

A Taste of Life

Book Tasting



Welcome!

to Penguin's Book Tasting!

We're Penguin Young Readers, and we'll be your server this evening!

Today we have a special look at five middle grade novels that your young readers may find appetizing. Please see our menu to give you a sense of what to expect, and be sure to fill out the Book Tasting form when you're done tasting each book!

If the mood strikes, we'd love to hear from you. Share your thoughts on social using the **#PenguinBookTasting** hashtag.

Bon appétit!

Penguin Young Readers



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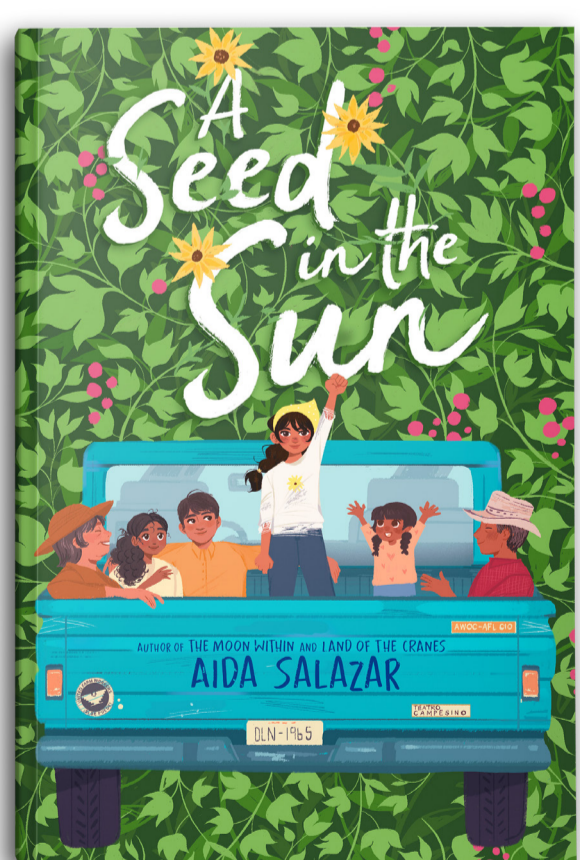
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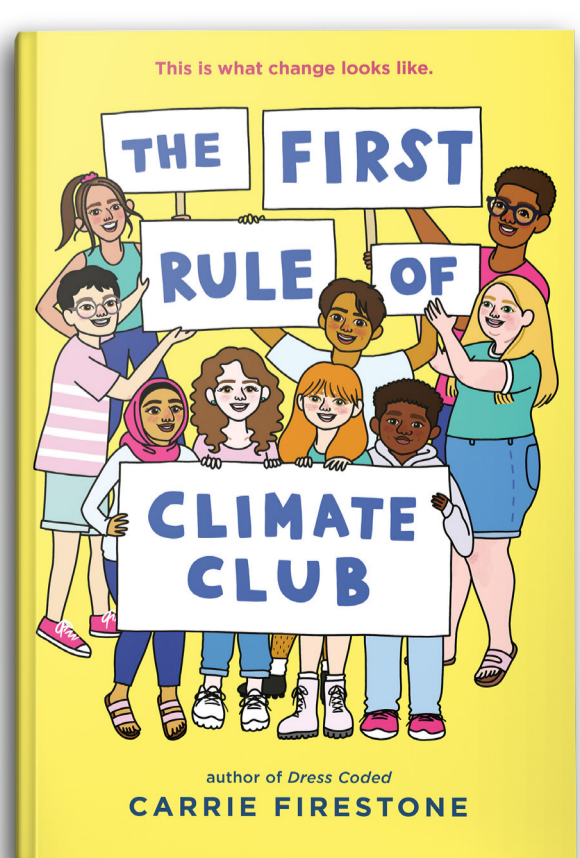
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MINNI LIVES IN THE POOREST PART OF MUMBAI, where access to water is limited to a few hours a day and the communal taps have long lines. Lately, though, even that access is threatened by severe water shortages and thieves who are stealing this precious commodity—an act that Minni accidentally witnesses one night. Meanwhile, in the high-rise building where she just started to work, she discovers that water streams out of every faucet *and* there's even a rooftop swimming pool. What Minni also discovers there is one of the water mafia bosses. Now she must decide whether to expose him and risk her job and maybe her life. How did something as simple as access to water get so complicated?

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Sanjay and I sit on the top of the hill and stare out at the huge, never-ending Arabian Sea. The salty breeze brings a little relief from the heat.

“It feels like the world is made of water from up here,” I say. “That there’s enough of it for everyone.”

But I know there isn’t.

In the distance, the flyover bridge soars into the sky and snakes across the bay. Its lights twinkle and outshine the stars in the night sky.

“The sea link bridge looks like an *M*,” I say.

“It does,” my brother says. “*M* for Mumbai?”

“*M* for me—Minni,” I say. “And for Monsoon. I hope this year we have a good one.” Lately the monsoon season comes later and later, which means less and less water.

Although water surrounds my island city, most of the people I know are always struggling to get enough. We don’t have running water in our house. We just have a tap outside

that we share with our neighbors. Ma has to wake up at the crack of dawn to fill our buckets because the authorities only supply water for two hours every morning and for an hour in the evening when the shortages aren't too bad. The rest of the day, the tap is dry. Every home has a big barrel outside the house, to store collected water for the day.

“Remember when Ma and the other women draped our leaky old tap with a marigold garland as if it was a god they could charm with flowers?” Sanjay says.

I do remember, and we laugh, although it's sad to think it was probably a frustrating day when the water trickled rather than flowed.

I look out at the ocean. Part of our view is blocked by billboards with glamorous Bollywood movie stars—billboards that are larger than our house.

The houses in our neighborhood are small and crammed on top of each other, but they do face the sea. Rich people who live in skyscrapers pay millions for the same ocean view.

Last year, a charity helped paint our homes and fix our leaking tin roofs. Some said it was because the people whizzing past in their air-conditioned cars on the flyover bridge didn't want to see decaying, moldy “slums.”

I chose yellow for our house. I helped to sand down the years of moss and mold from our old tin and concrete walls. Baba, Ma, Sanjay, and I dipped our brushes in yellow, and the first coat of paint was like a ray of bright sunshine getting rid

of the darkness. My neighbors chose purple and blue, and red and orange. Our street looks like a rainbow.

“Sanjay,” I ask, “will we have to worry about water when we are grown up?”

For a long moment, he is silent.

So I answer myself. “No. No, we won’t.”

I point at the cluster of tall buildings shimmering in the distance where Ma works in the afternoons. I say, “One day, we’ll live in one of those tall shiny buildings, where water runs from taps.”

“Okay,” he says, and links his arm in mine, as if I’m predicting the future. “Like the boy who was born here and studied computers and now has an office in a building and employs sixty people.”

I nod.

“Can you imagine,” I say, “that on top of some of those high-rise buildings they have a swimming pool full of water? Enough for our whole neighborhood to bathe. How do you think they built a pool on top of a building? Wouldn’t you love to see it?”

Sanjay laughs. “You and your questions!”

“Well, they are awfully lucky to have so much water to spare . . .”

“Minni,” he says, “I wish there was a way to make all this seawater drinkable. Then there’d be enough for us all.”

“There is a way!” I say. “Our teacher told us it’s possible—

she said it's called desalination. But it's expensive, and you need a huge factory to strain the salt out."

