Sick and Tired
I Love Basketball
What the Game’s About
The Turd
Happy Farts
Out for Supper
Worse Than Hunger

All I Need
Last Night
Nighttime’s for Wishes and Dreams
Everyone Has a *One Day*
The Return of Thanos
Raven
Seeds of Hope
Screaming
Three Kinds of People
I Am Falcon
The Hug Sandwich
Grandmum Got Her *One Day*
The Crow
Chimera
Casserole Surprise!
Shepherd’s Pie
Snapped
Around and Around
Take Him Off My Hands
Reeling in the Food
Fish Fry
Fly Free
I Get It Now
One Sweet Moment
Losing More of Grandmum
Mom and Me
Maybe It’s Like Basketball
The Kiss
Silence
The Balloon
Texting
Zipped Lips
Couldn’t Help but Hear

Doomsday’s Left Hook
No Reply
The Bag
Tangled Webs
Should Have Asked
Abandoned
Rescued
The Luckies
I Can’t Even Feed Me
The Knock on the Door
Places to Go, People to See
The Right Thing
Dawggone Hole
The Magic Closet
Mrs. Swan, My Superhero
Rock, Paper, Scissors
We Have to Talk
Logic Train
Worst Thing Ever
I’m Not Alone
Running Out
Surprised, Not Surprised
Problem Solved
Leaning on Each Other
The Grocery List
Disconnected
The Five Marbles
Going, Going, Gone
Just a Fraction
Making Sure I Don’t Go Hungry
Satisfying Sounds
Right Hook!
Oh Deer!

Did What I Asked
What Hunger Feels Like
Oak, Joe Oak
Dumpster Diving
Olympic Medalist
Eating Leftovers
Can’t Win
Maybe
Can’t Be All That Bad
Bad Beef Stew
All That for Nothing
On the Tip of My Tongue
My Favorite Day
Not Quite Right
Howling Winds
Trapped
A Big Pile of Poo
It’s Just Beginning
Lightning Strikes
And Then
Here It Comes
The Tornado
Holding On
Superman
Survived the Storm
After a Storm
Hurt
Take Care of Yourself
My Story
Bracing
All Kinds of Lucky
Barely Recognizable
Hunger Three-Finger Rundown

Clean Start
A Lot of Ifs
The Suitcase
Everybody Knows Now
Slushy Manor
A Little Overwhelming
Phoenix and Olivia
The Davisons
A Minute to Get Used to All This
Surrounded by Food
Learn from Each Other
The Fifth Chair
Taken Care Of
Before They Get So Bad
My Room
Rebuilding
My Boy
Little Free Pantries
Do What You Can
The View from Here
Even Superheroes Need Help

Readers and Teachers
Acknowledgments
About the Author

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To every kid who hungers for food; hungers to be out of poverty; hungers to let go of the shoulder-breaking, knee-buckling weight of each *and then, BOOM!*; hungers to be a kid instead of a grown-up in a kid's body; hungers for a safe place away from stormy people popping in and out of your life; and who hungers to never be left abandoned and alone again: I know you. I was you. I wrote this book to you and for you to give you hope, something to believe in, and to tell you it can all work out in the end.
You. Are. Not. Alone.

In memory of Grandmum,
Eleanor Elizabeth Davison Brown Fipps.
Still miss your Captain America hugs.
XOXOXO

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JUST LIKE SUPERMAN

My name’s Joseph Oak, and
since an oak tree
grows from an acorn nut,
Grandmum calls me a little nut,
and if Mom’s around to hear it, she adds,
I’m allergic to nuts.

It isn’t nice of Mom to say that,
but she’s not known for saying
—or doing—
nice things.

But I never thought
she’d do what she did.

I never thought a lot of things.
Like I’d be on the news and
the whole wide world
would end up finding out about
the moment I flew.

Just like Superman.

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ORIGIN STORY

I'm *not* a superhero.
Straight up not.
I mean, yeah, sure,
I flew like Superman.

Once.

But
I don't have any special powers—unless
you count my ability to be invisible,
and to survive.

I do have one thing in common
with superheroes.
I have an origin story.
So does Grandmum, who's from England,
Mom, who gets The Itch,
my best friends, Hakeem and Nick,
Uncle Frankie, who's not really my uncle,
and my sixth-grade teacher, Mrs. Swan.
Each of us has an origin story,
the story of how we became who we are.

This is my story,
and when you read it,
I want you to remember something.

When Superman summons every ounce of his strength
to survive something others can't even imagine,
he's the same person he was when

he crumpled to his knees,
left helpless by Kryptonite.
He’s the same person he was when
he was Clark Kent,
just living day by day,
invisible to the world.
Superman’s the sum of *all* his moments.

And so am I.

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WHY THE WORLD NEEDS COMIC BOOKS

In comic books,
superheroes use their powers to help others,
defeat villains,
and save themselves.
Good triumphs over evil,
giving you hope,
something to believe in.
Comic books remind you
that even when horrible things happen,
it can all work out

in the end.

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AND-THENS AND BOOMS!

Every story boils down to
and-thens
and
BOOMS!

And-thens
and
BOOMS!
are all about the moments when
something happens
that changes
everything.

It could be bad.
And it could be good,
but it’s often not.

So always pay attention to
and-thens
and
BOOMS!

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SCRATCHING AN ITCH

I’m only allergic to one thing.
Poison ivy.
I learned that the hard way one day when
my basketball rolled into the woods.
Leaves brushed across my face as
I parted them like curtains to find the ball.
When I woke up the next day,
I looked like . . . well . . .
Pretend you need to blow up a big balloon, and
fill your cheeks full of air.
Bigger.
Bigger.
Bigger.
Now squint.
That’s what I looked like.

But worse than how I looked was how I felt.
An itch is the worst!
You can’t stop thinking about it,
and the more you try not to,
the more you do.
Plus you just have to scratch it,
but then an itch itches even more.

It’s almost impossible
to live with an itch.

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PREPARE FOR TAKEOFF

My grampy was a pilot,
and my grandmum says
you can always tell when
a pilot's preparing for takeoff.
They start ticking boxes on a checklist.
And the list is always the same.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Mom's like a pilot when she gets The Itch.
That's what I call it when she gets restless
and wants to take off.
Her Itch Takeoff Checklist goes like this.
Stares out windows.
Sighs loudly a lot.
Swings like a pendulum
from sad
to mean
and back again.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Mom leaves for days.
Weeks.
Months.
You never know when she'll take off
or when she'll come back.
But you know takeoff's coming.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

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MOM'S FIRST TAKEOFF

The first time I remember Mom taking off
was on a sweaty, sticky summer day.
We lived in The Gingerbread House then,
the color of graham crackers with a fancy white trim.
It was old and didn’t have air-conditioning.
Mom sighed as we sat on the porch swing,
hoping for a cool breeze.
She pumped her legs,
and the swing creak-creaked as we rocked.
My legs stuck straight out,
too little to dangle down.
As soon as I spied
yellow wings with black tiger stripes and a blue tail,
I jumped down to chase
the eastern tiger swallowtail,
and Mom chased me.
All I wanted was to hold the butterfly,
but every time I got close to it,
it took off.

What on earth’s wrong with you?!
Who tries to trap a butterfly?!
Mom yelled,
picking me up,
carrying me back to the porch, and
plopping me down onto the swing.
I flinched
when the screen door banged
as Mom went inside the house.

She came back out
with her purse slung over one shoulder
and her keys jingling, jangling.

Where you going? I go, too!
I yelled, scooting off the swing.

She didn’t even look at me.
She just went straight to her car and got in.
Slam!
Squeal!
Vroom!
Mom took off.

I hopped onto my Big Wheel
and pedaled down the sidewalk,
trying to catch her,
but my little legs
just couldn’t keep up.

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MAKE ME CHOOSE

Mom wears a silk butterfly scarf all the time.
She says she's a butterfly,
and butterflies are free.

You should be able to go
wherever you want
whenever you want.
Fly away.
Be free.

But Grandmum would say,
You're not a butterfly, Carli.
You're a mom.
You can't be both.

Oh yeah?
Mom would answer.
Then make me choose and
watch what happens.

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POP!

When I was little,
I had a jack-in-the-box.
Music played as I turned the handle, and
I never knew exactly when
it was coming, but
I knew the door would open with a loud
POP!
And the clown would be right there.

The longer I turned the handle,
the more nervous I got,
waiting for that pop.

That's what it's like
after Mom gets The Itch and takes off.

I never know when
she'll pop back into my life.

The longer I wait for her,
the more nervous I get
that she won't ever return,
and yet
the more I fear her coming home.

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ONOMATOPOEIA

Comic books are full of onomatopoeia.

I can tell you a story about Mom and me
using only onomatopoeia.

Grrr!
Slap!
Ouch!
Shhh!

Onomatopoeias are words
that sound just like
what’s actually happening.

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OODLES OF DOODLES

I’m a doodler.
I have a notebook full of doodles.
Oodles of doodles.

I doodle the infinity symbol a lot.
It looks like the number 8 on its side.
When you draw it, the line loops and connects.
So you end up not being able to tell
where it all even started.
But once it starts,
it never ends.
It goes on forever because
it keeps repeating itself.
∞

Sometimes I don’t even realize
what’s going on inside me till
I start doodling and
whatever was in me is out of me and
right there on paper.

I just doodled a circle that became
a planet in a galaxy where grown-ups act like grown-ups
and do what they’re supposed to do,
over and over again.

The world where I want to live.

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POWER OF A WORD

Grampy died before I was born,
but Grandmum tells me so many stories about him,
I feel like I know him.

Grampy loved to fly.
He was a US Air Force pilot, and
Grandmum met him when he was stationed in England.

He also loved restoring old cars.
He bought this one called a Pacer
for a few hundred bucks and spent
tons of time tinkering with it.
Grandmum still drives it.

The bottom part of the Pacer
is like a regular car.
The top part
is round with lots of glass,
kinda like you set an upside-down fishbowl on it.

I call it The Fishbowl.

The name Fishbowl is sort of a word doodle.
It paints an image in your head
just like a doodle gives you an image on paper.

Now, even if you've never seen a Pacer,
you can imagine what it looks like.

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FROM POOR TO POORER

Grandmum said when Grampy was alive,
they had enough money.
But I only know what it's like
to not have enough.
Grandmum and I managed to do okay,
mostly,
unless The Fishbowl broke down, or
one of us got sick and needed medicine, or
the furnace stopped working
—anything unexpected.

Then we'd get waaay behind.

We could usually count on catching up, though,
when Grandmum got her tax refund.
Then all the bills got paid at once for a change, and
sometimes we had enough left over to splurge some.
To put extra food in the fridge,
buy new shoes
and, if we were lucky, winter coats.

I didn't know what poorer than poor was,
until the Mess with Mom.

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THE MESS WITH MOM

The Mess with Mom
started about a year ago when
a sheriff in Cheyenne called and
said they'd arrested Mom on a warrant for
a crime she committed here, so
they were boomeranging her back to
face the charges.
Don't ask me what Mom did.
I ain't tellin'.
That's the *point* of saying the Mess with Mom;
it allows me to talk about what happened without
having to spill my guts about
every awful detail.

Long story short,
Grandmum had to put the house up for bail
to get Mom out of jail,
and then,
BOOM!
Mom took off again
and didn't show up for court.

And then,
BOOM
again!
Grandmum had to sell the house
to pay the court fees and lawyers
to get Mom, and now herself, too,
out of legal trouble.

What a mess.

In math, my teacher, Mrs. Swan, talks about a multiplier,
the number you use to multiply another number.
When it comes to messes,
Mom’s a multiplier.
One mess becomes two becomes four.
Infinity symbol.

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WISH I DIDN'T HAVE TO KNOW

I think I know a lot of things
kids shouldn’t
have
to know.

I know
how much Grandmum makes
cleaning houses during the day
and offices at night.

I know
how much the government loads each month
onto her SNAP card
(short for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program,
though most people still call it food stamps).

I know
the list of what SNAP *will* pay for,
like veggies and vegetable seeds for a garden,
and what it *won’t* pay for,
like soap, shampoo,
deodorant, detergent,
toothpaste, and toilet paper
—anything you need to get and stay clean.

I know
when the cost of anything,
like gas for the car,
goes up,
the amount we have left for food

goes down.

I know
the humiliation of a grocery store clerk
telling you your total, and you don’t have enough,
so you have to choose what food to put back
—all while everyone waiting in line watches.

I know
now I need to be extra careful
—to triple-check the math—
when adding up the cost
of everything we put into our grocery cart.

I know all this,
and I
sure wish
I didn’t.

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WHAT I KNOW ABOUT MY DAD

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TWO HALVES ≠ WHOLE

Our front yard was a park
when we lived in The Gingerbread House.
Swings. Zip lines. Slides.
A real basketball court.
A creek to play in on hot, humid days.

I was furious when I had to say goodbye
to our house,
to the park.
I picked up rock after rock
and threw them as hard as I could
into the creek.

Kerplunk.
Kerplunk.
Kerplunk.

Anyone who saw me
thought I was just throwing rocks into the water.
No one knew I was imagining throwing them
at Mom.

Half of me
hates
my mom.
Half of me
loves
my mom.

And somehow even with two

hal ves,
I don’t feel whole.

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UNHOUSED

I once saw an unhoused woman,
curled up against a store during a snowstorm,
get shooed away like a stray cat.
Hisssssss!
Go away.
Git!
the manager yelled.

I don’t think anyone should be treated like that.

I always wondered what happened to her,
but until we lost The Gingerbread House,
I never stopped to think about
how she ended up unhoused.

Now I get it.

It’s kinda like how you take one step after another,
climbing the ladder to a slide.
Some people’s ladders have lots of steps.
Others just a few.
But there’s always one final step,
and then,
you’re sitting at the top of the slide,
and all you can do is hold on tight.
’Cause once you slip over the edge,
BOOM!
There’s no stopping
until you reach

the bottom.

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THE FISHBOWL

It’s easier to explain all that happened
after the Mess with Mom
if I describe my Fishbowl doodles.

I doodled
The Fishbowl full of our stuff.

I doodled
the shelter with a sign saying NO VACANCY
and people waiting in a long line.

I doodled
The Fishbowl going in circles around town
as Grandmum and I looked for a place we could afford.

I doodled
The Fishbowl parked at one house,
then another,
as Grandmum and I couch surfed,
staying with her friends and coworkers.

When we wore out our welcome
and couldn’t couch surf anymore,
I doodled
The Fishbowl in the parking lot at the store
that’s open twenty-four seven
and Grandmum and me sleeping inside the car.
I felt like we were goldfish in a fishbowl.
Anyone could see us
and watch our every move.

And then,
BOOM!
I discovered something.
Nobody even looked at us.
We were invisible.
People didn’t *want* to see us,
because if they did,
they’d get scared that one day
they could be us.

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EATING CRUMBS

I scrape the last bean
out of a can of pork and beans.
Then I use a heel of bread
to sop up every drop of juice.
(I save the good bread for Grandmum,
since that’s all she’s eating for supper,
one slice.)

You eat every crumb
when you don’t know where
your next meal’s coming from.

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OUT OF OUR REACH

Let's get ready for bed.
You wash up first,
Grandmum says.

I stuff
my toothbrush, the toothpaste,
and a comb into my pocket,
take a deep breath, and enter the store.

Inside I see the socks Grandmum needs.
Her blood doesn't circulate so great.
I slip the soft, thick socks over my hands.
Her toes wouldn't always be cold if she had these.
Maybe I could slide off my shoes
and sneak these socks over my sockless feet.
Maybe people will think I wore them into the store.
But maybe I'll get arrested like Mom
and cause us even more problems.
I toss the socks back into the bin.
Then I see a plump pillow.
It'd be great for propping up Grandmum's swollen feet.
My mouth waters as I pass the chocolate bars.
I pick one up and breathe in the cocoa scent so sweet.
I imagine breaking off bites for Grandmum and me,
letting the creamy chocolate
melt in our mouths.

So much of what we need
is right here in the store.
All within reach.

And yet everything
is out of our reach.

Can I help you?
a clerk asks, one eyebrow raised and
his arms folded across his chest as
he looks down at me,
sniffing a chocolate bar.

I . . . uh. Was just . . . looking.
I drop the candy bar and run to the bathroom.

If I ruled the world,
it wouldn’t be a crime to take food
when you’re starving.

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DIRTY

I turn on the faucet and
bend my head over the sink,
using one hand to splash water on my head
and the other to lather dispenser soap into my hair.
I use paper towels to pat my hair dry,
then use the damp paper towels as washcloths.
After I brush my teeth,
I stuff paper towels and toilet paper into my pockets.
Grandmum and I always take extra,
since food stamps don’t cover paper products.

I’m cleaner, but
getting washed up in a grimy public restroom
makes me feel so dirty.

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ANT-MAN

Sometimes Grandmum calls me Ant-Man.
I'm basically an eighty-four-pound
sugar-seeking ant,
sniffing out food anywhere I can find it.
And when I go to work with Grandmum,
there's usually something to eat
in the employee break room
of the office building she cleans weekday nights.
Tonight as I plop down at a table to start my homework,
I spot a cake box on the counter.
I imagine an army of ants marching
in a straight line over to the box, and I follow.
I open the box and read
HAPPY BIRTHDAY IMMY.
Somebody ate the slice with the first initial.
I guess it must have been a Timmy, Jimmy,
or Kimmy's birthday.
I cut a big corner piece and scrape off all the frosting
so I can save the best for last.
After wolfing down the cake in five big bites,
I let the frosting melt in my mouth.
The gritty grains of sugar turn into
Sabretooth's claws digging fast and furious
into the ever-growing cavity in my back right molar.

But the toothache is sooo worth it.

Thank you, Timmy, Jimmy, or Kimmy.
Surely no one would mind
my eating a piece of their birthday cake if

they knew how often
I go hungry.

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IT'S AMAZING

I don’t tell anyone,
not even my friends, Hakeem and Nick,
about Grandmum and me living in our car.
They think I still live in The Gingerbread House.
When they want to come over,
I just say,
Meet me in the park.
Grandmum’s making some changes,
and everything’s a mess.