"Look how smart you are," he says. "You will live in a fancy building!"

"You too," I say.

Sanjay is fifteen, and after he graduated from tenth grade last year, he got a job in a restaurant. He dreams of being a chef, but for now he does food prep. It's good he likes what he's doing, because we didn't have money for college anyway.

I dream for him too. Chef Sanjay.

I pretend to be a palmist and study both our hands.

"Could I be like Meena Aunty?" I ask.

"Why not? Knowing you, you can do anything you set your mind on doing," he says. "And plus you're even named after Ma's sister."

"Like her, I will finish school and get a good job," I wish aloud.

"Hmmm, Minni Meow, banker," he says, teasing me with my childhood nickname. "But I think I see you more as a scientist."

"That'd be cool—or maybe a builder," I say dreamily. "I bet those high-rise roofs don't leak like ours after the monsoon. Wouldn't it be great if ours didn't? And if they didn't get so hot?"

We head home as the sun starts to dip. There is a line for the water tap on the main street. Water pressure must be weak today. When it doesn't get through the web of make-

shift hoses, people must line up at the main source. The water line snakes around the block, and we hear the sounds of insults being hurled and see some men shoving one another. There are shrieks. Women scatter. Angry noises fill my ears.

Another fight's breaking out.

We don't wait to see what happens. Sanjay grabs my hand, and we turn around and away from the scene and find our way home through alleys and side streets. My heart thumps along with my running feet.

Our father has told us a million times over the years, *If you invite trouble, it will come. It will stay for chai and for dinner.*

We definitely don't want to invite trouble.

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Ma makes the most delicious daal in the world, and my father has eaten two bowls of it. “I might make the best tea and pakodas, but your ma is the greatest at everything else,” he says, and sighs in contentment.

Ma blushes whenever Baba praises her cooking.

Ma’s potatoes melt in your mouth too, and I’ve saved a few for the last bite of my meal. Sanjay’s right hand hovers over my plate, and I slap it away.

“Minni Meow won’t even give me a potato!” he says dramatically.

“Ma,” I complain, “tell him to stop calling me that—I’m not five anymore.”

But I can’t help giggling and give him the bite anyway. I’ve never been able to resist his goofy ways.

We’re seated on the floor in the center of our living space. Curtains separate this from our parents’ sleeping area, and

Sanjay and I sleep up in a small loft. Never-ending sounds of honking horns and smells of cooking food and the citronella that keeps away mosquitoes fill the air in our home.

“Something happened today in the water line, and there was another fight,” my father tells us. Baba runs a tea shop named Jai Ho, which means “victory.” It’s where everybody in our neighborhood hangs out, so he hears everything that goes on.

Sanjay and I exchange a look because we know a little too well what Baba is talking about.

We don’t mention it because our father also believes in the proverb illustrated by the three monkeys—one with his hands over his eyes, the second with them over his ears, and the third covering his mouth—symbolizing “See no evil, hear no evil, and say no evil.”

Ma kisses her Ganesh locket. “I hope no one got hurt.”

“The water pressure is too low already,” Baba says. “Someone said they might have to order a water tanker. That usually doesn’t happen till May.”

Ma looks worried. Buying water means money. Money that we don’t have.

Then she pulls a flyer from her bag. “This was on the bulletin board at the clinic.”

Baba’s sitting back in his worn-out wicker chair, but now he straightens up, alert. “Why were you at the clinic?”

“That’s not important,” she says.

“Yes, it is,” Sanjay and I say together.

“My stomach hurt,” Ma says. “So I went to see the new doctor, but the line was too long, so I couldn’t wait.”

I had noticed that Ma didn’t seem to have much of an appetite lately.

“It’s probably nothing. A little bug probably, like last year. Remember the doctor said we should *always* boil our water,” she says.

“We almost always do,” Sanjay says. “Are you feeling better?”

“I feel tired, but I’m okay. Now forget about me. I’m glad I went, because otherwise I might not have heard about the computer class,” says Ma.

What? Computer class!

My eyes are wide. The small room suddenly feels spacious. It’s as if the word *computer*, spoken aloud, has magically created windows in the walls where none existed.

Baba, who is usually a quiet listener, has so many questions. Who is running the class? Where will it be held and when? Who decides who’ll get in? What will they teach?

Then Sanjay asks the important question: “Ma, how much does it cost?”

The room shrinks down to size again. Money: It rules everything.

“I don’t know,” says Ma, “but before leaving for work tomorrow, I will go back and find out.”

Ma works hard. Every day, she cooks and cleans not only

for our family, but also for a family that lives in one of the expensive high-rise buildings not far from where we live.

“One of my friends said her son learned computers right after school and got a job in a big office.” Ma tousles Sanjay’s hair. “Maybe our Sanjay could get a job like that.”

“It will be Minni,” Sanjay says. “She’s the smart one. She’s always first in her class. Plus I’ve got a job already.”

“Perhaps you both will,” says Ma.

Sanjay is downcast whenever Ma dreams of him getting another job. She doesn’t believe in his chef dream like me. I wish she did.

“You’ll be a star chef on TV with your own show, Sanjay,” I say. “And I’ll be in the audience and clap the loudest. They’ll name dishes after you. Sanjay’s bhindi masala.”

Baba laughs affectionately at me. “Minni and her dreams,” he says.

Ma jumps up, a big smile on her face. “I almost forgot. I have a surprise. Pinky gave me a mango. An Alphonso mango.”

“Those are so expensive!” I say.

“Yes, they are,” says Ma. “And the season has barely started.”

Ma takes the mango out of her cloth bag and places it on a plate. It isn’t overripe. It doesn’t have any black or brown spots. It’s golden yellow, with streaks of red. Firm to the touch and perfectly ripe, shaped like a kidney. The mango gleams.

Three pairs of eyes turn toward Ma. We need to know more.

Ma giggles like a schoolgirl. Her smile lifts her cheekbones. “Pinky’s hair was all in tangles, and it hurt too much when her mother tried to comb it, so I offered to help.”

Pinky is the daughter of the family Ma works for, and she’s about my age.

I imagine Ma’s gentle hand combing through Pinky’s hair and braiding it like she does mine.

“And for that she gave you an Alphonso mango?” Sanjay says.

Mama laughs. “You didn’t hear how loud Pinky was yelling at her mom. Anita Ma’am said Pinky was giving her a headache.”

Ma cuts the juicy fruit into four portions. I notice Ma’s portion is smaller than the others, and Sanjay’s is just a bit bigger than mine.

“Ma,” Sanjay says, “you should comb Pinky’s hair every day through the mango season.”

“I would do it anytime,” Ma says. “Pinky is a sweet girl. And Anita Ma’am’s always been good to us, even paying Minni’s school fees this year.”

I stop mid-bite. “You never told me that,” I say.

“I didn’t? It was back in December when I needed to send some money to your grandmother and was worried about being able to pay your fees. She offered.”

I wrestle with this knowledge. What would we have done if Ma's boss hadn't offered? Would I have been sent to the free government-run school instead of my current school, which is run by an educational charity?

How could Ma not tell me something that important? It's troubling to think my future was in the hands of someone else and I didn't even know.

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After dinner I sit outside on our stoop. Moti, the neighborhood dog, who belongs to no one and everyone, comes up to me whimpering. Normally he hangs out at Naan Aunty's house, a couple doors down from us, where he gets handouts of her famous bread. We call her Naan Aunty because she makes the best naans—she bakes hundreds every day for the local shops, and for some fancy restaurants too.

Moti keeps whimpering, which is unusual, so I walk down the lane with him and see Naan Aunty's door is closed and the lights are turned off.

“Moti,” I say, “this *is* odd. I wonder where they went.”

The older men playing cards at the corner see me. “Naan Aunty's at the clinic with her husband,” one of them says. “He was hurt in a fight at the water line.”

Nooo!

I race back to tell my parents. Naan Aunty and Ma are

best friends. Uncle is such a meek man, I can't imagine him fighting.

My father leaps to his feet. "Let's go see if they need help."

Cars cannot enter our neighborhood because the streets are too narrow. So we don't worry about being run over as we walk toward the clinic. Instead we look out for bikes and take care to skirt around kids playing cricket, teens rapping, and older folks playing cards or carrom in the middle of the road.

We pass second-shift workers going to work and others returning home. I hear someone memorizing times tables and someone saying evening prayers. In this heat everyone's doors are open, making it easy to know each other's business.

Then I see Naan Aunty and her husband walking toward us. In my excitement, I practically knock over a game board placed on a stool, and everyone shouts, "Minni! Look where you're walking, girl."

"I'm sorry," I say, and I slow down a bit as I race toward Naan Aunty.

Uncle has a gauze bandage around his head, covering his forehead, and leans on Aunty as they take slow steps. They both look exhausted.

"A stone came flying at me," says Uncle. "Hit me right above my eye."

"We were lucky he ducked," says Naan Aunty. "He could have lost an eye."

My father steps forward. "Lean on me," he says to Uncle.

One of the men playing carrom comes and helps on the other side.

I hold Naan Aunty's arm as we walk home. I am so happy Uncle is okay. He didn't invite trouble, but it found him anyway. I guess you can be in the wrong place at the wrong time, so you have to be careful—and lucky.



THAT EVENING, I write in my notebook. Shanti, our friend and neighborhood storyteller, keeps a journal, and she encouraged me to do so as well. We both find it helps untangle our thoughts and calm our minds. I've also discovered I like writing poems, even though Sanjay teases me, calling me Minni Meow, poetess.

Tonight I write:

*The water reaches out to the horizon,
as far as my eyes can see.*

*Sometimes the sea gently rolls,
rocking the fishing boats.*

*Other days it whirls and rises up,
smashing against the rocks.*

They say water is life.

Does it know the trouble it causes?

The fights?

The lines?

The heartache?

Today, though, it's calm.

Beautiful, like yards and yards of a blue sari
woven with threads of silver.

But what will tomorrow bring?

On our way home from school, my best friend, Faiza, and I chatter like we always do, dodging stray dogs, sleeping cows, trash heaps, and street vendors without missing a step or a beat in our conversation.

“Minni,” she says, “yesterday, Masterji taught us the dance steps to the song from *Student of the Year*.”

“The movie?” I say.

Faiza nods. “I imagined that I was Alia the whole time.”

“Why not? You are just as talented as any Bollywood actress,” I say.

“You think so?” she asks.

“It’s the way you spin and twirl, and your rhythm,” I say. “If I tried that, I’d fall on my face.”

Faiza reaches for my hand. “You are my best friend. For life.”

Which is true. We’ve known each other forever. We’ve played hopscotch and fought over dolls. It has never mattered

that I'm Hindu and Faiza is Muslim. When Faiza's ammi makes kebabs for Eid, she always saves one for me. When Ma makes ladoos for Diwali, she saves one for Faiza.

When we are almost at the banyan tree, we hear Shanti blowing into her conch shell, so we race over and find her sitting under the tree's canopy. Faiza and I come here often, even when Shanti isn't telling stories. Sometimes the three of us just sit and talk about our world. Shanti's a teacher too and gives the best advice.

This afternoon, a lot of the neighborhood is here. Shanti begins. "Today I'll tell the story of a wedding and a most interesting dowry."

Everyone sighs. Who doesn't like a wedding?

We got to go to one last summer when our neighbor Reva got married. Faiza and I danced till our feet had blisters. They served the softest, sweetest jalebis at the feast, which burst into syrupy sweetness in my mouth. If I close my eyes, I can see the deep red sari that Reva wore, and the beautiful henna etched onto her hands.

The small crowd that has gathered is as excited as we are.

"Was there a song and dance party before the wedding?" asks Faiza. "It's not a wedding without a sangeet."

Yes! Yes! Everyone agrees.

"Shush," says Shanti. "This was a long-ago wedding and a different kind—a royal one. King John of Portugal's daughter, Catherine of Braganza, was to be married to Charles II of England. What do you think King John gave as a dowry?"

“A refrigerator?” I say.

“A car?” Faiza says.

“A house?” That’s Sanjay’s voice. He’s joined the crowd too. Shanti laughs her wonderful huge laugh.

“This was four hundred years ago—there were no fridges or cars back then, and Charles II probably had all the palaces he needed. So King John promised Bombay to the British as part of Catherine’s dowry.” Shanti pauses again like a good storyteller.

“Bombay? The city we live in? Who gives a city?” I ask.

“Kings do!” says Shanti.

“Was Bombay King John’s to give?” someone shouts out.

Shanti blows into her conch shell, and when the crowd quiets, she says, “Back then the city was seven disconnected islands, floating in one big swamp.”

“Swamp?” someone asks.

“Yes, this was all swamp back then,” Shanti answers. “So they gathered rocks, and they dumped them by the boatload into the sea.”

“Then what happened?” someone says.

“The rocks were bigger than men,” Shanti says. “And they built a wall to push back the sea. But the sea was having none of it. The sea crumbled the wall again and again.”

If I close my eyes, I can see that wall collapse, like homes and roofs do during a fierce monsoon.

When Shanti winds up her story, Faiza has a question. “Were the people who lived on the islands part of the

dowry?” she asks. “Were we like cattle, of no importance back then?”

“We aren’t exactly important now either,” says Sanjay. “Which is why we don’t get water. And get questioned before we enter fancy shops. As if we might steal.”

“You are bringing up an important point,” Shanti says, using her best teacher voice.



TO LIGHTEN THE mood as we walk home, Faiza breaks out some of the new dance steps she learned.

“Nice moves,” Sanjay says. “When you become a dancer in a Bollywood film, don’t forget that I taught you how to hold a cricket bat.”

“When you become a big-time chef, don’t forget that I taught you how to dance a little better than you used to, which isn’t saying much.” Faiza laughs.

Amit, Sanjay’s friend, comes running toward us, excited. “Sanjay, my uncle has that new car tonight. He said we could go for a ride.”

Amit’s uncle Ram is a chauffeur, and his employers travel a lot and are always needing to be dropped off or picked up at the airport.

Sanjay is excited. “I’m in—that moonroof is cool! And I bet the sound system is too.”

“It is, and there are TVs on the back of the seats too.” Amit sees my eyes light up, and he turns to me and raps:

“Ahh, Minni, the seats are made of butter-soft leather. Never sat on anything better. AC blasts out super icy ’cause this car’s the kind that’s pricey. Any day I can I’m gonna glide in my uncle’s borrowed ride.”