It’s amazing
how easily you can make
a truth into a lie
and a lie into a truth.

Grandmum drops me off at the bus stop
a little early and picks me up a little late
so no one ever sees The Fishbowl
full of our stuff.

It’s amazing
how long you can live
without anyone realizing
how you live.

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LIFE PRESERVER

I doodle
Grandmum and me at the store
and finding a piece of paper
tucked under the windshield wipers.
No overnight parking allowed.
Violators' vehicles towed at their expense.

I doodle
The Fishbowl full of water
from all our tears.

I doodle
snorkels on Grandmum and me
because there's so much water,
we're drowning.

I doodle
us running late because of it all
and my friend Nick seeing
Grandmum dropping me off at school.

I doodle
Nick with a giant question mark over his head
when he notices all our stuff
crammed inside The Fishbowl.

I doodle
Nick dropping a note like a life preserver
on my desk during class,
telling me about a mobile home for rent

across from his.

Then I doodle
The Fishbowl driving down Duchess Drive
and parking outside a mobile home
next to a humongous oak tree
and all the water in The Fishbowl pouring out.
Thanks to Nick,
we found a place.

We can breathe again.

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THE OVERRIPE BANANA

The mobile home's long and yellow
with brown spots from peeling paint.
I name it The Overripe Banana.

Inside, walls slice the banana into six chunks.
Living room.
Kitchen.
Three bedrooms.
One bathroom.

I love my bedroom.
A whole room just to sleep in again.
But the bathroom's my favorite.
No more getting cleaned up in a public restroom.

It's a little cramped
inside The Overripe Banana.
It feels like the peel's gonna snap and split open.

But it's a kajillion times better
than life in The Fishbowl.

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NICK

You're here!
Nick says,
running out of his mobile home
when he sees me unpacking The Fishbowl.
Finally, I have a kid for a neighbor!
Makes it even better that the kid's one of my best friends.

When I thank Nick,
he tells me that he wishes he'd figured out sooner
that Grandmum and I needed a home.
He says,
I noticed stuff that should have clued me in.
You fell asleep in class every day.
Wore wrinkled clothes, like you'd slept in them.
You—the star student—even missed assignments and
doodled instead of paying attention to Mrs. Swan.
Then he says,
The mobile home had been vacant for a while.
You could've moved in right after
you said goodbye to your house.
Bada bing, bada boom.

Nick's right.
I went through so much
because I didn't tell anyone what was going on.
But some things that happen in a family
are so messed up,
it's hard to talk about it,
even with your closest friends.

So is it just you and your grandma now?
Nick asks.

Mostly, I guess.
Mom might be around sometimes.
She comes and goes a lot.
You're lucky to have a mom and a dad.

Well, my parents recently made like an atom and split,
Nick says.
Dad moved to Colorado,
but we text all the time, and
I'm going to visit in the summer.

At least you still have your mom,
I say.

Kinda, Nick says.
It's complicated.

Yeah, I say.
From what I've seen,
families always are.

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THREE-FINGER RUNDOWN

So let me give you the three-finger rundown
about living here,
Nick says, tightening his ponytail before grabbing two boxes.
He's famous for his three-finger rundowns.
He thinks you can boil anything down
to three main points.
He holds up one finger.
The walls are thin,
so it takes a minute to get used to the noise
from neighbors, vehicles, and critters.

Critters?

Squirrels. Raccoons.
Every now and again a skunk.
Sometimes they sneak through holes in the skirting
or dig under it.

Skirting?

Nick balances the boxes in his arms
as he uses one foot to tap on the vinyl siding
along the bottom of The Overripe Banana.
Skirting hides the concrete blocks the mobile home sits on
and helps keep critters out.

When we lived in The Gingerbread House,
mice sometimes got inside, and once even a squirrel.
But a skunk?
Let's keep the critter stuff between us.

Grandmum will freak out.
So what's number two in your rundown?

Nick holds up a second finger.
It's scary here in a storm.
If you hear the tornado warning siren, scram!
There's a shelter in the center of the mobile home park.
It's near where Uncle Frankie has cookouts.

Uncle Frankie?
I open the door to The Overripe Banana,
and we set down the boxes.

Nick holds up a third finger.
Uncle Frankie—nicest guy ever.
Helps everybody.
Which also means he's kinda in
everyone's business.

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UNCLE FRANKIE

Yep, everyone here calls me Uncle Frankie,
says Frank King, the owner of
King of the Castle Mobile Home Park,
as Grandmum signs the lease.
He has hair on each side of his head,
but he's bald on top.
If you're here, you're family.
We look out for each other.
Notice the magnet on your fridge.
That's my cell number.
Call me. Anytime.
I'll do anything I can to help.
He looks around The Overripe Banana.
Where's your furniture?

Figured we'd buy some after we found a place,
Grandmum says,
her voice a little higher than usual,
a sign she's fudging the truth.
The truth is we had to sell our furniture
along with the house—
that's how strapped we were for cash.

Well, I have all kinds of stuff
collectin' dust in an old barn on a friend's farm.
Wanna see if you can use any of it?
Uncle Frankie asks,
scratching his stubble-covered chin.

Our budget's sorta tight at the moment,

Grandmum says.

Everything in the barn
is stuff that didn't sell in a garage sale,
was left behind by a renter,
or was tossed to the curb.
It's free to me, so it's free to you.
You can take whatever ya need.

Really? You sure?
Grandmum asks.

Look, I've been in the shoes you're walkin' in right now.
If you give when you can,
it's okay to take when you need to.

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FRANK-MART

Uncle Frankie climbs into his pickup,
and Grandmum and I follow in The Fishbowl.
I glance over at the fuel gauge.
The needle's just about on empty.

We finally turn into a gravel driveway, and
Uncle Frankie pulls up in front of a faded red barn.
He takes off the padlock and swings open the door
to reveal rows and rows of stuff just like in a store.
Besides furniture, there are old windows, doors, and lumber
stacked against the wall.
Even a wheelchair.
I name the place Frank-Mart.

It feels like Christmas,
watching our new belongings pile up.
We score beds, air mattresses, a couch, lamps,
and even a kitchen table with mismatched chairs.
When I flip back a tarp and see a TV,
I hesitate.
Do we look super-needy? Greedy?
I start to cover up the TV,
but Uncle Frankie says,
We're in Tornado Alley.
Gotta have a TV to help keep an eye on the weather.

Grandmum and I do our best to help
Uncle Frankie and his farmer friend
load our stuff into the pickup.
But Grandmum's not as strong as she used to be,

so we mostly tug and slide more than carry anything.
She jokes, saying,
Geez, it's obvious I'm no spring chicken anymore, huh?
Guess I'm an autumn chicken now.
But I see her lips quiver like she's about to cry.

When we're ready to head home,
the car won't start.
Let's pop the hood and see what's wrong,
Uncle Frankie says, reaching for the latch.
Oscar and I are good at fixin' things.

Grandmum's face blushes strawberry red
and she mumbles,
We're probably out of gas, I'm afraid.

What's that?
Uncle Frankie asks,
cupping one hand around an ear,
trying to hear better.

We're out of gas,
I say so Grandmum doesn't have to.

Well, that's an easy fix. Be right back,
Oscar says.
He returns with a gas can.

As we leave,
I look at The Fishbowl's fuel gauge.
Nearly a quarter of a tank.
Now my lips quiver.

When you're so used to doing everything for yourself,

you forget that others will help.
If you let them.

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THE QUILT

The best thing in our new place
is the quilt Grandmum made years ago.
The top side has a yellow cottage with a red door
on a cliff overlooking the sea,
just like her house in England.
We love to snuggle under it,
and on our first night in The Overripe Banana,
it makes us feel at home.
Everything about it is cozy.
The padding in the middle
is soft and fluffy like a marshmallow,
and the back's solid yellow like spring sunshine.
Each shape is a separate piece of fabric
held together by her stitching.
Without the thread,
it'd all fall apart.
Grandmum's the thread
holding her, Mom, and me,
separate pieces so different from each other,
together
as a family.

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GRANDMUM'S ARMS

Grandmum’s arms are like Captain America’s shield,
protecting me,
defending me.

If Captain America shows up,
it means there’s trouble brewing.
When he puts his shield up,
the scary things going on around you
are still going on around you,
but you feel safe.

You know everything’s going to be okay.
Somehow.
Some way.

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KEY

A gold key.
Weighing less than an ounce.
Only two and a half inches long.

How can something so small
be worth so much to me?

I squeeze my new house key in my hand until
the jagged teeth bite into my palm and
make my skin smell like metal.

I fall asleep holding it.
I don’t ever want to let it go.

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BY THE FRONT DOOR

Next to our front door is a baseball bat,
our home security system,
and an accordion folder
packed with our important papers—
the proof-of-who-we-are
and
the proof-we're-poor documents
that the government, charities, and schools
demand to see every single time they help us.

If there's ever a fire or tornado,
grab that sucker and run!
That's our life right there!
Grandmum says.

The Oaks are always ready
for fight
or flight.

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SAFE SPACE

I scope out our new surroundings,
looking for a safe place to go
when I need to get away from it all.

I find a pine grove
that separates the mobile home park
from the nearby houses.

I scooch into the grove,
squeezing between trees
until I’m in the center.

It’s perfect
—just big enough for me
to curl up and lean
into the strength of the trees
so I can be weak

sometimes.

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THE GROWER

Grandmum finds her safe space
when she sees there's room for a garden.

The yard doesn't look like much,
but with Grandmum's love and green thumb,
that'll change soon since
it's just about warm enough
to start a garden.
We'll get it all sorted.
Just you wait and see,
Grandmum says.

Like at The Gingerbread House,
we're going to grow our own food—
everything from A to Z,
acorn squash to zucchini.

Before we sold the house,
Grandmum uprooted her prized rose of Sharon bush.
Now she plants it in its new home.

The great thing about having roots is
you can go anywhere,
start over,
and keep right on growing,
Grandmum says.

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MY WALK TO SCHOOL

When I lived in The Gingerbread House
and rode the bus to school,
the sidewalks leading up to the bus stop
were flat, perfect rectangles
surrounded by thick, trimmed green grass.

But the sidewalks around here look like
the Hulk threw a temper tantrum,
slamming his fists down on them
and stomping his feet,
creating cracks and craters in the concrete
until they rippled into mini roller coasters
I ride up and down on my way to school.

In the yards I pass,
shards of glass
outnumber the blades of grass.
Some houses have couches on the porches.
Others are covered in graffiti.
Even more are abandoned and boarded up,
with rusty chains like slithering snakes
coiled around their door handles.

There are closed factories,
closed restaurants, and
closed stores.

Signs on buildings scream,

KEEP OUT!

NO TRESPASSING!

BEWARE OF DANGEROUS DOG!

It’s scary.

On the way home,
I walk the same sidewalk with Nick and Hakeem.
The more we cut up and swap jokes,
the more the bad stuff around us fades.

I didn’t change my path,
but I changed who joined me on it,
and that changed everything.

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HAKEEM

One good thing about our move
is that I still get to go to the same school
with Nick and Hakeem.
Hakeem's my oldest friend.
I've known him since kindergarten.
We met on the playground when
I was on the climbing rings and
started to lose my grip.
Hakeem says he grabbed my legs
to try to keep me from falling.
I say he ended up pulling me down.
Hakeem says he caught me.
I say he softened my fall.
Hakeem says he got hurt worse than me.
I say the scar on my right elbow proves otherwise.
Hakeem says I cried louder.
I say he did.
Either way,
Hakeem was there for me.
And ever since,
we've been there for each other.

Although I couldn't put it into words back then,
it's when I learned what friendship's all about.
Friendship is being there
to notice someone's about to fall,
to try to keep them from falling,
to catch them when they fall or
to cushion the blow when they do,

to feel what they’re feeling,
and to understand why they feel that way.

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FARBAL

F ree
A nd
R educed
B reakfasts
A nd
L unches.

That’s the school’s name for it.

L
o
s
e
r
s.

That’s what some students call us kids who need it.

H
u
n
g
r
y.

That’s what I’d be without it.

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MATH MATTERS

When my teacher, Mrs. Swan,
who moved here from Georgia this year,
realized FARBAL kids had to say
I get mine free
at every breakfast and lunch
—in front of everybody in the cafeteria—
she worked with the tech guy
to change the system.

Now, whether you pay or get it free,
you just scan your ID card.
The computer figures it all out.
You know how they do that?
With coding,
which means math.

Math changed my world.
I love math.
You can always count on numbers.

On one of my math tests,
Mrs. Swan wrote,
Joe, I've never seen any kid
as good with numbers as you are.

I kept that.
It made me feel like a googolplex,
which is a one followed by
more zeroes than could fit in a book,
when most days I feel like

a zero.

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JUSTE HORRIBLE

Fake fish,
or as the French would say,
faux poisson,
Hakeem says.

Poison is right,
Nick says as we eat lunch in the cafeteria.
Even tartar sauce can't resuscitate this sandwich.

It's DOA,
Hakeem says.
Rest in grease, little fake fishy.
He spreads a napkin over it
as Nick hums taps.

Hakeem's using a language-learning website,
free through the library,
to teach himself French,
since he wants to go to culinary school in France.
Says all the great chefs do.
And I bet he will, because Hakeem can cook.
Like for real for real.

And diced tomatoes straight outta the can?
He shakes his head.
They call that a side?
C'est tragique.

He eats a fry and
curls his upper lip.

There's not enough ketchup in the world
to give these any flavor.
He slides his plate to the side.
I can't torture my taste buds like this.
Juste horrible.

I don't tell Hakeem
that eating food you'd rather not eat
isn't so horrible.
Not having enough food
is juste horrible.

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THE SHARE TABLE AND CORNER STORE

After lunch,
I grab two yogurts and some apples
from The Share Table.

Whenever you eat in the cafeteria,
if there's something you don't want and haven't opened,
you place it on The Share Table.
All of it's free for the taking
for anyone who wants it.
It was Mrs. Swan's idea.

Mrs. Swan also fills baskets in our classroom with snacks.
She calls it The Corner Store.
You help yourself to whatever you want
whenever you want it.
In the afternoon, I snag two granola bars.

Every day,
I get food from The Share Table and The Corner Store.
It's not much,
but it gives Grandmum and me
a little more to eat.
Especially when we have the outtas.

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THE RETICULATED PYTHON

By the middle of each month,
we always have the outtas—
outta this,
outta that,
outta the other thing.

There's always more month
than money.

Once, at the library,
I checked out a book about all kinds of reptiles,
including the reticulated python,
which is the world's longest snake.
It bites.
Sinks its fangs in deep.
But the venom's not
what you have to worry about.
It's the chokehold.
Once it gets ahold of you,
a reticulated python doesn't wanna let go.
The longer it's wrapped around you,
the harder it is to escape.

If I doodled poverty,
I'd draw a reticulated python
twisted into the shape
of the infinity symbol.

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NOT ENOUGH, BUT PLENTY

For dinner we're making Potato Thingees,
sliced potatoes dipped in batter and fried.
Grandmum invented them one night
when we were hungry and
all we had were potatoes, flour, salt, and milk.

Like tonight.

I cut the potatoes and
dump them into the batter,
coating every slice.
Then Grandmum takes over and
fries the Potato Thingees in bacon grease.
Sizzle. Sizzle. Smoke.
The smell of bacon fills the kitchen.
I wish we had some bacon, but
I don't tell Grandmum.
She probably wishes that, too.

I set the table, and
when the kettle whistles,
I dunk yesterday's tea bags into cups.
We reuse everything until
we wear it out.

What would we be fixin' if we lived in England?
I ask.

Maybe bubble and squeak,
if we had some cabbage to fry up

with mashed potatoes.

Cabbage?
I say.
No wonder it's got such a silly name.
I'd sure be squeakin' all night after eatin' it.

Grandmum laughs
as she piles Potato Thingees onto our plates and
we start to eat.

We have some warm food in our bellies.
It's not enough.
But we have each other,
and that's plenty.

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VILLAINS AT THE TABLE

When bills come,
we toss them onto a pile on the kitchen table,
where they sit until whenever we can pay them.
Each person we owe is like Doomsday,
a seriously bad dude from the comics.
So every time Grandmum and I sit down to eat,
a bunch of Doomsdays
are right there with us at the table.
Doomsdays throw all kinds of punches.
Jab!
They'll turn off the cable.
Left hook!
They'll turn off the heat.
Right hook!
They'll turn off the electricity.
Uppercut!
They'll turn off the water.
Cross!
They'll turn off your cell.

Their threats don't stop until
you pay what you owe *plus*
all kinds of fees to get everything turned back on.
Pow! Sucker punch!

As I add up what we have to pay
and subtract it from Grandmum's check,
she's always amazed
I can do all the math in my head.
But numbers stay with me

—especially the amount we owe
the Doomsdays.

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FAIR AND SQUARE

It’s the last hour of class on Friday.
Mrs. Swan starts humming the theme song from *Jeopardy!*,
which means it’s time to play Whaddya Know?
It’s like *Jeopardy!*
but with categories based on
what we’ve learned during the week.
When I win, I walk over to the prize table,
but there’s not much to choose from.

The dismissal bell rings.

So sorry about that,
Mrs. Swan says.
Everyone did so great today,
I gave out prizes left and right.
But I have some goodies in the storage room.
Follow me.
She unlocks the door and turns on the light.
Take your pick.

I see what I want on the top shelf.
I have to stand on my tippy-toes to reach a corner of the box.
I inch it toward me until
suddenly it slips off the shelf.
I jump out of the way before it lands with a big
THUNK!

Oops! Mrs. Swan says.
I actually meant the things on this lower shelf.
She points to some boxes of games and puzzles.

No, thanks. This is good.

Really?
Mrs. Swan blinks.
Okay, but take a prize, too.
Something fun. Just for you.

This is enough, Mrs. Swan.

You sure?

I nod, picking it up off the floor.

It's awfully big. You can barely see over it.
Let me drive you home.

It's okay! Nick and Hakeem can help.