“That’s so cool, Amit. You can make a rhyme about *anything*,” Faiza says. “Can Minni and I come too?”

“I don’t know if I can twist Ram Uncle’s arm,” Amit says.

“Please, please, please? I’ll teach you some dance moves.” She tilts her head, and her eyes look like Moti’s when he wants a naan.

“Okay, okay, I’ll try. How can I say no?” Amit grins. “Meet us after dinner, and I’ll try to convince my uncle to let you come.”

“You’ll thank me when you become a rap star,” Faiza yells as we leave. “It’s good to have some moves.”

“She’s right,” I add. “Faiza will help you dance like Shah Rukh Khan—then you can be the next king of Bollywood. You won’t regret it.”

“King Amit! Okay, I’m down with it,” Amit shouts back as he disappears into the night.

"It's a brand-new Mercedes," Ram Uncle is saying with pride. Then he sees me and Faiza. "Why are they here?" he asks Amit. "I told you one friend. You think I can give rides to all the kids in the neighborhood?"

"Sorry, Uncle," Amit says. "It's just that these girls work so hard, and I thought maybe you could give them a treat . . ." He gets in the front seat.

Amit's uncle doesn't look convinced, and I step back, ready to turn around and go home, but Faiza grabs my arm and whispers, "Not so soon."

"Uncle," she says in her sweetest voice, "I've never been in a Mercedes. Does it have cold air? Are the seats made of leather?"

Silence. One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . . six . . .

Amit's uncle sighs. "Okay, okay, get in, but don't touch anything."

Sanjay, Faiza, and I scramble into the back seat before

Uncle can change his mind. Then he turns the key, and we feel the throb of the powerful engine. He rolls the windows up and presses a button. A blast of cold air hits us and gives us shivers.

We are quiet for a bit, looking out at Mumbai at night. Then the roof of the car starts to open with a whooshing sound, and we can see the sky. Uncle sees our amazed faces. “Go on,” he says. “Stand up, push your head out through the roof, and look at the world.”

He doesn’t need to tell us twice. We kick off our flip-flops, stand on the seat, and poke our heads out. Sanjay raises his hands high and yells, “Mumbai! I’m Sanjay.”

The night air is still hot and sticky, so the wind feels good. I raise my hands too, and in that moment it feels like I could conquer the world. Too soon, we hear Uncle’s voice. “Enough! Come in.”

The roof closes. Our laughter fills the car, and then Uncle turns on the radio and we sing along to the newest Bollywood song.

The car slows down, and Uncle says he needs to make a stop, pointing to a building. He says he’ll be back in ten minutes. “Stay in the car.”

Once he leaves, Sanjay scrambles into the front seat with Amit. The radio’s off, but we continue to sing the song. Sanjay is so loud, his voice drowns out ours.

“Hey,” Amit says, “what’s going on out there?”

We all peer through the car windows and across the iron fence, where we see the Western railway tracks. Behind the tracks there's a huge water tanker truck. The kind the community orders when the water shortages get really bad and nothing runs from our taps.

"Why is a truck back there? Nobody lives there," says Faiza. Amit opens the driver's door. "I'm going to check it out."

"Wait!" I say. "Your uncle said to stay in the car."

But Amit doesn't seem to care. "I'm just going as far as the fence—it's in the shadows, so no one can see us. It will be okay."

I can't believe Amit is disobeying his uncle, but Sanjay always said he was a daredevil. What I didn't expect is Sanjay getting out of the car too. "Sanjay, don't," I say, but he doesn't listen.

"Just for a minute," he says.

Faiza sees how upset I am and repeats what Amit said. "It'll be okay. Don't worry."

But I can't help it. I hear Baba's voice in my head about inviting trouble. This feels wrong.

For a few minutes Amit and Sanjay stand by the fence, and then Amit begins climbing over. Sanjay follows. How could he? Doesn't Sanjay remember *anything* Baba has taught us?

I feel trapped in the car and need to get air, so I open the door and step out. *Be careful*, I want to yell to the boys, but I don't. Something tells me I should not draw attention to

them. Once over the fence, they crouch and cross the tracks in the shadows and hide behind some bushes.

Faiza is standing with me. “Why did they cross the tracks?” Now Faiza’s voice is nervous too.

“What if Uncle comes back and they are stuck on the other side while the train’s passing?” I whisper to Faiza.

Now that my eyes have adjusted to the dark, I see that a hose attached to the tanker truck is draining water from the pipeline that runs near the tracks.

Faiza whispers, “Minni, why are they taking the water?”

It’s a hot March night, but I shiver. In the distance we hear a train whistle.

We hear the voice of an angry man. “Pay attention, you knucklehead. I’m not paying you to chat with your friends. Hurry up.”

Then I hear Sanjay sneeze—and the man shouts, “Hey, who’s out there? Who are you? You from one of those newspapers or the police? Or just little rats?”

The angry man gets closer, aiming his flashlight near the bushes where Sanjay and Amit are still hiding. In the glare of the light, I can see the man has a scar on his cheek.

We watch as he grabs Sanjay. But Amit comes from behind and kicks the man hard on his leg. The man yelps in pain, and when he lets go of Sanjay, the boys race away.

“Ravi,” the man shouts to one of his workers, “catch the rascals.”

By now we can hear the click-clacking of train wheels. It's coming fast and looks like a racing dragon with its flaring headlights. Will it block Sanjay and Amit's pathway back to us?

I instinctively shut my eyes. I want to see no evil, but it is happening right in front of us.

I squeeze my hands together and pray.

Thirst

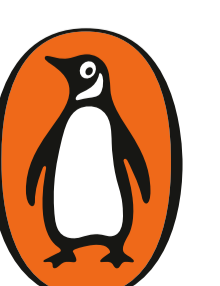
by Varsha Bajaj



What did you think after reading a few pages?

What did you think of the cover?

Would you share this book with your students? Why or why not?





CELIA C. PÉREZ

award-winning author of *The First Rule of Punk*

TUMBLE

Wrestling with the past is never easy.

AVAILABLE IN
SPANISH
PAPERBACK
OCTOBER 2022

TWELVE-YEAR-OLD ADELA “ADDIE” RAMÍREZ HAS A BIG DECISION TO MAKE when her stepfather proposes adoption. Addie loves Alex, the only father figure she’s ever known, but with a new half brother due in a few months and a big school theater performance on her mind, everything suddenly feels like it’s moving too fast. She has a million questions, and the first is about the young man in the photo she found hidden away in her mother’s things.

Addie’s sleuthing takes her to a New Mexico ranch, and her world expands to include the legendary Bravos: Rosie and Pancho, her paternal grandparents and former professional wrestlers; Eva and Maggie, her older identical twin cousins who love to spar in and out of the ring; Uncle Mateo, whose lucha couture and advice are unmatched; and Manny, her biological father, who’s in the midst of a career comeback. As luchadores, the Bravos’s legacy is strong. But being part of a family is so much harder—it’s about showing up, taking off your mask, and working through challenges together.

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★ CHAPTER 1 ★

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I bit into a french fry, one of those tiny crunchy pieces that always make their way to the bottom of the pile, just as Apollo slammed a folding chair across The Eagle's back. The small TV on the shelf behind the counter was muted, and while I couldn't hear the whack of metal against muscle, it startled me anyway. I flinched and jabbed myself with a shard of potato so hard that my eyes watered.

"Uyyyyy," Alex said. He peered up at the TV from the flat-top grill and let out a slow whistle. "El Águila is getting his butt kicked again, eh, Adelita?"

"Yeah," I said. I ran my tongue over the fresh cut on the roof of my mouth. "*Again.*"

"Maybe he'll win this one, right?" Alex winked at me and cracked an egg into a bowl.

I watched as he attacked the egg with a fork. Alex said the key to making a good scrambled egg was to keep the heat low and to beat the egg before pouring it into the pan. In general, I found the idea of eating eggs gross, but even I had to admit that Alex made a fine scrambled egg. Still, when he caught my eye and motioned to the runny glob he was cooking, I shook my head.

Bacon grease popped and snapped on the grill as Apollo smacked the palm of his hand across The Eagle's chest. A sizzle and the scrape of a spatula accompanied The Eagle bouncing off the ropes, zipping across the ring, and attempting a failed clothesline. My insides jumped as if the mat, which vibrated with each impact, were sitting in the middle of my stomach.

On-screen, The Eagle showed no signs of winning this one. He struggled to get up, only to be met with the toe of Apollo's golden boot. He didn't stand a chance.

"Why does The Eagle always have to lose?" I asked.

"Because he's a jobber," Alex said, not looking up from the grill.

"What's a *jobber*?"

"A jobber puts over the other wrestler," Alex explained as The Eagle tried to untangle himself from the ropes.

"Plain English, please."

"It means his job is to lose and make the other guy look good," Alex said. "He's not a heel nor a face. Not a bad guy and not a good guy. Just—"

"—a jobber," I finished.

Unlike Apollo, who was definitely the good guy. He's the one you're supposed to want to win. But Apollo had enough people cheering for him already, so I found myself going for the masked luchador. Mom says someone has to root for the underdog. That someone is me.

While The Eagle slowly got up and rolled back into the ring, Apollo climbed to the top turnbuckle and waited like *he* was the bird of prey. I knew what was coming next. Wrestling might look like chaos, just a couple of people brawling, but it's a ballet. And anyone who was a fan would know that the final curtain was about to drop.

Sure enough, when The Eagle stood and turned, Apollo pushed off like his boots had springs, flying through the air in his signature closing move, the Sunset.

"And that's liiiiights OUT!" Alex yelled, just like the ringside announcer did every time Apollo finished off an opponent. He slashed his spatula through the air for dramatic effect.

"Hey," I said with a frown. "Whose side are you on anyway?"

"Yours, Adelita." He pointed at me with the spatula. "Always."

I rolled my eyes. Alex was my stepfather. He was supposed to say mushy stuff like that.

Alex lifted his Albuquerque Isotopes baseball cap, revealing the shiny bald spot that had expanded over the years, the area of hair on his head shrinking like a polar glacier. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand before pulling the cap on.

"Order up!" he yelled, smashing the bell on the counter.

On the TV screen, The Eagle lay motionless in the ring. *Get up get up get up.* I thought the words so hard, I was giving myself a headache.

The referee dropped down next to the wrestlers and started the count.

“One!” He slapped his hand against the mat.

Get up.

“Two!” The crowd was counting along with him now.

Get. Up.

“Three!”

The bell rang, signaling the end of the match. Apollo stood and pumped his fists in victory while the audience cheered and whistled in appreciation.

In the grainy image, I could see The Eagle’s belly rise and fall with each heavy breath, like a ball of unbaked dough. He rolled over on his side, and the camera zoomed in on him. His spotted gold-and-brown mask was slightly twisted. Something about the way the mouth and eye holes didn’t line up with his face made me feel sad for him. He looked like a helpless little kid who needed an adult to fix his costume. I wanted to reach through the TV and straighten him out.

I slumped on my stool, feeling like I’d lost too. I looked away from the screen and pushed my fries around on the plate, making a french fry face on what was left of my pancake syrup.

The door to the kitchen swung open, and Mom came

out of the back, pulling her curly dark hair up into a messy ponytail. Her T-shirt rose a bit, exposing her stomach, the tight skin like a big brown balloon ready to pop.

“Mom,” I whispered.

“What?” she whispered back.

I widened my eyes in the direction of her midsection.

“Oh.” She laughed and pulled down on her shirt. “I thought I felt a draft.”

“Not funny,” I said.

“Ay ay ay.” Mom groaned and made a face at the TV, where The Pounding Fathers rode in on horseback while “The Star-Spangled Banner” played. “They could at least be historically accurate,” she said. “The Founding Fathers came before ‘The Star-Spangled Banner.’”

“It’s not supposed to be historically accurate,” I said. “They’re *zombies*.”

“And the zombies come *after* the apocalypse,” Alex added. “Everyone knows that.”

Mom and I looked at each other and shook our heads.

“Does this have to be on all the time?” Mom asked, reaching across the counter and switching off the TV.

“It does,” Alex said. “This is wrasslin’ country, lady.”

And it was. Roswell had its aliens. Albuquerque had its hot-air balloons. We had wrestling. Lots of people came into Esperanza, one town over, for Cactus Wrestling League matches at the arena. The diner stayed open later on the weekends to feed hungry fans after the matches.

The menu was even separated into two sections: The Undercard—breakfast and lunch—and The Main Event, which was dinner, of course.

Alex had grown up a wrestling fan. The wall across from the counter was decorated with lucha libre masks he picked up at events in Esperanza and on trips to Mexico. His old wrestling action figures sat on the shelves behind the counter, flexing their muscles between big jars of homemade salsa and pickled peppers and plastic tubs of spices. His most prized possession was a signed and framed black-and-white photo of André the Giant that was propped up on a shelf above the flat top. Next to it was a color photo of Alex as a little boy standing next to the seven-foot-four wrestler, who had visited the diner after an event in Esperanza. On the other side of the signed photo was an André the Giant action figure. The whole thing was a shrine to his favorite wrestler.

It was hard not to be a wrestling fan in the Dos Pueblos area—the neighboring towns of Thorne, where we live, and Esperanza, where Cactus Wrestling happens. I wasn't a fanatic like Alex, but I liked the characters and the costumes and the stories. Wrestling was a lot like mythology, and I loved mythology.

“It's too early for body slams,” Mom said. Mom was definitely *not* a fan. “And it's giving me indigestion.”

“You sure it isn't you-know-who?” I pointed to her pregnant belly.

“That’s possible,” Mom said. She looked at my plate. “Speaking of indigestion, the last time I checked, french fries were not a breakfast food.”

“Says who?” I asked.

“I tried to give her some hope,” Marlene called over from the table she was wiping off. She laughed at her own joke.

There were a lot of things about the Four Sisters Diner that hadn’t changed since Alex’s grandfather opened it in 1963. Marlene Rosado was one of them. Marlene was the closest thing I had to a grandma. She was tiny and ancient, with a cap of tight black curls that made her look like she wore a blackberry on her head. Despite her age, she moved around quicker than most of the younger servers. She always said that when she stopped moving, she’d know it was time for her to go. “And by go, I mean *GO*,” she’d say, and look down toward the ground in case people weren’t sure what she meant.

Marlene liked to holler out orders in diner lingo. She said things like “moo and wrap” for beef enchiladas and “don’t cry over it” for no onions. She said diner lingo was a dying language.

“These young people today speak in mojitos,” she said one day.