And they do.
The three of us take turns
carrying my enormous box of toilet paper.
We get some pretty strange looks,
but I don't care.
I won it fair and square.

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SITGEN

The US Air Force transferred Grampy
from one base to the next.
So Grampy and Grandmum
moved around a lot, and
Grandmum picked up cuss words as souvenirs.

We joked and said Grandmum cussed in sitgen—
a combination of
S panish,
I talian,
T urkish,
G erman,
E nglish, and
N orwegian,
the languages of the countries where they lived.

But the first time I said one of those cuss words,
I got in big-time trouble.
So I started saying *sitgen* as a cuss word.
Grandmum figured it was a good idea
to clean up her language and
started saying it.
Pretty soon Hakeem and Nick used it, too.

Change always starts with one person,
Hakeem said.

I say *sitgen* a lot lately because
my life’s a pressure cooker and
cussing’s a steam valve.

Stuff happens that makes me angry, but
there's nothing I can do about it, so
all this anger just keeps
building,
building,
building
up inside of me, and
I swear if I didn't have a word to say
to let off some steam,

KABOOM!

I'd explode.

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TUMMY TROUBLES

Grandmum's sick.
Her stomach keeps hurting.
I offer to skip school and take care of her, but
she won't hear of it.
Don't worry about me. I'll get moving in a bit.
Work late to make up the time.
You focus on school.
Fill that noggin plumb full.
Keep making good grades so
you can get a scholarship,
go to college, and find a good job.
No scrubbing loos for you.
She musses my hair
and kisses the top of my head.
Off you go!
Can't be late.
You'll miss breakfast.

Grandmum's had a stomachache for weeks.
She needs to go to the doctor.
But that means spending money.
And it means less money come payday,
since she'd have to miss some work to go.
Then what will we do?
We're out of food as it is.
We won't get more grocery money
loaded onto our SNAP card anytime soon,
and Doomsdays are waiting at the kitchen table.

The more I think about it,

the more my stomach knots until
I have tummy troubles, too.

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HUNGER

Hunger is day-in, day-out lack,
creating inside you
an urgent need,
a craving,
a longing,
for something you can’t survive or thrive without
and yet
you don’t have it.

Hunger isn’t just about food.

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WASTED

Every day after school,
Hakeem, Nick, and I go to The Gathering Spot,
the convenience store at the gas station
across the local highway from King of the Castle.
We pick out snacks, and
Hakeem always pays for mine.
I feel bad about it,
but not bad enough to turn down food
and the brain-freezing icy goodness of a slushy.
While we're in line,
I watch the manager dump
soft pretzels,
gloopy gloppy cheese,
donuts,
pizza slices,
fried chicken,
and hot dogs and buns
into the trash
so he can clean containers and machines.

So much wasted food
everywhere.
So many hungry people
everywhere.

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BOWLING BALL PYRAMID

People are taking photos of the bowling ball pyramid
in front of King of the Castle and causing a traffic jam
as Hakeem, Nick, and I leave The Gathering Spot.

Uncle Frankie's on a ladder trying to coax
our neighbor Miss Blye's calico cat out of a tree.
Come here, Purrito!

I take a sip of my slushy as we watch the rescue.
The sugary slush sloshes against my back molar.
Pain ping-pongs from my tooth
to my jaw
and back again.
Infinity symbol.

Shouldn't there be a castle at the entrance
to King of the Castle Mobile Home Park
instead of a pyramid?
I ask Uncle Frankie as he steps off the ladder
and hands Purrito to Miss Blye.

Well, that's what I planned to build.
But when the alley closed
and I went to take away any bowling balls that didn't sell,
I ended up with—

Ninety-one,
I say, having already calculated it.

Yep! You got it, Joe!
Not enough balls for a castle.

But plenty for a pyramid.
I've learned in life that if Plan A doesn't work,
it's good to have a Plan B and C,
Uncle Frankie says.

I'm pretty sure Grandmum and I
are on Plan ZZZ,
I say inside my head.

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SICK AND TIRED

As soon as Hakeem, Nick, and I near The Overripe Banana,
I see the empty gravel spot next to it.
The Fishbowl's not there.

I'm glad Grandmum went to work,
because we need the money.

I feel bad she went to work sick
because we need the money.

When the reticulated python has ahold of you
—squeezing, squeezing, squeezing—
you can't break free,
not when you're sick,
not when you're tired,
not when you're sick and tired.

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I LOVE BASKETBALL

When I was three,
I thought peas
were little green basketballs.
Even tried to dribble them
on the kitchen table.
It didn't end well.

The point is,
I've always loved basketball.
And I'm good at it.
Free throws.
Layups.
Three-pointers.
All of it.

I'd be the star point guard
if I were on a team.

But I can't afford the shoes or the pay-to-play fees.
So I settle for being the star
of the King of the Castle half court
with lines I chalk in each game
and a netless basketball hoop from Frank-Mart
that Uncle Frankie nailed to a light pole for us.

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WHAT THE GAME'S ABOUT

Tinging thud,
tinging thud,
tinging thud,
the sound of the bouncing basketball
as Hakeem, Nick, and I begin a game of Twenty-one.

Whoosh,
the sound of nothing but net we make,
since there is no net.

Squeak,
the sound of sneakers making sudden stops.

Tinging thud, whoosh, squeak,
the sounds of all of us not thinking
about everything happening off the court.

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THE TURD

Hakeem, Nick, and I are in front of my place
when Uncle Frankie pulls up in his pickup.
Joe, just found something your grandma will love!
You kids help me out here, would ya?

It's an old porch glider, and
we set it on The Overripe Banana's small deck.

That's better, Uncle Frankie says.
It's nice having a chair you can swing in and say
"Hey!" to anyone who passes.

It's kinda messed up and leans to one side,
like a broken teeter-totter, but I say,
Thank you, Uncle Frankie! Grandmum will love it!

Hakeem and I flop down on it after
Uncle Frankie drives away, and
flecks of brown paint fall off the rusty metal.

Hmm. It's brown and it's gross.
Shall we call it The Turd?
I say in my best English accent.

Nick's chugging water and laughs so hard,
it shoots out his nose.

Seriously, Joe, you may need to flush The Turd.
Get rid of it before it breaks and
you're left in a pile of poo,
Hakeem says.

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HAPPY FARTS

I’m sitting on The Turd when
I hear farting,
the kind I’m happy to hear ’cause
it means Grandmum’s coming home.
There’s a hole in the exhaust pipe, so
The Fishbowl sounds like
it’s lettin’ it rip all the time.

Grandmum’s so short,
it looks like the car’s driving itself.
I only notice her from the nose up
when the sun sparkles off the rhinestones
on her silver cat’s-eye-shaped glasses.

Jump in, Joe!
Grandmum says
through the driver’s-side window,
since it doesn’t roll down anymore.
We’re going out for supper.

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OUT FOR SUPPER

I slide my tray along the rails
of the soup kitchen and
say thank you to everyone.
The volunteer who scoops spaghetti onto my plate,
the one who spoons out the sauce,
and the one who uses tongs to plop garlic bread on top.
I grab a bowl of fruit cocktail and
a glass of milk.
Then Grandmum and I find a table
with people we've never met and
don't know anything about except
they're just like us.

Hungry,
and too poor to buy food.

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WORSE THAN HUNGER

Who's this little one?
Grandmum asks as a woman slides a high chair
over to the table where we're sitting and
straps in her daughter.

Candy Sprinkles,
the woman says.
I named her that 'cause
I want my baby's life to be sweet.
My name's Rain,
and I swear my mama put some kind of curse on me
by namin' me that,
since I've had nothin' but sadness
raining down on me my whole life.

Rain tucks a napkin in at the neck
of Candy's makeshift dress,
a grown-up's plaid flannel shirt,
and Candy swings her feet in the excitement
of finally being fed.
Candy loves the fruit cocktail.
When she runs out, Rain shares hers,
just like Grandmum slides half her spaghetti onto my plate.
She gives me her food a lot,
even when her stomach's not hurting.
You're a growing boy.
You need it more than me,
Grandmum always says.

Sometimes Grandmum acts busy until

I’m done eating and then
she eats whatever’s left.
What she doesn’t know is
I never get my fill.
I stop eating
to make sure there’s food left for Grandmum.

There’s one thing worse than hunger:
watching someone you love
go hungry.

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ALL I NEED

On the drive home, Grandmum sighs.
I'm grateful for the soup kitchen,
but I hate that I can't give you everything you need.

You give me so much!
I say.
And all I really need is you.

Sometimes you're like
a grown-up in a kid's body,
you know that?
Taking care of me
as much as I take care of you.
Grandmum reaches over and musses my hair.
What would I ever do without you?

What would I ever do without you?
I answer.

I don't want to find out,
she says.

Me neither,
I say.

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LAST NIGHT

Just as I’m drifting off to sleep,
Grandmum groans so loud that
a shiver of fear shoots down my spine.
I run to her room.
You okay?

Probably just a stomach bug,
Grandmum says,
her voice a little higher than usual.
Go back to bed.

Can I get you a pain pill?
Fix you a cup of tea?
Maybe the heating pad will help?

I’ll be all right.

Okay.
I peel back the quilt and snuggle up next to her.
I’ll be right here if you need me.

We watch the oak tree’s branches and leaves
dancing to the rhythm of the wind
outside Grandmum’s open window.
Swish, swoosh, swish.

Grandmum wraps her arms around me.
Did you know that as soon as I saw
the towering oak tree outside,
I knew this was the place for us?

Why? Because we're named Oak, too?

Yes, and because oaks are like us.
Each season, they face storm after storm.
Some real doozies.
But they keep standing.
Growing.
Adapting.
Surviving.

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NIGHTTIME'S FOR WISHES AND DREAMS

Whoever lived in The Overripe Banana before us
stuck glow-in-the-dark stars on
the ceiling in Grandmum’s bedroom.

Let’s wish upon the stars,
Grandmum says.

My wish is for you to feel okay,
I say.

No, Joe.
Sunup to sundown’s all about our worries.
Nighttime’s magical.
It’s when we make wishes on stars and
dream of what could be.
One day.

Well, then I wish I could be a pro basketball player.
Hear the crowd erupt in cheers when the score’s tied
and I sink one into the basket right before
the horn honk of the buzzer.
I’d make all kinds of money.
And the first thing I’d do
is buy back The Gingerbread House for you.

I rattle off one dream after another,
wishing on every glow-in-the-dark star
until I have more hope
than worries.

Nighttime is magical.

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EVERYONE HAS A *ONE DAY*

We all have at least one
one day.

One day,
I'm gonna be the world's best chef
at my very own restaurant, and
the food's gonna be so good
that when Michelin reviews it,
it'll create a fourth star just for me,
Hakeem says.

One day,
I'm going to find a cure for depression,
Nick says.

One day,
I'm going back to my beloved old England.
Everybody longs for home,
Grandmum says.

A *one day* is
a hope,
a wish,
a dream
that gets you through
ordinary days,
hard days,
the worst days.

One day,

I’ll never be filled with
the ache of hunger again.

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THE RETURN OF THANOS

Uncle Frankie's waiting for me
when I walk out of school.
Your grandma's in the hospital, Joe!
Get in! I'll take you to her.

I hop into his pickup truck, and
when we get to the emergency department,
they say Grandmum's in room three.
I run down the hallway,
turn the corner,
and then,
BOOM!

Mom's right there in my face.
What are you doin' here? I ask.

My mother called me, she says.

That doesn't make sense.
When Gotham's in trouble,
you activate the Bat-Signal.
You don't call Thanos,
the destroyer of worlds.

I start to push open the door
so I can see Grandmum.
Mom stops me.

She's gone, Joe.

Gone?

They already sent her home?

Mom shakes her head.
Gone, gone.

My heart free-falls to my feet.

But . . .
She can't be gone.
It was just a stomach bug.
She said she'd be okay.

No, Joe. She had a stomach aneurysm,
a weak spot in a blood vessel.
It ruptured and she lost a lot of blood.
Too much.
Happened fast.

How did you get here in time?

She called me a few days ago.
Said I needed to get home.
I found her in the garden. Called 911.
They did everything they could to try to save her.
But it was too late.

No!
I shout.
No! No! No!
This doesn't add up!
You're lying!
You always lie!
Let me see Grandmum!

Mom takes a deep breath,

lets it out,
and pushes open the door
to the hospital room.
Have it your way.

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RAVEN

The room’s cold.

So cold.

I start shaking.

My teeth chatter.

Grandmum’s lying on a bed
with a thin white sheet draped over her,
covering everything but her head.
No cozy, soft quilt to keep her warm.

My knees are Jell-O cubes,
weak and wobbly,
buckling with each tiny step
I take toward Grandmum.

I want her to say something,
like,
I love you, my little nut.

I want one of her Captain America hugs.

But Grandmum’s not
talking,
or moving,
or breathing.

Grandmum’s Raven,
the Marvel character,

her skin so blue.

Now I know what it was like
for the people of Krypton
when their sun went away.

I’ve lost my world.

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SEEDS OF HOPE

It doesn’t seem right to be back home
when Grandmum’s not.

In the yard,
I see the recycled milk jugs
that Grandmum turned into little makeshift greenhouses.
I think about what Grandmum said every year
as she filled them with dirt and seeds.
In winter, all we can see
is how lifeless the frozen ground is,
but beneath the surface
there are always tiny seeds of hope
getting ready to spring to life
and change everything.

Grandmum’s trowel and gloves
are still where she left them.
And I can see the imprint of her knees
on the kneeling pad.
The very last thing she did
was plant vegetables to make sure I had food.

All these milk jugs are cluttering up the place,
Mom says.
Grab some trash bags.
Get rid of this junk.

It’s not junk!
I shout.
These seeds will become plants for the garden!

So we can have food all summer!

I. Don't. Care!
Mom yells.
I want them out of my way!
She kicks a few jugs before heading inside,
squashing all kinds of hope.

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SCREAMING

I stand in the pine grove.

Close my eyes tight.
Curl my fingers into fists.
Dig my nails into my palms and
screeeam
until my throat hurts,
screeeeeeeam
until my ears hurt,
screeeeeeeeeeeeam
until I can barely breathe,

and I just keep on
screaming.

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THREE KINDS OF PEOPLE

When I slip out of the pine grove,
I find Nick a few feet away,
leaning against the oak tree.

He walks with me to the garden.
While I scoop the dirt and seeds
back into the jugs Mom kicked over,
Nick picks up as many jugs as he can carry
and takes them to his place.
He does that over and over
until all the seeds of hope are safe.

The whole time,
Nick never says a word.
Neither do I.
Actions say more than words ever could.

There are three kinds of people.
Some are hope-planters.
Some are hope-squashers.
Some are hope-restorers.

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I AM FALCON

Somehow I presto-chango into Falcon
and fly above my body,
giving me a bird’s-eye view
to look
d
o
w
n
at Grandmum’s funeral.

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THE HUG SANDWICH

All kinds of people come to Grandmum's funeral.
Guys who served in the Air Force with Grampy.
Grandmum's coworkers.
People who went to school with Mom.
Uncle Frankie.
Mrs. Swan.
Hakeem and his parents.
Nick.

You're lucky, kid,
to have someone who loved you
as much as your grandma did,
Uncle Frankie says.
Remember, you can call me
whenever you need something.
We're family.

I'm so sorry, sweetie.
Hakeem's mom, Zuri,
wraps her arms around me.
I start to cry.
She hugs me closer.

I got your back,
Hakeem says.
Always.
He wraps his arms around me
from the back.

Me too,

Nick says,
hugging me from the side.

Then Hakeem's dad, Tyrone,
wraps his arms around us all.
I'm in the middle of a hug sandwich.

I cry even more.

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GRANDMUM GOT HER *ONE DAY*

Remember me telling you about *one days*?
How Grandmum said,
One day,
I'm going back to my beloved old England.
Everybody longs for home.

Well, turns out there can be a problem
with a *one day* wish.
Sometimes you get it
in a way you might not have wanted.
It's as if the universe wasn't totally paying attention
to what you said you wanted
and only heard bits and pieces before
it waved its wand and went to work.

After they cremated Grandmum,
they shipped her urn of ashes off to England
to bury her beside family.
Grandmum got her *one day*.

She went home.

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THE CROW

I doodle
Mom as a crow
circling and swooping down
into Grandmum's room.
Peck, peck, pecking
through Grandmum's things.

I doodle
The Crow's claws curling around
Grandmum's quilt.

I doodle
me grabbing hold of the quilt
as a tug-of-war begins
with the thieving bird
—scratching,
squawking,
feathers flying—
until a jewelry box gets knocked over
and sparkly, shiny treasures spill out,
capturing The Crow's eyes
and attention,
and it lets go of the quilt
to curl its claws around silver and gold
before it soars away,
cawing, cawing, cawing.

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CHIMERA

Mom says she's a butterfly,
but I see her more like a Chimera,
the mythical creature
that's part lion, part goat, and part snake.
Only, my mom is part butterfly,
part crow,
and mostly storm.

Storms are unpredictable.
Scary.
Sometimes violent.
Storms do all kinds of damage,
then—poof!
They take off.
Turn your world upside down and
leave you to deal with the mess.

I don't want anything to do with a Chimera.
Because I never know which creature I'm dealing with.
And sometimes I have to deal with all of them
at once.

But now the Chimera's all I have.

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CASSEROLE SURPRISE!

One thing you can be sure of when someone dies
is that there are gonna be lots of casseroles.
From friends, neighbors, and even folks you don't know.
We have so much food
that we have to freeze half of it.
It's the first time I've ever seen
the whole fridge full, and
I can't help but be sad
Grandmum's not here to enjoy it.

Each night, Mom and I heat up a casserole.
Since it's impossible to tell what we're about to eat,
we create a game out of it.
Casserole Surprise!
When the food comes out of the oven,
we fold back the foil and
slowly rake our forks through the casserole,
making like archaeologists unearthing artifacts.
Whoever figures out what it is first
doesn't have to do dishes.

Cream of something soup,
I say.

Mom sighs.
There's cream of something soup in every casserole.