I told her the word was *emojis*.

“Mojitos, emojis, whatever it is, there’s no poetry in it,” Marlene complained.

Anyway, *hope* is diner lingo for oatmeal, which is funny because oatmeal seems about as hopeless a breakfast as I can imagine.

“Oatmeal is cringe,” I said. Even more than eggs. “Besides, french fries are practically hash browns. *And* I had a piece of French toast too.”

“Ooh la la.” Alex twisted an imaginary mustache. “French fries *and* French toast. Oui, oui, mademoiselle.”

“You are reaching dangerous levels of corniness,” Mom said, but she laughed anyway as she bent down to pull something from behind the counter.

“Look what I remembered.” She placed a white poster board in front of me. “What are you doing with this again?”

“I told you already,” I said. “Like, three times.”

“Fourth time?” Mom gave me an apologetic look. “Please?”

“It’s for the mythology assignment,” Alex said, walking to our end of the counter while Carlos took over the flat top.

“See? *He* remembers.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” Alex pouted.

I didn’t say anything, but what it meant was that step-fathers don’t have to remember.

“I knew that.” Mom tapped her forehead.

Between getting ready for the baby and helping with the diner and her real job at the museum, Mom said she didn’t have room for one more thing in her brain. That

one more thing was me, I guess. She said it was good that I was old enough to take care of a lot on my own. I thought it was pretty convenient how I was old enough to handle the stuff she couldn't remember or make time for but not old enough for everything else.

"Your mom has a lot on her plate right now," Alex said. He looked at his watch. "Don't leave. Let me grab your lunches."

Mom came out from behind the counter and put an arm around my shoulder. She gave me a little squeeze. Mom wasn't a hugger, and awkward hugs from Mom usually meant one thing.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

Mom wasn't very good at showing her feelings. I think expressing herself made her uncomfortable, like I feel when I see people kiss in movies.

"I'm fine," I said, shimmying out from under her arm.

Alex came out of the kitchen with two brown paper bags that he set on the counter in front of us.

"Sardine-and-horseradish sandwiches." He let out a maniacal laugh and went back to the flat top.

Mom and I both scrunched up our faces.

"You're always fine," Mom said with a sigh. "I wish you would tell me how you're feeling. You're just like me."

"Why do you always do that?" I asked, opening my lunch bag and sniffing. Just in case.

“Do what?”

“Just like me,” I mimicked and sighed. “Who else would I be like?”

The question wedged itself between us like when we have to squeeze three people into one seat on the school bus for field trips.

“We haven’t really talked about the adoption,” Mom said. She looked at me and then over at Alex.

We have these old ornaments that we put up on the diner’s Christmas tree every year. The glass is so thin that they shatter easily, and then they’re impossible to clean up—little flecks everywhere. Sometimes, talking with Mom felt like putting up those decorations. Each word, each feeling, was a delicate glass ornament that could break if it wasn’t handled carefully. The adoption was one glass ornament. My biological father was another. Sometimes it was just easier to not talk.

“I’m fine,” I said again. I took a sip of milk. The raw spot on the roof of my mouth hurt. “And I have to go to school. Unless . . .”

“No unless,” Mom said. “We’ll talk later.” But she seemed relieved to not have to continue her attempt at a conversation. “Don’t forget this.”

She nudged the poster board toward me, then tugged on her shirt again before collecting my plate. When she turned away to scrape the french fry face into the trash, I grabbed my lunch bag and the poster board and hopped

off the stool so fast, I almost tripped on my own feet.

I pushed open the diner door with my sneaker, ignoring Alex's *Enjoy your sardines and horseradish*, ignoring Mom's *Have a good day*, ignoring Marlene's wave at the window. I threw the brown bag in my bike basket and pedaled away.

★ CHAPTER 2 ★

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There's a poster of the pantheon from *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths* hanging in Mrs. Murry's classroom. It looks like an outtake from a family photo session. Hera is smiling, and Zeus looks like the serious patriarch. They stare at the camera. They're ready to have their photo taken, but the rest of the family isn't. Aphrodite's head tilts down, her eyes closed. Poseidon looks to his left, like someone outside the frame called to him. Hermes appears to be up to no good. By the way Ares stares at him, he knows this too. Demeter fusses with baby Persephone on her lap. Hades couldn't even be bothered to show up. He's too much of a rebel for something like a family portrait.

I imagined the Greek gods and goddesses wearing matching funky Christmas sweaters and standing for a photo in front of the tumbleweed snowman on Route 13 just like Mom and I do every year. One year, we wore gray sweaters that had reindeer with bright red plastic noses that squeaked when you squeezed them. Another year, we wore chunky green sweaters with sparkly silver tinsel. One of my favorites was the sweater with the fireplace pattern and real stockings hanging off the front.

Mom hung each year's photo on the same wall in the living room. She used a ruler to make sure the photos were even and then had me stand back with her to check that nothing needed adjusting. We had a tumbleweed snowman photo on the wall for every Christmas. Or at least that's what I'd always assumed.

Until one day, a few years ago, when I was in the third grade. I was working on a math assignment where we had to count groups of things in our home. I counted the snowman photos, and then I counted the age I was in each one. That's when I realized that my first Christmas was missing from the wall.

"There was never a photo for that year," Mom said when I asked her about it.

The next time I asked, she said it must have gotten lost. That's when I learned that adults sometimes lie.

When I lied, it was usually because I was afraid of getting in trouble. Because I knew I'd done something I shouldn't have done. Like the time I ate half the lemon buttercream frosting Alex had made for Marlene's birthday cake. But what reason did Mom have for not telling the truth? I didn't know. What I *did* know was that the wall suddenly felt . . . incomplete. Just like the pantheon illustration without Hades. Just like I did. I also knew the truth usually had a way of coming out. Like it did when I threw up the lemon buttercream all over the diner floor.

Mrs. Murry started each class by reading from the big

mythology book. Even though we were in the seventh grade, no one complained about being read to. She let us spread out and get comfortable. It was the one time in the school day when it almost felt like we weren't in school, and we could just be. It was the one time when everyone paid attention—even Brandon Rivera.

Today Mrs. Murry read to us about Cronus swallowing his sons because he was afraid one of them would grow up to be more powerful than him. When she finished, she let us spend the rest of class brainstorming for our mythology projects.

Cy dragged her desk over so that it touched mine.

“What are you going to do?” she asked, plopping down in her seat.

“Your hair!” I glanced at Mrs. Murry, afraid I'd been too loud. I unrolled my poster board, but my eyes were back on Cy's new hairdo.

“Do you like it?” she said, posing. “I asked the lady who does my mom's hair to make me look like Cleopatra in that old movie.”

Cy's head was covered in tiny braids that hung to her shoulders and ended in gold beads that made little clicking sounds when she moved. Her bangs were straightened and cut bluntly across her forehead as if someone had trimmed along the edge of a bowl. Cy shook her head, and the beads grazed her brown cheeks.

“It looks very you.” I smiled at my best friend.

A lot of people found it hard to believe that Cyaandi Fernández and I were best friends, because we seemed like opposites. She was the kind of kid who would come to school wearing mismatched high-tops—one purple and one black—green tights, a shiny gold dress, and a totally new hairstyle without feeling awkward at all. Which was admirable because sometimes seventh grade was nothing but awkward.