Okay. Okay. Hamburger.

Oh, that makes it easier.

You're a real Sherlock Holmes!
She rolls her eyes.

Hey, the past two times were tuna!
I dig some more.
Maybe cheeseburger casserole?
Taco casserole?

Tamale casserole?
There's some kind of mushy-looking stuff,
Mom says.

I'm tempted to say,
It's a casserole. Everything's mushy.
Maybe call her Sherlock.
But I know better.
I lean in and spot a french fry.

French fry casserole!
We both shout at the same time.
It's a tie,
but I agree to do the dishes,
trying to keep Mom happy,
trying to keep her from getting The Itch.

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SHEPHERD'S PIE

Tonight when we play Casserole Surprise,
I take a bite and start to cry.

That bad, huh? Mom asks.

I shake my head.
That good—it's shepherd's pie!
Grandmum's recipe.

I take another bite,
savoring the ground lamb,
with onions, carrots, celery,
and creamy mashed potatoes baked golden brown,
and remembering Grandmum making it.
The sound of her knife chopping veggies
on the cutting board.
The delicious smells filling The Gingerbread House.

Hakeem made this one!
Grandmum cooked it once for us
when he stayed overnight.
He loved it so much, she gave him the recipe.

I chew slowly,
trying to make every bite,
every memory,
last.

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SNAPPED

When Mom and I try
to use Grandmum's SNAP card at the grocery store,
it's declined.
I suppose they cut off food stamps as soon as you die,
which makes sense—except
what if you had SNAP to feed other people,
people you were taking care of,
who depended on you?
What happens to them?

Mom snaps.
Yells at the clerk.
Yells at the strangers staring at us.
Yells at the cart
as she slams it into the other carts in the corral.
CRASH!

So now I'll have to apply for food stamps
and wait for who knows how long to get help
just to feed you.
Great.

Well, how do you afford stuff when you take off?
I ask.
Maybe you should get a job?
My voice trails off,
and as the words tumble out,
I know I've just made a big mistake.
Huge.
Mom doesn't say a word as we leave the store.

Or walk to her car.
Or drive to the food pantry.

The silence presses against my ears so hard,
I think my eardrums will POP!
I'd rather be yelled at than
be given the silent treatment.
Each word feels like a slap,
but each second of silence feels like a punch.

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AROUND AND AROUND

Mom says I stink,
tells me to round up all my clothes
so we can go to the laundromat.
Grandmum and I hardly ever went to the laundromat,
since it costs all kinds of money.
We had to choose between
feeding washing machines and dryers
or us,
and we chose us.
We wore everything several times,
wore some stuff inside out,
and washed clothes by hand,
letting it dry on hangers on the shower rod,
or the backs of chairs,
or the clothesline outside,
if it was warm enough.

My clothes almost fill an entire garbage bag.

That everything?
Mom asks.

I nod.

She sighs.
Then what are these?
Mom yanks the blankets off my air mattress.
And these?
She pulls off the sheets.
And this?

She slides off the pillowcase.

I want to defend myself, to say,
You said round up my clothes,
but I stuff my words down
as I stuff everything else into another garbage bag.

No matter what I say or do today,
Mom’s going to be just like the washing machine,
keeping everything stirred up.
And all day we go around and around.

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TAKE HIM OFF MY HANDS

Hakeem, Nick, and I are shooting hoops when
Uncle Frankie says,
Headin' out to the lake to teach some kids how to fish.
Wanna come?

None of us have fishing rods.

I have plenty, and it's a free event,
Uncle Frankie says.
Just need to get your parents' permission.

Ummm . . . Mom won't mind,
Nick says.
She's in bed—not feeling well.
I'll go tell her where I'll be, though,
so she doesn't worry or anything.
Nick takes off for his place.

Hakeem calls his mom, Zuri,
who wants him to pass the phone to Uncle Frankie.
She asks a bunch of questions.
When Uncle Frankie tells her
it's a community event and
there'll be volunteer officers,
firefighters, and paramedics,
she says okay.

Two down, one to go,
Uncle Frankie says,
taking the steps up to the deck

of The Overripe Banana.

I chew on my bottom lip
as Uncle Frankie knocks and
Mom opens the door.

Nice seein' you again, ma'am!
I was wondering if Joe could come with me . . .

My mom cuts him off.
She has no questions.
Anytime anyone wants to take Joe off my hands,
the answer is yes.

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REELING IN THE FOOD

Uncle Frankie teaches Hakeem, Nick, and me
about types of bait and bobbers,
when to use each kind,
and shows us the different fishing rods
and how to cast lines.
We catch on quickly, and
Uncle Frankie moves down the pier to help others.

Hakeem is describing how he'll cook what we catch
when my bobber goes down.
I caught a fish!
I turn the crank, reeling in the line.
I raise the rod, and it bows.

That's a big one!
Nick says.

It takes a while, but I finally get it out of the water
and Hakeem helps me get it off the hook
and into the net that Nick holds.

Wow, I think,
I can't wait to go home and show Grandmum!

And then I remember.

If I had to calculate how long it takes
to get over losing someone,
the answer would be
∞.

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FISH FRY

Uncle Frankie teaches us
how to clean and cut the fish we caught.
Eeeew! Blech! Yuck!

Then I work with Uncle Frankie
chopping cabbage for coleslaw,
Nick peels potatoes,
and Hakeem fries the fish.

When I tell Mom we're having a fish fry and
Uncle Frankie's invited her to join us,
I'm hoping she won't come since
I never know how she'll act.
But she's all in.
Sure, I'll tag along,
she says.
Find out more about this Uncle Frankie fella.

Hakeem's parents, Zuri and Tyrone, join us, too.
Nick's mom doesn't.
We spend hours sitting on Uncle Frankie's patio
as we eat and talk.
Mom doesn't cause any trouble.
Mostly, she stares at
the local highway that leads out of town.
She barely says a word
—until our walk home.
Does Uncle Frankie do this a lot,
take care of things,
watch out for people,

help them?

Yeah. I nod.
He says if you're here, you're family.

Hmm. Good to know,
Mom says.
Good. To. Know.

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FLY FREE

It’s one of those perfect spring days
that makes you forget the winter,
and the world feels fresh and new.
The kind of day where
it feels like anything can happen.

And something rare does.

Mom and I are having fun together.
We go to Mot’s Ice Cream Shop.
Each of us orders a large twist,
chocolate and vanilla blended together.
Right before we pull out of the parking lot,
we roll down the windows
so Mom can blast her favorite tune.

It’s the best song ever written,
and if anyone tells you otherwise,
they’re lyin’, she says,
turning on “Free Bird” by Lynyrd Skynyrd
and cranking the stereo all the way up.

The song starts out slow.
I never realized a guitar
could sound like it’s crying,
but that’s how the song begins.

The wind dances with our hair,
swirling and twirling it all around
as the song speeds up,

and we speed up right along with it when
Mom pulls onto the highway.

The drummer and guitarist go
faster,
louder,
faster,
louder,
faster,
louder.
Drums pounding.
Cymbals crashing.
Guitar screaming.

And Mom and I are enjoying it all
together.

I feel my arms stretch out like wings,
and I swear if the car didn’t have a roof,
I’d take off right now

and fly.

Free.

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I GET IT NOW

For a split second,
quick as a blink,
I think:
This is what it feels like for Mom
when she leaves.

I look in the rearview mirror.
Our town
—everything—
is so far behind us.

And then,
BOOM!

I get it.
I understand The Itch.
It's all about leaving behind
everything and everyone that reminds you
of anything bad,
anything that makes you feel sad,
and starting fresh in a new place
where maybe everything could be better.

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ONE SWEET MOMENT

I reach out to hold Mom’s hand,
to silently tell her,
I understand.

At first, she jumps.
Startled.
Like she’s forgotten I’m in the car with her.
Then she gives my hand a squeeze.

For one sweet moment,
I think we’re going to be okay.

Until she lets go,
and pulls her hand away.

At the next exit,
we turn around and head home.

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LOSING MORE OF GRANDMUM

Hakeem, Nick, and I are at The Gathering Spot,
and my heart skips a beat when
I hear the familiar fart of The Fishbowl.
I look outside and see some guy driving it,
pulling up to get gas.
I run outside and holler,
Hey, you stole that car!

If I were Iron Man,
I'd reach out my hand
and blast a beam at the thief,
send him soaring through the air,
far away from The Fishbowl.
But I'm no superhero,
so I lunge at him instead.
Nick steps in front of me,
becomes my human shield.

Stole? Whaddya talkin' about, kid?
I just bought this piece of crap.
Gonna resell it to the junkyard for scrap.
Now get outta my way, ya lyin' brat!

He climbs into The Fishbowl
and takes off.

And I lose even more of Grandmum.
Just.
Like.
That.

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MOM AND ME

I doodle
me as a balloon
on a string.

I doodle
Mom as a Chimera
holding the string.

So even when I want to get close,
as a balloon
I always have to keep a little distance from the Chimera
with her pointy crow beak
and sharp claws.

I doodle
the string slipping
and the words
tick, tick, tick.

I want Mom to hold on tight!
To tie the balloon's string around her,
make it as much a part of her
as her butterfly wings.
I need her to do anything and everything
to make sure she doesn't let go,
doesn't storm off without the balloon,
no matter how bad The Itch gets.

Because if you've ever let go
of a balloon,

you know what happens
next.

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MAYBE IT'S LIKE BASKETBALL

I roll up the end of the toothpaste tube,
trying to squeeze out enough to brush my teeth,
especially my back molar.
My toothache keeps getting worse.

Mom stands in the bathroom doorway
and shakes her head
as she stares at my PJs clinging to my skin.

How can you still not know
how to dry off after you shower?
And don't just toss your towel on the floor.
Sheesh!

I pick up my towel to hang it on a hook,
and Mom shakes her head.
Drape it around your shoulders.
Head out to the deck
so I can cut your hair.

She sighs as the scissors snip.
Look.
I know I say bad things sometimes.
I've screwed up a lot.
And I tend to leave
when things get to be too much.
But you can't expect me to be Grandmum.
I'm nothing like her, okay?
I like things a certain way.
And I'm obviously not good

at taking care of anyone but myself.
Heck. I'm not even good at taking care of me.

You're not all that bad,
I say, biting my tongue for the "not all that bad" part.

Mom laughs as she finishes cutting my hair.

Grandmum had a lot of practice, I say,
taking care of you,
taking care of me.
Maybe it's like basketball.
You have to do it a lot to get good at it.

I've tried, Joe.
It may not seem like it,
but I have.

I feel like I should say something else,
but I don't know what to say
and I don't want to say the *wrong* thing.
So I give her a Captain America hug,
try to let her know everything's going to be okay.

Somehow.
Some way.

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THE KISS

In the middle of the night,
I could swear I feel
Mom giving me a kiss on my forehead.

But surely, I was just dreaming.

She never does that.

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SILENCE

Mom likes to sleep late,
so I tiptoe through The Overripe Banana
as I get ready for school.
I trip over my loose shoe soles,
and before I know what's happening,
I land flat on my face on the floor,
making a loud thud
and bloodying my nose.

And then,
I brace for Mom to go all Storm
and yell at me for waking her.

Silence.

I get up and pinch my nose
to stop the bleeding.
I stand outside her door and say,
Sorry.

Silence.

My stomach turns into a volcano,
spewing acid like lava
up into my throat.

Mom?
I knock.

Silence.

I crack open the door and peek inside.

No Mom, blanket, or pillows
on her bed.

I step inside.
Glide one hand across the top of her dresser,
usually piled high with makeup and stuff.

I yank open each drawer.
Empty.

I slam open her closet doors.
Just hangers.

BOOM!
Mom got The Itch.

She left me.

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THE BALLOON

I’m a balloon
drifting along all on my own
with no one left
to hold the string.

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TEXTING

Mom, you okay?
When you coming home?

Holding Grandmum’s cell,
I stare at the screen,
never seeing those three little dots.

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ZIPPED LIPS

I need to slap a zipper over my mouth
like Deadpool in *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*.
I can't tell a single soul that Mom got The Itch.
If anyone finds out,
the cops will go after Mom.
She has a police record.
She'll get into all kinds of trouble.

I need to put a lock on the zipper,
because if the zipper slips the least little bit
and I'm tempted to say something,
Child Protective Services will put me in foster care.
Nick's been a foster.
Didn't say why.
Just said it was the worst thing ever.

I need to throw away the key to the lock
so I don't make a peep,
no matter what happens.
I have to be like Deadpool
until Mom comes back.
I remind myself she's always come back.

Eventually.

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COULDN'T HELP BUT HEAR

Have you ever known me
to get all up in your business?
Nick asks
as we walk along the broken sidewalk to school.

I shake my head.

Mobile home walls are thin, remember?
I couldn't help but hear some stuff lately.
Your mom yelling.
Doors slamming.
A car leaving in the middle of the night.

I'm fine, I say.

Oh, really?
'Cause your nose is bleeding.
And there are blood drops all down your shirt.

Sitgen!
I take off my T-shirt,
turn it inside out,
and slip it back on.
Tripped and fell flat on my face.
But I'm fine.

Yeah. You said that, Joe. Twice.
You gotta be careful about
keeping secrets,
because it doesn't take long
before secrets keep you.

Wait, Nick. I'm supposed to tell you
about my mom when you never tell me about yours?
Like why she never comes out
and how you once ended up as a foster?
Well, I'll tell you when you tell me, okay?
But for now, here's a three-finger rundown.
I hold up one finger.
I'm fine.
A second finger.
Stay out of it.
A third finger.
I really need you to keep your mouth shut.

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DOOMSDAY'S LEFT HOOK

As if this day isn’t bad enough,
I come home to find out
Doomsday turned off the heat.

At least winter’s over.
So I can make do without a furnace to warm the place,
but shutting off our gas
means the water heater won’t work either.

No hot water when doing dishes.
No hot water to wash clothes in the bathtub.
No hot water for the shower.

Sitgen!

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NO REPLY

All night I text Mom.
Haven't told anyone.
Don't want you to get in trouble.
I check my phone every few minutes.
She doesn't reply.

I do my homework.
Then I text.
I'll try to be better.
Mom doesn't reply.

I scrub the tub, toilet, and sinks.
Take out the trash. Dust and vacuum.
Then I text.
Cleaned the place.
Just like you like it.
I'll keep it that way.
Promise!
Mom doesn't reply.

I'm so sleepy, I can barely keep my eyes open,
so I get ready for bed.
When I turn on the shower,
the cold water shocks me,
takes my breath away,
and leaves me numb.

I text once more.
Pls just let me know you're okay.

I don’t even bother
to look for a response.

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THE BAG

Every time I hugged Grandmum,
I'd breathe in her scent.
When I miss her a lot,
like tonight,
I open the bag in the back of my closet
where I keep Grandmum's quilt,
and breathe in her scent.

I call it "Grandmum in a bag."
I don't tell anybody about it,
because I know it sounds kinda weird.

But it's all I have left of her.

And I need her now more than ever.

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TANGLED WEBS

I pass Uncle Frankie building a wheelchair ramp
for Miss Blye, who's sprained her ankle.
She sits in a lawn chair and watches as he works.
Uncle Frankie says,
To cheer you up,
I could tell you a joke about
how good of a carpenter I am, but
I'm not sure it wood work.
Get it?
Wood work?

When Miss Blye laughs,
Uncle Frankie says,
Yes! I totally nailed that joke.
Get it?
Nailed?

She rolls her eyes at him.
Uncle Frankie spots me and says,
Haven't seen your mom around lately.

Oh, that's because she's cleaning houses during the day
and offices at night, just like Grandmum did,
I tell him.
That's why her car's never here.

You don't say.
Uncle Frankie yanks on the ramp's railing,
makes sure it's steady, then looks me in the eye.

I’m Spider-Man,
but instead of spinning webs, I spin lies.

Thwip!
Yep. Even works for the same company.
They needed to hire someone after Grandmum . . .
well . . . you know.

Your grandma was good people.
Uncle Frankie unloads from his pickup a wheelchair,
the one I noticed at Frank-Mart.

Is it okay if I help you into the chair and
push you up the ramp?
Uncle Frankie asks Miss Blye.

Only if we pop a wheelie,
she jokes.

Thwip!
So that’s why Mom’s gone—I mean,
not around lately, I say.

I see,
Uncle Frankie says, helping Miss Blye
get into the wheelchair.
Remember I’m here for you, kid.
You know the number.
Just text or call.

Thwip!
Thanks, but I’m fine,
I say, and as I say it, I realize
that maybe

I’m lying to myself, too.

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SHOULD HAVE ASKED

The seeds in Grandmum's milk jugs have sprouted,
so Hakeem and Nick help me plant the garden.
It takes all day to dig holes,
ease each plant into the soil,
pack the dirt loosely around it,
then give each plant some water,
just like the books I found at the library said to do.

We should probably think about
putting some kind of fence around this later,
you know, to keep critters out,
Nick says.

Our backyard was fenced in at The Gingerbread House.
Was that because of the garden?
I never thought to ask Grandmum about that, or
even how to take care of a garden.
I wish I had.

I should have asked her a lot of things.

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ABANDONED

It all happens so fast.

A car pulls over
right next to the Bowling Ball Pyramid,
and a guy gets out carrying a cardboard box.
He doesn’t take the time to shut the door.
A small dog jumps out of the car.
The dog’s black, tan, and white,
and its chest is so skinny,
I can count each rib.
Easily.

The dog follows the guy
as he sets the box on the grass
next to the pyramid.
The dog tries to use its nose
to nudge the flaps open, and
while the dog’s distracted,
the guy gets in his car.
Slam!
Squeal!
Vroom!
The guy takes off.

Ruff! Ruff! Ruff!
the dog barks,
trying to catch its owner,
but its little legs
just can’t keep up.

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RESCUED

The cardboard box starts moving.
I run over to it and
flip back the flaps.
Four eyes stare back.
Two teeny-tiny puppies,
tricolored like the mama.
One whimpers.
The other yip-yap-yelps.
The dog goes from chasing the car to
charging toward me.
I quickly move my hands away from the box.
It's okay, mama dog.
I'm not gonna hurt the pups or you.
I let her sniff my hands.

It doesn't take long before she trusts me enough
to let me pet her and the pups.
Then I take the puppies out of the box.
They snuggle up to my chin,
tickling me with their whiskers,
while the mama curls up in my lap.

I stare at the dogs.

They've been abandoned.
Left all alone
to fend for themselves.

Just like me.

I decide I have to keep them.

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THE LUCKIES

You're a lucky dog today,
finding someone who'll take you in,
I say to the mama,
who tilts her head as she listens.
Hey! Lucky would be a great name!
But if you're Lucky,
what should we call the puppies?
I think for a minute.
How 'bout Lucky Duck and Lucky Dawg,
Duck and Dawg for short?

They lick me.

I'll take that as a yes.

The pups shake
like they're freezing,
and they're way too weak to walk
even the short distance to The Overripe Banana.

My shirt's getting loose,
so I'm able to make a pouch for the pups
like I'm a kangaroo.
I tuck Duck and Dawg inside, and
Lucky walks beside me
as we head home.

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I CAN'T EVEN FEED ME

The dogs are up at all hours of the night.
Needing to potty.
Sometimes having accidents.
Wanting to play.
Sometimes playing with the wrong things.
And sniffing every inch of The Overripe Banana
for food.
Just like I've been doing for days.

Duck and Dawg suckle on Lucky,
hoping for their mama's milk,
but Lucky needs food to turn into milk.

Even when the dogs sleep,
I'm wide awake wondering,
How am I gonna feed the Luckies
when I can't even feed me?

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THE KNOCK ON THE DOOR

A loud knock on the door
wakes me up and
gives me a bad case of the what-ifs.

What if somebody figured out Mom left
and CPS is here to take me away?

Even worse.
What if it's a cop
here to tell me Mom's in trouble again
or
something bad's happened to her?

When you live in fear,
not knowing what'll happen next,
a simple knock on the door
is anything but.

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PLACES TO GO, PEOPLE TO SEE

Before I open the door,
I pick up the baseball bat beside it,
then peek through the peephole
to see who it is.

Uncle Frankie.

I put down the bat and open the door.

He says to grab the dogs
because we have places to go
and people to see.

How'd you know I had dogs?

Saw you rescue 'em.
If you're keepin' those dogs,
you need to take good care of 'em.
If you have what you need, fine.
If not, let's get goin'.
Time's a-wastin'.

But I don't have any money,
I say.

Uncle Frankie shakes his head.
It's like you don't even know me.

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THE RIGHT THING

One of Uncle Frankie's friends runs a vet clinic.
That's our first stop.

Doc, have I got a deal for you!
Uncle Frankie says.
I'll let you be on my bass tournament team if
you take care of these dogs for free.

I can fish with the ten-time champ?
Done! the vet says before
examining the dogs, bathing them,
and showing me how to clean their ears,
brush their teeth, and trim their nails.

Then the vet gives Lucky her vaccines,
and the puppies dewormers,
and tells me to come back in two months
for the pups' vaccines.

You're all set,
he says, handing me a bag full of stuff.
Leashes.
A brush.
Nail trimmers.
Toothbrushes and paste.
Heartworm and flea meds.

I thank the vet over and over.
I can't believe I got all that for free!
I say when Uncle Frankie and I

get back in the pickup.

The joy of bartering!
Uncle Frankie says.

Huh? What's bartering?

It's when you trade things you have or can do
to get what you need
and everybody wins.
People have done it for thousands of years,
long before there was money.

We stop by Frank-Mart and pick up a crate
big enough for all three dogs and a tie-out rope.
We swing by the humane society.
It has a pet pantry for when money's tight and
you can't afford to feed your animals.
I get kibble for Lucky,
puppy milk replacer for Duck and Dawg,
and even some treats.

Thank you so much!
I say to Uncle Frankie
when we get back to King of the Castle.

It was the right thing to do,
he says.

How do you always know what the right thing is?
I ask.

If it means helping others or yourself,
it's always the right thing to do,
Uncle Frankie says.

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DAWGGONE HOLE

Dawg chewed a hole in my jeans.
Right. In. The. Butt.
I don’t know how to sew
so I use duct tape to mend the hole.

In class, I sit crisscross applesauce on a carpet square
during one of Mrs. Swan’s read-alouds.
When she’s done,
I stand up, and the carpet square sticks
to the tape on my jeans.
I feel like one of the Luckies,
chasing my tail as I twist and turn
to tug off the rug.

Riiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiip!

Now the hole in my jeans is even bigger.
You can see my underwear.
Everyone laughs but my friends,
like a room full of Jokers cackling.

The read-aloud is now a laugh-aloud.

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THE MAGIC CLOSET

The door looks like any other door until
Mrs. Swan opens it and I see
piles of clothes and stacks of shoes.
It's our new Magic Closet, Mrs. Swan says.
All the clothes you might need are right here.
I started one as a student teacher in Georgia.
Figured this school could use one, too.

I flash back to Uncle Frankie saying that
helping yourself is always the right thing to do,
so I tell Mrs. Swan, *I need sneakers, too.*

Help yourself, she says.
Everything is here for the taking.

I leave the Magic Closet with jeans and
brand-new name-brand sneakers that fit perfectly.
Brand-new sneakers with the tags still on them.
I run my hands over
the toes
—no holes—
the smooth leather sides
—no scuffs—
the bottoms
—no flip-flop soles.

Not a sliver of silver duct tape anywhere.

Then I breathe in that new-shoe smell.
Part rubber.

Part pride.
And all joy.

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MRS. SWAN, MY SUPERHERO

It’s pretty cool having a superhero
for a teacher.

Over and over again,
Mrs. Swan uses her powers
to change things for the better.

Kids get humiliated for needing free lunches.
And then,
BOOM!
She helps you not be embarrassed.

Kids don’t have enough to eat.
And then,
BOOM!
She provides more food options.

Kids are bullied for not having nice clothes and shoes.
And then,
BOOM!
She creates a closet of clothes you can choose from.

Any of those things can make a poor kid
feel invisible.
And then,
BOOM!
A teacher steps in and you feel seen.

But school ends soon.
I’ll lose a superhero.

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ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORS

Your moms, she left, huh? Hakeem asks.
We're headed from school to my place
to walk the Luckies and shoot some hoops.

I look at Nick. He shrugs and says,
Didn't say a word about your mom.

That's true, Hakeem says.
I figured it out when Nick told me about the Luckies.
Your mom would never take care of three dogs.
She doesn't even take care of you.

Nick has to hold me back
to keep me from going at Hakeem.

Watch yourself! I say.
That's my mom you're talkin' about!

Hakeem holds up his hands, surrender-style.
Regretted it as soon as I said it.

For some reason the game Rock, Paper, Scissors
pops into my head.
Hakeem's strong
like a rock.
I'm a lightweight
like paper.

Paper beats rock.

But Hakeem's words cut like scissors.

’Cause they’re true.

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WE HAVE TO TALK

It’s so hot that the Luckies take shelter in the shade.
And even I don’t feel like shooting hoops but
I need to do something
to get everyone’s mind off Mom,
including mine.

To cool down, I take off my shirt.
Who’s ready for a beatdown in a game of Twenty-one?
I ask.

Sitgen!
You’re skin and bones!
Nick says.

You goin’ hungry, bruh?
Hakeem asks.

I have some food, thanks to Mrs. Swan.
Just not enough.

Hakeem has the basketball tucked under his arm.
I reach for it.
He keeps it from me.
We’re not playin’,
Hakeem says.
We’re talkin’.

I roll my eyes.
Not out here.
Inside The Overripe Banana,
away from Uncle Frankie,

who hears, sees, and knows all.

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LOGIC TRAIN

Take the logic train to conclusion station,
Hakeem says as soon as we're in The Overripe Banana.
Your mom's car is gone.
You don't think anyone's noticed?

I got that covered.
Told Uncle Frankie she works day and night.

Annnnnnnd the train derails,
Hakeem says.
Even if Uncle Frankie's bought your lie,
he'd expect your mom's car to be here sometimes.

I shrug.

Who. Gives. A. Sitgen. About. The. Car?!
Nick says.
Joe's starvin'!
And school's almost out.
He can't go all summer without food!

Guys! I know!
I shout.
You think I don't spend every minute of every day
thinking about food,
trying to find food?
I even dream about food!

Duck and Dawg paw at their ears
and curl into Lucky's tummy,
trying to hide from the yelling.

I sit down beside them and pet them.
Calm them and me down.
It's okay.
It's going to be fine,
I say.

Am I lying to them—and to myself again?

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WORST THING EVER

I get why you kept your mom leaving a secret,
Nick says.
You're wanting to protect her, and
don't want to go into foster care, but
we're friends.
You can trust us.
Any idea when she'll come back?

I shake my head.
At first, she used to take off for a few days,
and then it became weeks and months.
I don't tell them that last time,
she was gone for a year.

A parent can get in a car and go
or leave you in other ways,
Nick says.
My mom leaves every time she stops taking her meds
and falls into a really deep depression.
She just lies on the couch.
Sleeping, mostly.
And she won't budge,
no matter how much I beg her to get up,
to take a shower,
or to do something—anything.

That's rough,
Hakeem says.
So that's why you had to go to foster care?

Nick nods.

What's it like when CPS comes for you?
I ask.

Absolutely terrifying.
Not knowing where you're going.
Who you'll end up with.
What's gonna happen to you.
At the first home, I got lice.
The fosters were newbs and panicked.
Shaved all the kids' heads.
I looked like Professor X.

So that's why you were bald when I met you,
I say. *I thought it was cool,*
but I could tell you didn't like it,
since you kept your head covered with a baseball cap.

Yeah, I hated it.
Vowed then and there,
never again will anyone cut my hair.

Wait! Back it up a minute.
The first home?
Hakeem asks, furrowing his brows.

Sometimes they bounce you around.
A foster might not want you.
It might be a bad fit.
Or a foster might up and quit.

Wouldn't you have been better off
with your moms than them?

Hakeem asks.

Probably not.
Mom's depression was really bad back then.
Dad worked extra to make up for Mom not working,
so he was never around.

But you said being a foster
was the worst thing ever,
I say.

Because I was away from my parents.
And Mom needed me.
She still needs me.

But what do you need?
Hakeem asks.

Never think about that anymore,
Nick says.

Me neither,
I say.

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I'M NOT ALONE

I’m gonna make us something to eat,
Hakeem says, heading to the kitchen.
You can’t think straight when you’re hungry.
Facts.

I watch as he opens one cabinet after another.
Then the fridge.
Nothin’ in there, I say.

You see nothing.
I see ingredients to make something.
He sets out the bottle of ketchup.
Sugar.
Salt.
Pepper.
Garlic powder.
Onion powder.
Basil.
Oregano.
It’d be better if we had milk and Parmesan cheese,
but I’ll improvise.

Be right back, Nick says.
He runs home and returns like the Flash.
Milk.
Parmesan.
Bread.
He sets them on the kitchen counter.

Hakeem sees the green cheese can

and gives it a side-eye.

La snob,
Nick says.

Le snob,
Hakeem corrects.

A half hour later,
Hakeem's made tomato soup
and garlic bread.

Grandmum and Mom are gone.
But I am not abandoned.

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RUNNING OUT

I used to like to shower when we had hot water.
But now that I have none, thanks to Doomsday,
I can barely get up the nerve to shower
every three or four days.
Being blasted with ice-cold water hurts.
It’s miserable.

Today when I walk into class,
I hear kids whisper and laugh.
And when I raise my hand to answer a question,
I lower it quickly, since I can tell
my armpit smells like onions.
Everyone but Hakeem and Nick
wrinkles and then holds their noses.
I know I stink.
And it’s not just because I don’t have hot water.
I also ran out of soap.
I’m running out of everything.

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SURPRISED, NOT SURPRISED

Hakeem wants Nick and me to go to his place after school.
He lives several blocks away.
It's a hot June day, and
the three of us are sweaty, slimy slugs
by the time we get there.

I know how we can all cool off,
Hakeem says,
grabbing the hose and spraying Nick and me.

Oh, it's on now!
Nick says.
He and I wrestle the hose away from Hakeem
and drench him.

Truce!
Hakeem screams.
Hey, since we're already soaked,
will you two help me clean Mom's van?

Might as well,
I say.

Hakeem grabs buckets, sponges, and soap,
and the three of us give the
van a good scrubbing.
When Hakeem squirts soap on me,
I give myself a good scrubbing, too.

What a nice surprise! Thank you, boys!
Hakeem's mom, Zuri, says, leaning out the front door.

Mind if they stay for dinner?
Hakeem asks.

Of course not,
but you three look like drowned rats,
and none of ya are steppin' foot in my house like that.
She creates a trail of towels for us to walk on
from the door to the bathroom
and makes us change into some of Hakeem's clothes
while she washes and dries ours.

Later, when Nick and I are about to leave,
Hakeem hands me a bag full of leftovers
—and a bar of soap.

Hakeem surprised his mom,
but I'm not surprised
he found a way to help me yet again.

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PROBLEM SOLVED

During lunch,
Hakeem pulls a piece of paper out of his pocket.
He hands it me.
That, my man, is the answer to your problems.

I unfold it.
It's one of those junky ads that comes in the mail.
"Panties, two for the price of one"?

The other side, Joe. Read the other side.
He rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

> *Citywide Rummage Sale This Weekend!*
> *Clean out your closets and*
> *make some cold, hard cash!*

It's during the bass tournament,
so you won't have to worry about
Uncle Frankie nosing around,
Nick says.

Maybe I could sell Grandmum's stuff?

Now you're talkin',
Hakeem says.

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LEANING ON EACH OTHER

Grandmum's robe
hangs on the back of the door.
Her reading glasses
are upside down on a book on the nightstand.
Her fuzzy slippers
peek out from under her bed.
It feels like she's still here
and I like that,
so I leave those things right where they are and
pack up everything else.

Before I leave her room,
I stare at the photo of us on her dresser.
The library paid a photographer
to take it on their Free Family Photo Night.
Grandmum's eyes sparkle,
and we're standing up,
hugging tight,
leaning on each other.
I don't know who's smiling more.

We were a great team,
you and I,
I say,
trying to keep my tears
from landing on the picture and ruining it.

For safekeeping,
I tuck the photo into our accordion folder
that holds everything important.

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THE GROCERY LIST

I sell almost all of Grandmum's stuff
and have money for food.
I silently thank Grandmum for taking care of me
one last time.

I make a grocery list in my head
as I walk toward The Gathering Spot.
Potato chips, butter, and bread for crisps sandwiches.
(Potato chips are called crisps in England.)
Rice and beans would be good for filling me up.
And I *have* to buy toothpaste.
My gums are starting to swell around my bad tooth.

Near the Bowling Ball Pyramid,
Uncle Frankie stops me.
Says the rent's due.
Way past due.
Says he's been patient.
Understanding.
Says if Mom's working, then she needs to pay him.
So just like that,
my money's gone.
And it's only a little of what we owe him.

Does the reticulated python always have to tighten its grip
just when you think you're about to break free?

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DISCONNECTED

I’ve been texting Mom every day since she left
and getting no response,
so today I call her.
I expect to hear it ring
and then for voicemail to kick in.
She hates talking on the phone.
Instead, I hear
three
shrill
sounds
before a recording starts.

We’re sorry,
you have reached a number
that has been disconnected
or is no longer in service.

Surely it can’t be.
I must have dialed the wrong number.
I call again.
Three
shrill
sounds
and then the recording.

I’m about to try one more time.

But now my phone doesn’t work.

Doomsday turned it off, too.

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THE FIVE MARBLES

Five words roll around like marbles in my head,
slowly bumping out all other thoughts.
I let them roll out in front of Nick.
If Mom doesn't come back . . .

Then you'll be in foster care, Nick says.
Know what I hated most?
The garbage bags.
Every time CPS took me,
they threw all my things into garbage bags.
Like I'm garbage.

That why you always pack a suitcase
even for just a sleepover?

Nick nods.

I take a deep breath and exhale.
Do you think me being a foster would be better
than trying to make it on my own?

Here's the truth, Joe,
Nick says.
Foster parents are like birth parents.
Some are good.
Some are not so good.
It doesn't have anything to do with you.
It's just the luck of the draw.

Great, I say. *That's just great.*
'Cause the luck thing's been working out real well

for me these days.

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GOING, GOING, GONE

It’s almost summer vacation.

Nick’s going
to Colorado for a couple of weeks
to spend time with his dad.

Hakeem’s going
to New York City.
He got accepted to Jeunes Cuisiniers,
a camp for young chefs.

Uncle Frankie’s going
to Lake Michigan for ten days
with his fishing buddies.

And I’m about to be all alone
with no one to turn to for help
or food.

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JUST A FRACTION

On the last day of school,
Mrs. Swan gives me all
the snacks left over from The Corner Store.
A total of thirty packages
of animal crackers,
granola bars,
sandwich crackers,
fruit cups,
and pudding cups.
I stare at the snacks and do some math.
Sixty days of summer vacation.
A half of a snack each day.

I'm grateful to Mrs. Swan
for giving me all the snacks,
even though it's just a fraction
of what I need.

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MAKING SURE I DON'T GO HUNGRY

The night before he leaves for chef camp,
Hakeem brings over a ton of food.

Jeunes Cuisiniers ends with a competition,
he says.
We have to get inventive with chicken,
so I've been practicing all week.
Here's some arroz con pollo,
chicken satay with spicy peanut sauce,
chicken fricassée,
and I even made a dessert—
Turkish chicken breast pudding.
I made more than we could ever eat.

As Hakeem piles it into the fridge,
Nick shows up carrying two boxes of pizza,
a bag of breadsticks,
and a bunch of sodas.
My mom had lots of coupons we had to use up,
he says.

We dig into the pizza and,
as a special treat,
I let the Luckies snarf down my crust scraps.

Even though my friends are leaving,
they're not going to leave me hungry.