I had never cut my hair shorter than the middle of my back. Today, I wore one of Mom’s button-down shirts over a T-shirt, rolled jeans, and checkered slip-on sneakers. Cy said I dressed like I wanted a cloak of invisibility, which was exactly the point. My style was *please don’t notice me* chic.

But Cy wasn’t just my best friend. She was more like a sister. We’d known each other since kindergarten, and while we were different in a lot of ways, at our core we were the same. We looked out for each other. That’s what made us best friends.

“So”—Cy nudged her head toward my poster board—“what’s the plan?”

“There is no plan yet.” I shrugged. “This isn’t due for a while anyway. Why is she having us work on it already?”

“I’m making oracle cards,” Cy said, holding up a stack of purple index cards. “I’m going to draw the gods and goddesses and characters from mythology on them. Maybe

I'll do readings. I'll be like the oracle at Delphi without the wacky gases."

"That's a good idea," I said, wishing I had a plan too.

"Brandon gets the Medusa card." Cy frowned at the boy who was shooting balls of paper into the garbage can, the spell from Mrs. Murry's read aloud broken.

"Can I ask you something?" I said, staring at my blank poster board. It was like an oversize oracle card that revealed nothing.

"Listening." Cy leaned over an unlined index card and began drawing.

"If you were an adult and you wanted to hide something from your kid, where would you hide it?"

"Interesting question," Cy said. I waited while she drew. She was quiet for so long that I thought she might've forgotten I asked her a question. Finally, she spoke. "It depends."

"On what?"

"Well, if it's a boy, I would definitely put whatever I was hiding in a place I knew he wouldn't look," she said.

"Obviously," I said. "But like where?"

"Like in a box of maxi pads," Cy said. She laughed but didn't look up from her drawing.

"Yeah," I said, thinking. "That's a good spot. But what if it's a girl?"

"If it's a girl," Cy said, "that's trickier."

"Why?"

“Because girls are way more curious and wouldn’t be scared off by something like maxi pads,” she said.

“I don’t know if that’s true,” I said.

Until recently, *I’d* never even been curious enough to seek out anything about my biological father.

She looked up at me. “Is this about the adoption?”

“Maybe,” I said.

“You’re searching for something.” Cy put down her pencil and eyed at me suspiciously. “What is it? I want to know.”

“I’m not sure . . .” I hesitated.

“Well, in that case, you’re never going to find it,” Cy said and turned back to her index cards, her braids sliding off her shoulders.

I stared at my blank poster board. What if Mom had been telling the truth? What if there never was a first photo? But then why would she lie and say it was lost? Deep down, I knew exactly what I was looking for.

“You’re right,” I said with certainty. “I am looking for something, and I think I know what it is. Wanna help?”

★ ★ ★

Mom and Alex had sprung the adoption surprise on my birthday. I should’ve known something was up, because they seemed distracted all day. Even during dinner at my favorite Korean BBQ restaurant, Mom didn’t talk about

fossils or say something weird, like how the baby was sitting on her bladder. And Alex wasn't workshopping new diner menu ideas. They seemed to be only half listening to anything I said.

After I'd opened gifts and we'd had the best homemade chocoflan, while I played around with the little powder-blue instant camera I'd gotten, Mom announced that Alex had one more gift.

"Adopt me?" I asked after Alex told me that he loved me and would be honored to be my dad and wanted to know what I thought about him adopting me. It seemed that our definitions of *gift* were not the same.

"I know it's probably confusing and a little strange, maybe," he said.

"A little," I agreed.

"Do you have any questions?" Mom asked. "We know it's a lot to think about."

"A lot," I repeated.

Questions exploded inside my head like balls in a bingo blower. Finally, one rose to the surface.

"Why now?" I asked. "I mean, we live together. And you're married to Mom, and you're already my stepdad."

"That's a great one to start with." Alex laughed nervously.

I looked over at Mom, who was chewing on a nail. Her other hand rested on her stomach. She looked back at me and smiled.

“Well, it’s kind of like why I married your mom,” Alex said. “Because I love you, of course. I feel like I am your dad, but I’m not *legally* your dad. And like marriage, adoption makes our relationship legally binding. You know what that means?”

“Like a contract?” I said.

“Yeah, like a contract.” Alex nodded. “It means that in the eyes of the law, we have a relationship that makes me responsible for you.”

“Aren’t you responsible for me anyway?” I said, confused. “Why does it have to be legal?”

“Well, yes, and it’d be nice if it was as simple as saying that because I love you and think of you as my daughter, it should be enough,” Alex said. He furrowed his brow. “And it is. In some ways. The emotional piece has been there for a long time and is always going to be there. I’m committed to you and your mom, with or without a contract. But other pieces—financial, medical, things like that—those get a little trickier without a legal document.”

“So without a piece of paper you wouldn’t be responsible for me?” I asked. Sometimes the world of adults made no sense.

“Of course I would,” Alex said quickly. “A piece of paper doesn’t change how I feel about you or my responsibility to you.”

“But?”

“Well, this would make everything legal, official,” Alex

said. “I can make decisions on your behalf while you’re a minor. And it’s just something I’ve felt like I wanted to do for a long time.”

Alex glanced at Mom. I tried to read the look between them, but Alex turned back to me quickly.

“Think about it, okay? It doesn’t have to be something you decide right away,” he said, taking my hand and giving it a squeeze. “Or at all. My feelings won’t be hurt.”

I hadn’t even considered the possibility of hurting Alex’s feelings. I liked to imagine that having hurt feelings was one of those things you outgrew, like a pair of shoes or playing with toys. The idea that you could be a full-grown adult and someone could still hurt your feelings was just too much.

I did think of Alex as my dad. And maybe that should have been enough for me to say yes right then. But I knew there was something missing, even if Mom and Alex didn’t acknowledge it: my father. My biological father.

Mom looked like an unassuming science nerd on the outside, but she was full of secrets. My father was one of them. Mom said there was no point in dwelling on the past. Which was ironic because her job at the museum was all about the past. Maybe my father was her past, something she was done with. But he wasn’t *my* past. He wasn’t anything. The past, my father, they didn’t matter to her, but they mattered to me.

At that moment, while Mom and Alex looked at me with hope, all I could think about was the missing Christmas photo. Was it a coincidence that there was no tumbleweed snowman photo for my first Christmas? I didn't know. But I was sure there had to be a connection between my father and the photo, and I intended to figure it out.

★ CHAPTER 3 ★

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“Where do we start?” Cy asked.

We biked to my house after school. Usually, Cy and I would eat a snack, do our homework, and watch our favorite telenovela, *Mundo raro*, before she had to go. But today we had other plans. With Mom at the museum and Alex still at the diner, we had at least an hour before anyone came home.

“And what exactly are we looking for anyway?” Cy looked around, hands on her hips and gold beads clicking, as if whatever we were looking for might be in view. “A birth certificate?”

“A birth certificate,” I repeated. I hadn’t even thought of that. And now, as we stood in the living room, I had cold feet. “Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.”

I grabbed the remote control and turned on the TV.

“What are you talking about?” Cy took the remote out of my hand and clicked off the television.

I sat down on the couch and pressed a pillow to my face.

“I don’t want Mom to get mad,” I said into the pillow. “And I’m probably wrong anyway. And . . .” I tossed the pillow.

“And what?” Cy said, sitting down next to me.