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SATISFYING SOUNDS

Onomatopoeia of the best sounds in the world:

Gobble.
Chomp.
Guzzle.
Slurp.
Burp.

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RIGHT HOOK!

I wake up in a great mood.
I've had food to eat for days.

I step into the kitchen and
fall flat on my butt after slipping on a puddle.
A puddle coming from the fridge.
A fridge that's no longer click-rattle-gurgle-humming.

Oh no!
It can't be!
No! No! No!

I open the refrigerator door.
The light's off and everything inside's warm.
Doomsday threw a right hook!
Turned off the electricity.

The rest of the food my friends gave me is spoiled.

Sitgen! Sitgen!! Sitgen!!!
I scream as I kick the fridge until
I hear a pop and
a sharp pain shoots through
my big toe.

Sitgen!!!!!!!

The dogs cower around the corner.
I open the freezer to get some ice for my toe, and
water gushes out.
Not a cube of ice left either.

Lucky, Duck, and Dawg peek their snouts around,
look to see if I've stopped throwing things.
When they see me crying and curled up in a ball,
they come running.
They snuggle up next to me
and cover me in kisses.

Who rescued who?
I wonder as I stroke their soft fur.

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OH DEER!

At least I have my vegetable garden.
That's something.
A lot of stuff was almost ready to harvest.
As I limp outside,
the Luckies zoom past me and start barking.
Ruff! Woof! Ruff! Woof! Ruff!

Sitgen!
A family of deer invaded the garden
and now the dogs are after them.
No! Stop! Come back!
I yell.
The Luckies turn toward the sound of my voice,
and the deer dart away.

With the commotion over,
I notice the deer helped themselves to lots
of the ripening veggies
and trampled others.
I pick what's left.
Green beans, spinach, cabbage, zucchini, and peas.

While I strip the strings and snap the beans,
I try to think of what Hakeem might do
to make it all taste good.
I mix olive oil, vinegar, and mustard to make dressing.
Pour it all over my vegetable salad.
And take a bite.
Not bad, if I do say so myself.

I have enough to last a few days.
Hopefully more veggies will ripen soon.

And hopefully the deer won't come back
—at least until Uncle Frankie
gets home and
has the time
to help me build a fence.

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DID WHAT I ASKED

Nick asked me to keep an eye on his mom
while he's away, to make sure she's okay.
But every day when I knock, she doesn't answer.
The mail's piling up in their box.
I peek in the window and see her
curled up in the same spot on the couch.
She hasn't moved an inch and
is still wearing the clothes she had on when Nick left.
Uncle Frankie's still in Michigan, and
I don't know what to do, so I knock on Miss Blye's door.
Tell her about Nick's mom.
Miss Blye comes with me, and together
we knock—then pound—on Nick's mom's door,
until she finally opens it.
Her hair's matted, her eyes are puffy,
and she's wrapped in a blanket as if she's cold,
but it's eighty-seven degrees out.

Are you okay? Miss Blye asks.
Nick's mom doesn't answer.
She just starts bawling and can't stop,
so Miss Blye calls for an ambulance.

After the paramedics take Nick's mom to the hospital,
Miss Blye lends me her cell phone so
I can text Nick and tell him what happened
and where his mom is.

He texts back.
You did what I asked. Kept Mom safe.

Thank you for that.

Will have Dad call hospital.

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WHAT HUNGER FEELS LIKE

My stomach’s an empty bowl.
∞
My temples are drums,
thump, thump, thumping.
∞
My head’s a merry-go-round,
spin, spin, spinning.
∞
And food is the sun
my thoughts orbit.
∞

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OAK, JOE OAK

I feel like a spy.
I hum the theme song to James Bond
as I do some recon.

The Gathering Spot opens at eight in the morning.
Closes at midnight.
They toss all the food every four hours
so they can clean the containers and machines.

I plan it all out.
I don’t have money to buy their food, but
I can be like Uncle Frankie and
snatch what they’re getting rid of.
And since nobody wants it anymore,
it won’t be stealing.

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DUMPSTER DIVING

At midnight,
I hang out behind the Bowling Ball Pyramid
to watch and wait.
As soon as the night manager pulls out of the parking lot,
I run across the road
and around to the back of The Gathering Spot.
I lift the lid of the dumpster.
It’s full of trash bags that all look alike.

Nothing’s ever as easy as it should be.

I reach in,
grab a bag,
pull it out,
and open it.
The smell makes me gag.
Garbage from the bathroom.
Another bag’s full of regular stuff people throw away.
Cups. Napkins. Wrappers.
I reach for another bag, but
the flattened boxes underneath it shift, and
the bag ends up
at the bottom of the dumpster.

Sitgen!

I spy empty milk crates outside the store’s back door.
I stack them like stairs,
climb them,
swing my legs over the top of the dumpster

and drop down into it.
I open the bag.

Food.
Hot dogs, nachos, pretzels, and more.
All that yummy food.

I tie it closed,
toss it out of the dumpster,
and realize

I can’t get out.

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OLYMPIC MEDALIST

I’m in the middle of a STEM challenge.
How to get out of a dumpster.
I fold the flattened cardboard back into boxes
and stack them inside the dumpster.
As I step on the makeshift stairs,
they collapse.

Strike one.

I stack the bags.
As I climb over them,
they tumble and I stumble,
landing flat on my back in some kind of goo.
And when you’re in dumpster goo,
you don’t even want to know
what kind of goo it is.

Strike two.

I feel critters skitter over my hands.
I push up.
Crunch.
Squish.
Ooze.
Slime slips between my fingers.

Strike three.
And I’m still not out.

I wipe my hands on some cardboard.
Then I fill each box with a bag

and stack them,
making stairs just sturdy enough that
I can climb them to get out.
When I’m at the top of the dumpster,
the stairs collapse,
and I fall out,
belly-flopping onto the ground
and knocking the wind out of me.

If dumpster diving were an Olympic sport like gymnastics,
I’d get a gold medal.
Maybe silver.
Okay, okay. Bronze.
’Cause of the dismount.

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EATING LEFTOVERS

I'm dying to tear into the bag of food
as soon as I get home, but
even as hungry as I am,
I can't stand being covered in dumpster goo
for one more second.
So first I grab the garden hose and
rinse off the bag and my shoes.
My clothes are covered in who knows what, so
I step into the shower to wash them and me.
Then I fill the tub with water to let
my super-stinky clothes soak.
Finally, I open the bag.
It's like Casserole Surprise!
I have no idea what I'm eating,
but it's food.
The Luckies still have a month's worth of kibble,
but after I eat as much as I can,
I share some with them, since
there's no fridge to store what's left.
After all I went through to get it,
I don't want to waste it.

I convince myself it's just like eating leftovers.
'Cause I can't bear to think
I'm eating trash.

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CAN'T WIN

Now I have a new nightly routine.
Right before midnight,
I go to The Gathering Spot and
watch to see what part of the dumpster
the manager tosses the bag of food into
so I have a better idea where to look.
After midnight, I head to the dumpster and lift the lid,
stack the milk crates,
snatch the bag,
close the lid,
put the milk crates back,
and go home to eat.

Except

tonight, the milk crates are gone.
There's a lock on the dumpster
and a sign taped to it.
Dumpster diving isn't safe.
Stay out!
A security camera's pointed right at it.

The reticulated python squeezes so tightly,
I can hardly breathe anymore.

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MAYBE

Maybe Mom’s never coming back. Maybe
there’s no maybe to it. Maybe
I should tell Uncle Frankie as soon as he gets back. Maybe
I should try to find a way to get ahold of Mrs. Swan. Maybe
she’d help. She has all kinds of great ideas. Maybe
I should use a library computer to email Nick. Maybe
his dad could help with CPS. Maybe
I can make it until Hakeem gets home. Maybe
then the two of us together could tell his parents. Maybe
they’ll know what to do. Maybe
foster care won’t be so bad. Maybe

no foster parent will want me either.

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CAN'T BE ALL THAT BAD

The Luckies are getting bigger by the day,
eating their kibble.
But I'm getting smaller by the day.
After I feed them, I wash their bowls and
catch a whiff of the meaty smell.
Doesn't look so great,
but you guys gobble it down.
It's making you strong and healthy.
Can't be all that bad.

My stomach growls.
I haven't eaten anything since The Gathering Spot's leftovers
two days ago,
and some veggies from the garden, but
they barely fill me up.
I scan the dog food label.
Corn. Beef. Rice. Egg.
Human food.
I tell myself kibble is kinda like cereal
and grab a bowl,
dump a scoopful of dog food into it,
and add water.
I dunk the chunks,
wetting every piece,
just like when I eat cereal.
I put a spoonful into my mouth.
Chew.
And gag.
I run to the kitchen sink,

spit it out, and
drink straight out of the faucet until
I can’t taste the dog food anymore.

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BAD BEEF STEW

I can’t.

I just can’t do it.

But I’m so hungry.

I stare at the bowl.

I gotta do it.
It’s the only food I have until Hakeem gets back.

Just think of it as beef stew,
I tell myself as I pick up the bowl and
shovel in a second spoonful.

This time I swallow
more than chew,
just like the dogs do.

Helps a little.
I manage to keep it down.
Barely.

It’s just bad beef stew.
I take a third bite.
Really bad beef stew.
I take a fourth bite.
Spoiled beef stew.
I take a fifth bite.

Lucky, Duck, and Dawg stare at me like,

Hey, that's ours!
Sorry, Luckies.
Trust me.
I don't wanna do this.

I close my eyes and take another bite,
thinking I can convince myself
it's beef stew if I can't see it.
But that makes my other senses notice even more,
like the overpowering smell,
worse than artificial banana.
So I pinch my nose and take another bite.
But then I notice the mushy yet gritty texture,
like oatmeal sprinkled with sand.
I keep eating until I finish, finally.

I've never been so thankful
to be done eating.

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ALL THAT FOR NOTHING

Right before I fall asleep,
I burp.
Burp up dog food.

I cover my mouth
and run to the bathroom.
I barely make it to the toilet before
I puke.

I put myself through all that for nothing.
And my stomach's empty again.

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ON THE TIP OF MY TONGUE

Uncle Frankie's back and
has heard the news about Nick's mom.
You did the right thing,
he tells me,
getting her some help.
Now do the right thing again
and tell me where your mom is.

Mom left me.
The words are right there on the tip of my tongue.
Ready to say to Uncle Frankie.

And I swallow them.

Mom's on a date.
She goes out a lot.

Thought you said she was always working.

You asked me to tell you where Mom is.
That's where she is right now.
On a date.
I feel sweat beading on my forehead
as I cross my arms over my chest.

Uncle Frankie squints as he stares at me,
like he's trying to decide if I'm lying.

Lucky senses the tension.
Lets out a low growl.
Bares a few teeth.

Look, Joe,
I just want to make sure you're okay.
That's all.
I'll help in any way I can.

I know.
But I'm fine.

Well, you know where to find me.
Uncle Frankie turns to head home.
And stops three times to look back at me.

Every time he does,
the words—*Mom left me*—are right there
on the tip of my tongue again.

And I swallow them.

I'm sick and tired of living like I have to live.
But I'm terrified of what might come next.

Hey, kid!
Got an idea.
Go knock on Miss Blye's door.
You two come to my place for dinner.
I caught tons of fish.
If I eat it all by myself,
I'll grow gills.
He laughs.

He has the worst jokes,
but I'm glad he has the best heart.

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MY FAVORITE DAY

It’s my favorite day of the year—Sunshine Fest,
an all-day celebration of the first day of summer.
Everything’s free.
Swimming at the public pool.
Concerts in the park.
Popcorn, hot dogs,
strawberry shortcake,
and ice-cold soda pop.
All day the Luckies and I trail behind
one family, then another,
far enough away they don’t notice,
but close enough it looks like we’re with a family.
When it’s dark, the fireworks begin.
It’s my favorite event of the day.
I lie on my back on the cool grass
and watch explosions of color
—orange, yellow, green, and blue.
The loud noises make the Luckies nervous,
so I hide them under my shirt
while listening to the onomatopoeia orchestra in the sky.
Boom!
Whoosh!
Hiss!
Kaboom!
Crackle!
Fizzle!

I pretend the entire show
is just for me.

Because
it’s my twelfth birthday.

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NOT QUITE RIGHT

Ever get an ache in your gut,
kinda like how you feel after you've had bad food?
When your insides say something's not quite right?
I feel that way right now.
Maybe I ate too much at Sunshine Fest.
My stomach's not used to food these days.
But I know it's not just me when
Lucky starts doing zoomies,
going in fast circles,
as if the living room's the Indy 500 racetrack.
Then she jumps onto the couch,
where she can see out the open window,
and starts barking.

You feel it, too, don't you?

I scoop up Duck and Dawg
and sit on my knees on the couch,
trying to see what Lucky's looking at.
Then I spot it.
A dark gray cloud spreads across the sky
as far as my eyes can see.

Whoa!

It looks like a black curtain of rain
is hanging from the clouds.

Lucky sniffs and sniffs.
That's petrichor—Mrs. Swan taught us about it.

It’s the smell of rain falling on dry ground.
The rain starts to pelt the windows and walls,
like an angry drummer’s pounding
on The Overripe Banana.
As I shut the windows,
I notice the sky’s turned green.
With her teeth,
Lucky grabs hold of my pants leg
and starts tugging.

Lucky, stop!
These are my Magic Closet jeans!

But she doesn’t stop.
She tugs harder.

Okay. Okay. Geez!

She runs down the hallway and I follow.
She scampers into my closet and
curls up in the corner.
Duck and Dawg jump out of my arms to join her.
I lie down on my tummy
so the dogs and I are eye to eye.

Lucky whines as the wind howls.

It’s loud.
I know.
Hang in there.
It’ll be over in a bit.

But it’s not over in a bit.
It doesn’t even let up.

It gets worse.

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HOWLING WINDS

Gusts rock The Overripe Banana.
The wind howls louder.
Lucky darts out of the closet.
Hackles raised, she bares her teeth and growls
at the flashes, booms, and howls.

It's gonna be okay.
We have each other.
Together, we can get through anything.

And then,
BOOM!
The tornado siren!

I think of Nick's words—
how we're not safe in a mobile home.

We gotta get to the shelter!

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TRAPPED

Let's get outta here!
I yell to the dogs
as I slip on my new sneakers,
grab my backpack,
and tuck Duck and Dawg inside—
good thing my backpack is big and my dogs are small!

I reach for Lucky's leash.
She uses her front paws to claw my hands,
knocking the leash to the floor.
Her nails leave trails of peeled-back skin.
Okay! Run beside me, then.

Next to the door
I see the accordion folder and
hear Grandmum's voice in my head.
If there's ever a fire or tornado,
grab that sucker and run!
So I fit that inside my backpack, too,
and slip it on in front of me
so I can keep an eye on the pups.

It's me against the wind when I try to open the door.

It won't budge.

Wind, one.
Joe, zero.
Sitgen!

I head to the back door but remember

the heat’s warped it shut.
With all that’s happened, I never got around
to asking Uncle Frankie to fix it.
The front door’s our only way out.

We’re trapped.

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A BIG PILE OF POO

I pace.
Lucky paces alongside me.
Think, Joe, think!
You've got to get to the shelter!
Lightning flashes outside the window.
The window!

It opens enough to let air in,
but not enough for me to climb out,
so I grab the baseball bat,
which is there in case anyone tried to break in,
but I use it to break out.

Smash!
Crash!
As I slam the bat against the glass,
shards fly everywhere.

Now the wind's a giant vacuum cleaner,
trying to suck me through the hole.
I scoop up Lucky,
hold her to my chest like a player with a football,
jump out the window,
and land on The Turd.
As my leg goes through a rusty spot in the glider,
The Turd collapses
and becomes a big pile of poo,
just like Hakeem predicted.

Sharp pain shoots up my leg.

I scream,
scare the Luckies.
Duck and Dawg wriggle out of the backpack
and take off running in the pouring rain.
I try to hold on to Lucky, but
she squirms free to follow her pups.

They’re trying to find a safe spot,
just like I always do.

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IT'S JUST BEGINNING

It’s four o’clock,
but you’d think it was midnight.
The only light is lightning forking across the sky.
Something hits me in the head.
It stings worse than a dodgeball.
Hail!
Pelting and welting me.

I can’t see the Luckies.
I can’t hear them.
I can’t hear anything but the rain.
The hail.
The wind.
The thunder.

As I stand up, my ankle throbs.
I feel sick to my stomach
from hunger,
from pain,
and cold from the rain.

And then,
it’s dead calm.

If there’s one thing
I’ve learned about storms,
it’s that they’re not over
when it’s dead calm.

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LIGHTNING STRIKES

More lightning flashes,
and I can see and hear the dogs.
Duck and Dawg whimper
as they dog-paddle in a puddle turned moat
around The Overripe Banana.
Lucky jumps into the moat to rescue her pups.

Now the dark storm cloud isn't a cloud anymore.
It's a mountain.

BOOM!

Lightning strikes a pine tree in the grove.
The tree explodes into a fireball.
Bark and needles go flying,
and a limb falls right onto the moat.
Right where the Luckies are!
The tops of Lucky's and Dawg's heads
bob up and down in the moat.

But not Duck's.

I limp-run
and step-splash
into the knee-deep puddle.
I bend down and feel around.
Nothing.
I move a bit and try again.
Nothing.
I move even more and try again.

I finally feel fur.

Duck!

She’s pinned under the limb.
Her snout’s barely above water.
I tug on the limb, but it’s too heavy.
She’s going to drown!
I remember one of Mrs. Swan’s STEM lessons.
It’s easier to roll something than lift it.
So I push the log.
It rolls just a bit.
I push harder.
It rolls some more, and finally,
it’s off Duck.

Forked lightning flashes fast
like a strobe light
while I dig my feet into the mud
to keep the limb from rolling back onto Duck.

Get her, Lucky!

Lucky uses her mouth
to latch on to the scruff of Duck’s neck
and drags her out of the water.

I breathe a sigh of relief just as
the wind picks back up and
debris starts flying.

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AND THEN

I look to the west and see
the storm cloud mountain rotating.
A funnel cloud.

I shove all three dogs into the backpack,
zip it partway up until only their heads stick out,
and limp-run toward the shelter.

And then,
BOOM!

The funnel cloud
touches down on the ground.

A tornado,
spinning right toward us.

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HERE IT COMES

You can’t outrun a tornado,
even without an injured ankle.

I look around.
Spot the dogs’ tie-out rope.
I unhook it from the stake
and wrap it around
the humongous oak tree and me.

Here
it
comes!

Hold on, Lucky, Duck, and Dawg!

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THE TORNADO

Debris circles us.
The tornado's deafening, rumbling roar,
part jet, part train,
vibrates inside my chest,
and my ears pop.

Before I have to close my eyes, I see
the tornado lift a roof off a house and
set it right back down, as if
the tornado just wanted a quick peek inside.

It tosses a mobile home into the air and
spins it like a top before
it comes crashing down, landing
on the Bowling Ball Pyramid.

It uproots a pine tree as if
it's just a toothpick.

The tornado sends a semi soaring through the sky, and
it lands standing straight up.

It's like I'm watching a horror movie and
there's a scene I can't bear to look at,
but the remote's broken.
There's no hitting Pause

or turning it off.

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HOLDING ON

I can’t take any more.
I’m afraid of what I’ll see next.
And debris flies right by my head.
I close my eyes tight.
And then,
just like that,
my mind takes me back to The Gingerbread House.
I’m hiding in my safe space,
the cubby under the steps,
as the tornado turns into Mom,
breaking everything in sight.
Pop!
Slam!
BOOM!

I lean closer to the tree
to shield my dogs like Grandmum used to shield me.
I’m right here! I’ve got you!
I say,
like Grandmum always said.

Then something smacks me in the side,
almost knocking the wind out of me.
I hold on to the tree but
feel my feet leave the ground
as the tornado tugs at me.
I hug the tree tighter,
feel sharp splinters slide underneath my fingernails
as I dig my fingers into the wet bark.

And then
the rope snaps.

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SUPERMAN

I am flying.

Below me I see the tornado
flip The Overripe Banana like it’s a pancake
and leave it as flat as one.

And I’m still soaring,
speeding across the sky and yet
feeling like everything’s in slow motion.

I’m Superman,
flying, flying, flying.

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SURVIVED THE STORM

Finally,
as if it's a crow spotting something shinier,
the tornado lets go.

I crash-land onto a heaping pile
of Tornado Casserole,
a mix of all kinds of soft, mushy things I don't recognize.

I try to get up, but
my legs are cooked spaghetti,
too weak to stand on.

I hear the sirens in the distance
and coming closer.

I open the backpack.
Lucky, Duck, and Dawg spill out,
paw at me,
crawl on top of me,
and lick me over and over.

I survived the tornado to almost die
when the dogs lick me to death.

I hug them one by one.

We made it.
We're safe.
We survived the storm.

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AFTER A STORM

My neighbors come out of the King of the Castle
tornado shelter like zombies,
looking around them as if
they don’t recognize the neighborhood.

Bits of insulation hang like leaves from trees.

Shingles cover sidewalks instead of roofs.

Beds, kitchen tables, and couches
clutter the road.

Vehicles and homes look like
crushed or stomped-on soda pop cans.

Everything’s coated in thick mud.

And yet,
a family photo still hangs straight
on the only remaining wall of a mobile home.

A tiny teddy bear sits untouched
on someone’s dresser.

A pot of purple petunias
isn’t even cracked or turned over
next to a house where only the foundation remains.

Storms,
like stormy people,
can be impossible to understand.

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HURT

Joe! Joe!
Uncle Frankie calls out
as he leaves the tornado shelter and
heads toward where The Overripe Banana used to be.

Over here! I answer.

Whoa! Oh, thank God you had a soft landing
on this mattress and all these piles of clothes!
Uncle Frankie falls to his knees in front of me.
But what the heck were you thinkin',
staying outside during a tornado?!
he shouts.
You could've been . . .
He starts crying.

I got hurt.
Couldn't run.
I didn't know what else to do.

Uncle Frankie takes a deep breath.
Lets it out.
I'm sorry, kid.
I shouldn't have yelled at you.
You're safe.
That's all that matters now.
But you're bleeding.
Where do you hurt?

All over, I say.

But Uncle Frankie doesn’t hear me
over the wail of the fire trucks pulling up.

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TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Survivor!
a paramedic calls out as she runs toward me.
All kinds of wounds here,
she says as she examines me.
I wince when she touches my ankle.
You're gonna need a doctor.
Let's get you to the hospital.

Uncle Frankie reaches for the Luckies.

No way!
I pull them close to me.
I'm not leaving them.
They've been abandoned.
I know what that's like.
I won't put them through that.
I promised they'd never be left again.

You're looking at it all wrong,
Uncle Frankie says.
You're hurt.
If you're not okay,
you can't take care of them, now, can ya?
And they might be hurt.
Ever thought of that?
Sometimes the best way to take care of others
is to take care of yourself first.
So give 'em to me, and
I'll get 'em to my friend the vet.
You know he's a doggone good one.

Uncle Frankie laughs at his own bad joke.

I hand him the dogs.
They wriggle and whimper the whole way
as he carries them to his pickup;
the hail dented it all over like a golf ball.

And then a paramedic picks me up
and puts me on a stretcher.

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MY STORY

A guy with a camera strapped around his neck
walks alongside the paramedics
carrying me on the stretcher.

I'm Monty, a photographer for the newspaper,
he says
as we weave around the obstacle course of puddles and debris
the tornado created.

He says he saw the whole thing
and got all kinds of photos
of me holding on to the dogs and the oak tree,
the tornado swirling around us,
and then a video of me flying like Superman.

Monty asks me question after question.
I do my best to answer them
until I'm lifted into the ambulance
and the door shuts,
ending the interview.

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BRACING

The whole way to the hospital,
I brace for what's about to happen.

When I arrive, the first question out
of Dr. Sisskind's mouth is
Where are your parents?

I knew this moment would come.
I knew the day Mom left.
I just couldn't admit it.

I don't even know who my dad is,
and Mom left twenty-nine days ago.

Dr. Sisskind takes the stethoscope out of her ears,
as if she didn't hear me right.
Twenty-nine?

I nod.
Will you call CPS, please?
I need help.

Someone at the hospital makes the call
as Dr. Sisskind checks my injuries.

I have welts from the hail,
and a sprained ankle from
jumping out the window.
Dr. Sisskind pulls glass slivers and splinters
out of my back, arms, and legs
before stitching up all my cuts from flying debris.

I’m pretty much one big bruise
with bandages everywhere,
and I’ll be on crutches for a while.

Oh, and I had to have a tetanus shot
because a nail went into my arm.
Dr. Sisskind pulled that out, too.
I asked her to put it in a container.
Hakeem and Nick are gonna think it’s so cool.
I can’t wait to show them.

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ALL KINDS OF LUCKY

Dr. Sisskind says my dogs aren't the only ones
who should be called Lucky.

I survived a tornado
wider than two football fields
with one hundred fifty mile per hour winds.
An F2.

They're keeping me in the hospital
a couple of nights to keep an eye on me.

Food is delivered from the cafeteria,
and a nurse starts an IV
for fluids, vitamins, and an antibiotic,
since they discovered my bad tooth was infected and
the infection spread into my jaw.
They need to stop it before it spreads more,
maybe reaches my brain or my heart.
Who knew all that could happen from a bad tooth?

Outside my room,
I hear workers use the words
malnutrition,
dehydration,
and *so sad*.

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BARELY RECOGNIZABLE

My hospital room's dark.
I'm supposed to be asleep.
I'm wide awake.
Thoughts twirl like a tornado in my brain.
Where will I live next?
Will I bounce from one place to the next like Nick did?
Are the Luckies okay?
Can I take them with me?
The thoughts don't stop.
Neither do the storms.
One after another rolls through town.
Every time the lightning flashes,
I see bits and pieces of my reflection in the window.

Flash!
Battered, bruised, and bandaged.

Flash!
Dark circles under my eyes.

Flash!
More bones than muscle.

They weighed me.
I'm down to sixty-eight pounds.

Grandmum wouldn't even recognize me.

I barely do.

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HUNGER THREE-FINGER RUNDOWN

A three-finger rundown of what I've learned about
what not eating does to your body.

One.
When you're hungry, you feel tired all the time
and can't concentrate.
(No wonder I kept dozing off in class!)

Two.
As hungry as you might be at first,
you can't eat as much as you used to
or you'll get sick.
The nurse, Liza, told me why.
When you eat, your stomach produces acid to digest food.
When you stop eating, your stomach still keeps
producing the acid, and it builds up.
So then when you begin eating again,
you can get nauseated from having too much acid.
It'll get better.
I just have to start by eating little bits
at a time, when all I want is
to gobble down everything in sight.

Three.
It takes longer to heal
and it's easier to get an infection because
going without food weakens your immune system.

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CLEAN START

How are you feeling?
Nurse Liza asks the next morning,
after I've had breakfast and
a lesson on how to use crutches.

I hurt all over.

I bet you do.
Feel like getting cleaned up?

I nod.

It's a little weird using crutches, so
I'm glad Liza helps support me as I walk.
I balance on one leg as I take a hot shower.
The first one in weeks.

I'm so sore.
My muscles feel all twisted,
like when you sit on a swing and spin
until the chains tangle.
The warm water unwinds them.
I'm so weak,
I lean on the sink as
I brush my teeth with toothpaste
for the first time in a long while.

Liza's right beside me, helping again
as I head back to bed.

I'm all clean and

ready for a clean start.

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A LOT OF IFS

It’s official.
I’m in the system.
I’m a foster kid.

When I meet my social worker, Bashirah,
I have so many questions.
I start with, *What now?*

Now we find you a good place to live,
Bashirah says.
I’m here to help with that, and so are others.
I know you might be scared,
thinking about going to a foster home
and living with strangers.
But I think you’ll like the Davisons.

The Davisons? Can I take the Luckies with me?

Uncle Frankie told me about your dogs—

I cut off Bashirah.
I’m not going anywhere without ’em.
I don’t care if I have to run away—

Now she cuts me off.
Uncle Frankie told us how important your dogs are to you, and
that’s why we chose the Davisons.
They love animals.
Have lots of them.
You can bring yours, too.

I breathe a sigh of relief.
Can I still hang out with Hakeem and Nick?

Bashirah smiles.
Yes. You're allowed to have friends.

And can I go to my same school?

Yep. We're working all that out.
First things first, though.
I hear you saved some documents?

I nod,
hand her my backpack off the bedside table.

Bashirah flips through them.
You have no idea how much this is going to help.
Uncle Frankie said you were smart.
Like a grown-up in a lot of ways.

My grandmum used to say that, too.

Well, it's great you're so responsible,
but maybe it's time you start being a kid.
I know it might take a while for you to trust me
and everyone who wants to help you,
but remember,
we're on your side.
I just need you to promise
to tell me if you need anything or
if things aren't going well,
okay?

I nod.

Good deal.
Any other questions?

What'll happen to Mom?

I'm not sure.
Since we don't know where she is,
there are a lot of ifs.
But for now,
you're safe and you have a home.
That's a great new beginning.

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THE SUITCASE

At lunchtime,
when my hospital room door opens,
I figure it's food service,
but it's Hakeem and his parents, Zuri and Tyrone.

You're supposed to be at chef camp, I say.

And you're not supposed to be in the hospital,
Hakeem says.

But for real,
you wanted to go to that camp as soon as you heard about it.

But for real,
if I cooked and ate one more bite of chicken,
I was gonna grow feathers and a beak.
It was—bawk, bawk, bawk, bawk, bawk—time to get outta there.

We laugh.

All joking aside, you okay? Hakeem asks.

I nod.
It was time to get some help.
I couldn't keep going like that.

It was past time,
Hakeem says.

How about your house?
Any damage?

A tree hit the corner of the roof, but
considering so many people lost everything,
we feel blessed,
Zuri says.

You lost The Overripe Banana, but
you didn't lose everything,
Hakeem says, handing me a new suitcase.
I remembered what you told me Nick said about CPS,
so no garbage bags for you.

Wow, thanks! I say. *This is great.*

Look inside, Hakeem says.

I find a small box filled with padding wrapped around
a teacup and saucer.

We found it in the rubble around your place
when we stopped there this morning.
Your grandma was always drinking tea.
Hakeem smiles.

Thanks for finding this, Hakeem.
Amazing it survived!

There's something else in the suitcase,
Hakeem tells me.

I pull out a plastic bag, and inside it
is Grandmum's quilt.
I bury my face in it.
It still has her scent.

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EVERYBODY KNOWS NOW

Okay, now we have to videochat with Nick,
Hakeem says.
'Cause he's legit blowin' up my phone with texts
wanting to know what's going on.

Quick!
Turn on the TV in your room!
You're on the world news!
Nick says as soon as the videochat begins.

The news clip shows the moment
the tie-out rope snaps and
I fly like Superman.

This is unbelievable,
the anchorman says.
Let's play it in slow-mo.
Take a look at it again.

It seems like I'm flying forever,
just like it did when it was happening.
And I'm remembering every detail like
it's happening all over again.
It makes my chest feel tight.

Duuuuude! Nick says. *You're famous now!*
Anyone asked for your autograph yet?

Hey now, Hakeem says. *Slow your roll.*
Don't want to give Joe a big head.

Absolutely incredible! the anchorman says before adding,
As if he hasn't been through enough,
authorities say now the boy's mother is missing.
A photo of Mom
—her mug shot from the arrest
that started the Mess with Mom—
pops up on the screen.
If you have any information about her whereabouts,
please call this number.

Sitgen!
Did they have to use THAT photo?
Did they have to tell the whole world she's missing?
I ask, turning off the TV.

I change the subject.
So how's your mom, Nick?

Better. Much better.

And your mobile home?

Still standing, but all the windows are broken,
Nick says.

So then when are you gettin' your butt back here?
I ask.
I'm ready to beat you two in a game of Twenty-one.

You're on crutches! Hakeem says.

I could beat both of you while hopping on one leg,
with one hand tied behind my back
and one eye closed, I say.
Don't forget, I'm Superman!

We trash-talk and catch up.
With so much changing,
it feels good knowing
some things never change.

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SLUSHY MANOR

Almost there,
I say every few minutes to the dogs
when they whine to get out of the carrier,
even though I have no idea where we are,
where we're going,
or how long it'll take to get there.
But surely we should be there soon
since we left town miles ago
and are out in the country.
Then Bashirah turns down a long driveway
lined by so many trees,
it feels like we've entered a forest.
It takes a while before we can even see the house.
And then,
BOOM!
There it is.

Two stories and an attic?
I ask.

And a basement,
Bashirah says.

Good thing, I say.
Shelter from storms.

It's slushy blue.
I drink it in.

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A LITTLE OVERWHELMING

A man and a woman sit on a swing
hanging from the porch
that wraps around the house.
Two kids sitting on the steps
see Bashirah's car and start running toward us.
So does a goat with long, floppy ears like a dog.
By the time Bashirah parks,
we're surrounded by chickens, too.
The kids shoo them away.
Move it, Drumstick!
Get goin', Nugget!
Back off, Princess Lay-a!

Never mind the chickens.
Help Bashirah with Joe's things,
the man calls out.

There are so many people and pets.
It's a little overwhelming.

Bashirah grabs the dog carrier,
the boy grabs my suitcase,
the girl grabs my backpack,
I grab my crutches,
and fear grips my stomach
and shoves it up into my throat.

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PHOENIX AND OLIVIA

I'm Phoenix,
the boy says.
I'm nine.

The goat nudges me, makes loud noises.

That's Headcheese,
Phoenix says.
He kinda runs the place.
Hear him bleating?
He likes you already.
And he's pretty picky about people.

I'm Olivia,
the girl says,
holding a doll by one arm
so it smacks her legs while she walks.
I'm four and two-fourths.
We saw you on TV!

Oh yeah?
Four and two-fourths, huh?
You like numbers?

I do,
Olivia says.
I can't wait till kindergarten starts.
I get to tell everyone my new brother's famous!

Olivia keeps talking, but all I hear is
brother.

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THE DAVISONS

Welcome, the woman says
as I climb the steps to the porch.
I'm Iris.

And I'm Mike, the guy says,
helping me onto the wicker rocker.
Take a load off.

After I sit down,
Bashirah hands me the dog carrier.
Be right back.
There's something else in the trunk,
a surprise I think you'll like.

Close your eyes! Olivia says.

Since it's a surprise,
why don't we all close our eyes?
Mike says. *Not that you'd get all excited*
and accidentally say something.

I hear the trunk close,
Bashirah walking on gravel,
then the sidewalk,
and up the wooden porch steps.

I don't need to see.
My nose knows what it is from the scent.
And I'm right.
When I open my eyes,
there's a box with a terra-cotta pot

filled with Grandmum’s pink rose of Sharon bush.

Uncle Frankie threatened to chain himself to the bulldozer
if they didn’t let him save it for you
before they cleared away the debris,
Bashirah says.
The rose of Sharon’s seen better days.

We know a thing or two about helping something grow,
Mike says. *It’ll be fine in no time with*
a little extra attention and lots of love.

Well, I’ll get going, Bashirah says.
Let you all get to know each other.
You have my number, Joe.
And I’ll be dropping by to check in, okay?

I nod.

She waves as she drives away.
I watch as her car gets smaller and smaller
until it vanishes.

Now it’s just me,
the dogs,
and the Davisons.

I’ve been dreading this moment kinda forever,
worried it would be all awkward,
uncomfortable,
maybe even downright miserable.

But it’s not.

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A MINUTE TO GET USED TO ALL THIS

The goat bleats and nudges me with his nose.

He's trying to say hi.
Headcheese never shuts up,
Olivia says.

Neither does she.
Phoenix grins,
playfully elbowing Olivia.

She sticks her tongue out at him
before peeking inside the dog carrier.
Puppies!
Let 'em out!
I wanna play with 'em!

Hold tight, little one, Mike says.
Give Joe and the dogs a minute
to get used to all this,
to get used to us.

I'm happy Mike says that, but
I think it's going to take a lot longer
than a minute.

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SURROUNDED BY FOOD

I look around.
A two-car garage.
Long metal barns.
Red wooden barns.
Sheds.

What are those shiny steel buildings?
I ask, pointing to the ones by the barns.

The ones with pointy roofs are grain bins,
Mike explains. *They're full of dried corn and soybeans.*
The two concrete ones with round roofs are silos.
They're full of animal feed.

We have all kinds of animals, Phoenix says.
Boars, barrows, sows, gilts, and pigs.
Heifers, cows, bulls, and calves.
Hens and roosters . . .

He gets the idea, Iris says.
If you take a whiff, you'll smell them all.
She laughs as she stands up.
Be right back.

Once you feel up to it, we'll get out the Gator,
Mike says.

I gulp. *You have gators, too?*

The kids giggle.
Mike tries not to.

Well, we do have a pond,
Mike says, *but we fill it with fish,*
and with all the rain from the tornado and storms,
parts of the farm are more like a swamp,
but I meant the all-terrain vehicle.
It's kinda like a golf cart.
It's called a Gator.
We use it to get around the place.
The homestead's forty acres,
and we farm over three hundred.

I can barely believe all that I'm hearing.
This is the best news ever.
I'm surrounded by *hundreds* of acres
of food.

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LEARN FROM EACH OTHER

Mike jumps up to hold the door open for Iris,
who comes out carrying
a tray full of cookies and cups of milk.
Heard you had lunch at the hospital,
but I thought you might want a snack.
Baked several kinds.
Wasn't sure what you liked,
she says.

My mouth waters as I stare at them.

Go on, now. Eat up.
Don't be bashful.
Iris sets the tray down on a little table next to me.

I choose chocolate chip.
It's still warm.
I take a small bite,
trying to eat slowly like the nurse said,
but I can't help it,
I gobble it down.
I love biscuits!

The kids giggle.
Those aren't biscuits,
Phoenix says, chewing on a mouthful.

They're cookies, silly, Olivia says.

My grandmum was from England.
Over there, they call cookies "biscuits."

My stomach starts to ache a little.

Cool! Then these are the best biscuits,
Olivia says.

We sure learn a lot from each other,
Mike says as he grabs three cookies
and a cup of milk.
Try the peanut butter biscuits, Joe.
They're my favorite.
Iris wins all kinds of ribbons
at the county fair for her baking.
He sits next to her on the swing
and drapes an arm around her.

Lucky, Duck, and Dawg
smell the cookies and carry on so much,
I have to open the carrier.
I give the peanut butter cookie to the dogs,
trying to keep them close
'cause I'm scared they'll take off.
Get lost.
But Lucky stays at my feet, and
the puppies whine for me to hold them.

Good idea.
We're in a new place.
It's best we stick together,
I whisper in their ears.

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THE FIFTH CHAIR

I doodle
me with five shadows,
Lucky, Duck, Dawg, Phoenix, and Olivia,
as I tour Slushy Manor.

I doodle
Mike's office
and a lopsided, handmade ceramic coffee cup on the desk
with the words *#1 Dad*.

I doodle
a laundry room with a washer and dryer
and add the words *Fancy, schmancy!*

I doodle
the room next to the kitchen
—an entire room—
full of food and a second fridge.
They call it the pantry.
I call it heaven.

I doodle
the dining room table with five chairs.

Five.

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TAKEN CARE OF

The roosters cock-a-doodle-doo,
the cows moo,
the goats maa,
the sheep baa,
the chickens bawk,
and the dogs bark.

I take the dogs out,
then follow the smell of food to the kitchen,
where I feed and water the Luckies.

Morning!
Sleep well?
Mike asks as he and Iris make breakfast.

I nod as I stare at the table covered in food.
Big bowl of scrambled eggs.
Platter of bacon.
Basket of toast.
Pancakes piled high on a plate.

Milk, orange juice, or both?
Iris asks me.

Both, please, and thank you.

Mike scoops eggs onto his plate
and passes the bowl to his right.
He does that with all the food,
then the jam, butter dish, and syrup.

I make a mental note.
The right way to pass food is to the right.

I eat a lot and a little too fast.

Olivia watches me.
You're gonna have a bad tummy ache.

I know how you feel, Phoenix says.
I was like you when I got here.
But there's always plenty.
You'll learn.
Just takes a while.
To be honest, I still sneak food and hide it in my room.

And that's okay,
Mike says, patting Phoenix's shoulder.

When I take a sip of OJ,
the cold hits my back molar.
I wince and rub my jaw.

Bashirah said you had an infected tooth.
I called the dentist yesterday.
She worked you in.
Appointment's all set.
We'll get you all taken care of.
Head out right after breakfast,
Iris says.

Taken care of.
I'm all taken care of.

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BEFORE THEY GET SO BAD

I figure the dentist will just fix my bad molar.
But she cleans my teeth,
takes X-rays,
and examines each tooth.

The dentist gives me a shot
that stings a little,
and fills the cavity.
My mouth's numb,
and she says it will be for a while,
so I talk funny,
but it's worth it.
For the first time in a long time,
my tooth doesn't hurt.
The gum just aches a little
from being infected and swollen.

I'm mostly used to dealing with what's broken
after things go bad.
I guess I need to learn how to deal with things
before they get so bad.

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MY ROOM

My window
is right above Grandmum's rose of Sharon bush
Mike and Iris transplanted.

On the nightstand
is the picture of Grandmum and me
leaning on each other.

On the dresser
is the teacup and saucer
Hakeem rescued from the rubble after the tornado.

On the wall above my bed
is a framed newspaper clipping
of me flying like Superman
that Nick mailed to me from Colorado.
He'll come home soon.

In the closet
is the suitcase Hakeem bought me.
It's finally unpacked,
after weeks of me living out of it,
afraid maybe the Davisons wouldn't want me.

Under Grandmum's quilt,
Lucky, Duck, Dawg, and me,
none of us with ribs showing anymore,
snuggle and sleep.

And Lucky snores.

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REBUILDING

The court has me talking to a therapist.
Her name's Amy.
I told the therapist there's so much to sort through,
it feels like rummaging through the rubble after a tornado,
figuring out what's broken but fixable,
realizing some things are long gone
—there's no getting them back—
letting go of how things used to be,
and knowing you need to rebuild
but having no clue how to start.

It doesn't matter where you start
as long as you start, Amy says.

My anger surprises me, the more I talk.
I can feel my face flush red.
My fingers curl into fists.
My voice grows louder with each word
as I share more of my story.
Never knowing Dad.
The Mess with Mom.
Grandmum dying.
Mom leaving.
Being hungry.
All. The. Time!
It seems like some people
have to deal with all the worst sitgen in life
while others don't.
It's not fair!

You have every right to be angry,
Amy says.
You've been through a lot.

Will it ever get better?

Amy nods.
It does.
A storm can do a lot of damage
in a short amount of time,
yet it takes a while to rebuild.
Healing takes time, too.
But you have people who will be with you
every step of the way,
including me,
and we'll figure it out
together.

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MY BOY

Mike says to come outside.
He has a surprise.
Now that my ankle's better,
he's spray-painted the outline of a full-size basketball court
onto the asphalt drive leading up to one of the big red barns.

He fastened a basketball backboard onto the barn door.
The rim has a net.
With a basketball in hand, Mike stands underneath it.

I hear you play, he says.
Tinging thud.
Tinging thud.
Tinging thud.

I do okay, I say.

How 'bout a game of Twenty-one?

Let's do it, I say.

Mike tosses me the ball.
Iris, Phoenix, and Olivia cheer on both of us.
I smoke Mike.
I mean suh-moke him!

"I do okay," he says,
Mike teases me in a mocking tone
as he uses the hem of his T-shirt
to wipe all the sweat off his face.
We gotta get you on a team, Joe.

Pronto!

Really?
I can try out this fall?

Absolutely!
Can't let all those skills go to waste!
You, my boy, are gonna be a legend!

My boy.
I use the hem of my T-shirt to wipe my face,
pretending it's sweat.

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LITTLE FREE PANTRIES

Everyone’s done so much for me.
Grandmum.
Hakeem.
Nick.
Uncle Frankie.
Mrs. Swan.
Bashirah.
Amy.
The Davisons.
I’m grateful for them all.

I keep thinking about what Uncle Frankie said,
about giving when you can.
I’ve lost a lot,
but I still have more now
than I’ve ever had.
I want to give back.

I want to make a Little Free Pantry.
I doodle my design for it.
Then I take the drawing to Mike.

That’s a great idea!
he says. *I’m in!*

I call Uncle Frankie and ask if
I can have some lumber and small windows
in exchange for fresh corn and eggs.

Uncle Frankie laughs.

You've learned to barter!

Mike and I meet him at Frank-Mart
to gather the supplies.
Uncle Frankie offers us some paint, too.

Mike and I work for a week in his workshop,
building two Little Free Pantries.
He's teaching me carpentry and I love it!
It's all about math: algebra, geometry, trigonometry.
We make each one about the size of a small closet.
People can fill it with canned or packaged goods
for anyone who's hungry.

And on the door of each pantry,
we paint the words
In memory of Grandmum.

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DO WHAT YOU CAN

Mike tells his farming buddies what we're doing,
and in no time we have all kinds of donations
of food *and* toiletries to fill the pantries.

Uncle Frankie helps Mike and me
secure one by the rebuilt Bowling Ball Pyramid,
where the whole town will see it,
and one outside the school,
where so many kids need it.

It feels like I'm planting tiny seeds of hope.

I can't help or feed everyone,
but I can help some.
Maybe if everybody does what they can,
no one will ever be hungry again.

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THE VIEW FROM HERE

The county fair.
There's nothing like it.
Animals and exhibits.
Games and prizes.
Rides galore.
Bright lights and music.
And food, food, food.

Hakeem, Nick, and I eat cotton candy
as we ride the Ferris wheel.
I paid, for a change,
thanks to my allowance.

From this view,
I can see everything.

You guys are gonna love Slushy Manor,
I say. *You gotta visit soon.*
I decide I'll let Albert Eggstein,
Count Cluckula,
and Tyrannosaurus Pecks,
the cock-a-doodle-dooing roosters,
be a surprise for when they come.
Mwahahahaha.

It's just us up here.
No one can hear us,
Hakeem says.
They found your moms yet?

No.

Think they will?
Nick asks.

Maybe.
But even if they do, she won't want me.
She's never wanted me.

I'm sorry, bruh,
Hakeem says.

Yeah. That's sitgen. Pure sitgen,
Nick says.

It is what it is, I say.
It's taken me a while to begin to accept it, but
I'm getting there.

At least you hit the jackpot with your foster family,
Nick says. *And no lice!*

How's it going at Oak-MacDonald-Had-a-Farm, anyway?
Get it?
Joe Oak?
Oak-MacDonald-Had-a-Farm?
Hakeem laughs.

You've been waitin' all night to use that one, haven't you?

I won't front.
Yes. Yes, I have.

Then Hakeem gets all serious.
Are you okay, like for real?

What he said, Nick says.

I pull off a chunk of cotton candy
and let it stay in my mouth for a bit,
like I do with the words before I say them.

I'd still rather have Grandmum
than all the food and stuff
I have because of the Davisons.
But I think I'm gonna be okay.

How do you know? Hakeem asks.

At Slushy Manor,
I haven't looked for a single safe spot.
Because all the spots are safe.

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EVEN SUPERHEROES NEED HELP

Everybody talking about my Superman feat
has made me think a lot more about superheroes.
And I've realized something.

Even superheroes need help.

Superman's one of the most powerful heroes of all time.
And yet
he teamed up with Wonder Woman.
Aquaman.
Green Lantern.
Because they had powers Superman didn't.
And because some villains are so bad
—and some things that happen are so horrible—
Superman needed them.

Trying to carry the weight of every *And then*, BOOM!
all by yourself makes you crumple to your knees like
Superman, left helpless by Kryptonite.
It's too much.

Even the strongest person
needs help from others.

I figure that's the only way you get through life's
And thens
and
BOOMS!

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READERS AND TEACHERS:

Check my website, AuthorLisaFipps.com, for a variety of resources related to topics addressed in *And Then, Boom!*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'm living my lifelong dream of being a full-time author. During my journey, I have had the honor of working with and getting to know some of the best people on the planet, who've become a part of my story and my stories. I want to thank them and tell you a bit about them.

First, I thank God for giving me the talent of writing and blessing me by opening doors that I never dreamed about or imagined so my voice and so many children's voices can be heard.

I thank my editor, Nancy Paulsen. She sees my vision for each book and asks all the right questions and makes all the right suggestions until every word is razor sharp. But she's not just an editing legend in publishing. She's also an amazing human and a pure delight to work with. Full stop.

I thank my agent, Liza Fleissig. She gets me as a writer and a person. I honored her in this book by naming a character after her, a character who comes alongside Joe and supports him. That's Liza, coming alongside and supporting me.

I thank Mrs. Swan, my fifth-grade teacher. There are only two people I've ever enjoyed reading aloud to me: my mom and Mrs. Swan. She had a magical way of making each character come to life. In the classroom, she gave me everything I needed to express myself creatively through words and art. And she listened to me—truly listened.

I thank Elizabeth Blye. Because of some past experiences we have in common, as soon as we met, we instantly understood each other at a deep level. We laugh together. We cry together. And I'm grateful to have found her and to call her friend.

Then there's Timmy M. He was a student at a school that I visited virtually. He emailed me after my presentation and told me he loved

Starfish. He also said he had to write a personal narrative and asked me to read it and offer advice to make it better. It was a *Dear Mr. Henshaw* moment. I cherished it. I responded. Later, he wrote back to say his essay had won an award. He added a PS that it'd be okay with him if I named a character in a book after him someday. When I had the idea for the "Ant-Man" poem, I knew what name would be on the cake, because Timmy's emails and personal narrative told me he's kind and giving. I know he'd be the kind of person who'd be happy to share with anyone in need, with someone like Joe.

A big thank-you to Dr. Jaclyn Sisskind, a pediatrician and assistant professor of pediatrics in New York. She championed *Starfish* from the very beginning and uses it to help doctors understand how poorly so many health care professionals treat fat people so those doctors can be better and do better. She reviewed the medical information in *And Then, Boom!* for accuracy.

Mot's Ice Cream Shop is named after my aunt Martha, nicknamed Mot. She lived with me for a few years right after my dad died and while her soldier husband was out of the country. She was the most giving person I've ever met. One time I was visiting her in Lexington, Kentucky. Her sunroom was filled with boxes. She'd just received the new cabinets for her kitchen. She was so excited, sharing her plans for renovating her home. Then she heard that a family about an hour away had just lost everything in a house fire. She told them she had kitchen cabinets they could have. Mot had saved her money for a while to buy those cabinets. I asked, "Are you sure you want to do that?" She said, "If I give those away, I'll still have my old cabinets, but right now they have nothing." They headed to Mot's house right away. By the time they arrived, she'd gathered towels, washcloths, pillows, sheets, dishes, and silverware to give them, along with some small appliances and a TV. She even gave them chicken she'd just fried to have for dinner and gas money to cover the drive to and from her house to pick it all up. They cried and couldn't thank her enough. I thanked Mot, too, for teaching me about sacrificial giving.

Grandmum in this book is a character based on my paternal grandmother: Eleanor Elizabeth Davison Brown Fipps. She was from Newcastle upon Tyne, England. She was the only person in my life who never said one word about my weight, body, or what I ate. For each holiday, she'd go to Roselyn's Bakery, popular in Indiana years ago, and select specially decorated cookies or cupcakes for her grandkids—a real treat for me, you know, if you read *Starfish*. Like clockwork, Grandmum had tea and biscuits three times a day. She had a cookie jar filled with Fig Newtons and shortbread at her house and at her cottage on the lake, where I spent so many weekends and summers swimming. She had seven jewelry boxes. Every time I visited, she'd dump the contents of each onto her bed, and we'd put jewelry on each other as she talked about England. I never saw her without jewelry—even on a simple Saturday at the lake. She owned a necklace, brooch, bracelet, watch, earrings, and rings for each outfit. She had silver cat's-eye glasses coated in rhinestones and fake-fur coats. She wore gloves and a hat with each dress. She had a knack for picking out the best gifts. She made her own bows and wrapped those presents with precision and perfection. I still remember the savory smell of shepherd's pie and sweet scent of mincemeat tarts wafting from her kitchen. For each holiday, she decorated the dining room table until it was worthy of a magazine photo shoot. She made everything she touched special—and she made me feel special. She accepted me and loved me just as I was. Everybody deserves just-as-I-am love. For a variety of reasons, home wasn't a safe space, but Grandmum created a safe space for me with her Captain America hugs. The scary things going on around me were still going on around me, but wrapped in her arms, I felt safe and had hope that somehow, some way, things could be better one day. I lost her, suddenly and unexpectedly, when I was in elementary school. I still mourn her. ∞

Joe's therapist, Amy, is named after my therapist, Amy Liptak, Counselor, MA, LMHC, NCC. She literally saved my life, continues to help me heal from all the *and then, BOOMS!* I dealt with as a child, and gives me the tools to have the life of my dreams. Thank you from all the Lisas!

I was blown away by Swedish illustrator Alva Skog capturing how Joe, and kids like him, are brought to their knees from the crushing weight of every *and then*, *BOOM!* and yet still find the strength to not give up, to survive, and to hope.

Designer Kelley Brady, thank you for weaving Skog's illustration into the cover in a stunning way with spot-on color and font choices. Chef's kiss.

A team of eagle-eyed copyeditors find and fix almost every content and grammar error I make, and I am so grateful for each of them: Laurel Robinson, Cindy Howle, Bethany Bryan, and Ariela Rudy Zaltzman. Thank you, and I appreciate you!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Fipps is also the author of *Starfish*, a Printz Honor winner. She is a graduate of Ball State University, an award-winning former journalist, and a former director of marketing for a public library (where she won the Sara Laughlin marketing award). She lives in Kokomo, Indiana.

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