“I guess I’m a little scared,” I said. “I never really thought about finding my bio father. But now it feels like I have to.”

“You mean because of the adoption,” Cy said.

“Of course,” I said. “How do Mom and Alex think they can just throw this at me and not talk about him at all? What if I don’t ever find out the truth about him? What if I find him and he’s awful?”

“Well, you’re never going to know anything if you don’t at least try,” Cy said, standing up. “Come on. Let’s find . . .” She grabbed my hand and pulled me off the couch.

“We’re looking for photos,” I said. “A photo.”

“Does your mom keep any photo albums?” Cy asked. She walked over to the bookshelves.

“Yeah,” I said. “But that would be too obvious if she was hiding photos, don’t you think?”

“Maxi pad box?” Cy asked and raised her eyebrows.

I shrugged, and we headed to the bathroom Mom and Alex shared. I hardly ever went into Mom’s bedroom. Adult spaces seemed boring. When we stepped into the room, I felt like I was the disobedient Pandora. But unlike her, I wasn’t just being nosy. This was important.

“I feel weird poking around in my mom’s things,” I said.

“Want me to do it?” Cy asked, following me into the bathroom.

“Thanks.” I knelt in front of the vanity. “But I can do it.” I opened the bottom cabinet and peered in. Everything

was neatly organized, medicines and a first aid kit, bars of soap, a few extra rolls of toilet paper. I reached in and pulled out a small blue box.

“Tampons,” I said, shaking it. I opened the box, just in case, and found nothing but a few paper-wrapped tubes. “What now?”

“Closet? Under the bed? In the dresser?” Cy rattled off possible hiding locations. “I once watched this show where someone hid stuff inside a plastic bag in the toilet tank.”

We both looked at the toilet.

“I’ll check the closet,” I said, walking back into the bedroom.

I could hear the porcelain lid of the toilet tank rattle.

“Ouch,” Cy yelled. She came out of the bathroom holding her thumb. “That thing weighs a ton. Nothing but water in there.”

She tapped on the trunk at the foot of the bed.

“How about this thing?” The top was piled with clothes, a stack of magazines that threatened to topple over, and an empty coffee-stained mug.

“Sure,” I said.

While Cy checked the trunk, I looked in the closet, being careful to place everything back where I found it. Someone who used a ruler to line up picture frames would probably notice if things had been moved around.

I pushed hangers from one end of the rod to the other, checking the space at either end.

“Look at this tiny dress,” Cy cooed from where she knelt over the trunk. She held up a blue corduroy dress with yellow flowers. “Is this all your baby stuff in here?”

“I guess,” I said, shoving an empty suitcase back into a corner of the closet.

“Ha! Look at this,” Cy said. She held up a small red-and-black box of toddler-sized sneakers. There was a 50 percent off sticker on its side. “Can you believe you ever fit in shoes this small?” She looked at the box and then at my current size-eight feet.

“Let me see those,” I said. It was the same brand of shoes I still wore. Maybe I *did* need a wardrobe update.

Cy placed the box on the floor and pushed it toward me. I pulled open the lid.

Inside the box, I peeled away layers of brown tissue paper and found that instead of the checkered shoes with Velcro straps pictured on the label, there were photos underneath. I picked up the top one. It was of a younger Mom with Nana, her grandmother who had raised her. I knew that Nana came from a small town just across the border with Mexico, and that she raised Mom when her parents died. I had no memory of her—my bisabuela died when I was still a baby—but she was the only person from Mom’s past that Mom *did* talk about.

“Just a bunch of old baby stuff and *a lot* of Christmas sweaters,” Cy said, riffling through the contents of the trunk once more before closing the top. “Your mom could open her own Christmas sweater shop.”

She crawled over to me. I pulled the photos out of the box and spread them out on the floor.

“Is this what you were looking for?” Cy asked, excited. She knelt over the photographs, her braids dangling so that she looked like a chandelier.

“I’m not sure,” I said. “Maybe.”

Whoever had taken the photos was a terrible photographer. Some of them were off center or unfocused. Definitely not the stuff you’d put on social media for your friends to see. I knew they hadn’t been taken recently. I was born when Mom had just turned twenty, and I wasn’t in any of them, so she had to be younger than that. Alex wasn’t in any of them, either, and I didn’t recognize the places.

Mom didn’t have a lot of friends. To be honest, she really didn’t hang out with anyone who wasn’t Alex or the folks from the diner or the people at the museum. But these photos were filled with people who looked like friends. Maybe even family. Whoever they were, I could tell they were important to her, or at least had been. I wondered if my father was one of the faces that stared back at me.

It felt strange not knowing what Mom’s life was like before I was born. Even if she didn’t mention my father,

you'd think she would at least have a back-in-my-day story like all adults do. Mom had always guarded the information about her life before me. I imagined that maybe she was an undercover government spy, or a secret agent, or even someone in a witness protection program. But the old photos scattered in front of me seemed, well, normal.

I pulled a Polaroid from the stack. It looked like it had been taken through a filter of spun sugar or tulle, everything in the frame soft and dreamy. In it was a teenage Mom—the same Mom as in the other photos—with a boy about her age. She wore jeans, and he wore dark sweatpants. They both had on matching ugly shaggy green sweaters with ornaments embroidered all over the front. Behind them was a curtain of desert oranges and browns. And a tumbleweed snowman.

I almost missed something in the photo because it was so tiny. But there, peeking out from the crook of the boy's right elbow, was a little face. It was me, bundled up in my own ugly shaggy green sweater, one that blended in with the boy's.

I jumped to my feet.

“Where are you going?” Cy asked, scrambling up after me. “What'd you find?”

I hurried into the living room, my legs trembling like flan, to the wall where our annual tumbleweed snowman photos hung. In the space just to the left of the first frame,

I held the white plastic-like border of the photo against the wall with my thumb and forefinger. I had found it. It was our first tumbleweed snowman photo—the missing photo.

Cy looked from me to the wall. She moved in to get a closer look.

“Is that him?”

“I think so,” I said. “I’m pretty sure.”

“Wow.” Cy’s eyes widened. “He looks familiar, right?”

“It would be a little strange if he didn’t, don’t you think?” I said, pointing to my face.

“I guess. What are you going to do? Are you going to tell your mom?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I walked back to the bedroom, Cy following. We sat down next to the pile of photos. I looked through to see if I could find any others with the same boy.

“Why do you think she never talks about him?” Cy studied the photo.

“All she ever says about my father is that he was someone she’d once known and then she didn’t,” I said. “Who knows what goes on in my mom’s brain.”

“She’s a complicated lady with a mysterious past,” Cy said.

I rolled my eyes. “We need to put all of this away before Mom and Alex get home.”

We collected the photographs, and I stacked them

neatly into the shoebox and covered them with the tissue paper. The small container suddenly felt heavier than it looked as I placed it back where Cy had found it.

“Don’t forget this,” Cy said, holding out the tumbleweed snowman photo.

I took the little square and studied the three faces one more time, focusing on the teenage boy. He had an expression that I couldn’t make out. A half smile and something else. I opened the trunk and started to tuck the photo inside the box with the others. But then instead of putting it back, I closed the lid of the trunk and slid the photo into the pocket of my hoodie. If Mom could keep secrets, so could I.

★ CHAPTER 4 ★

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Mom is a fossil preparator, which is a kind of paleontologist. She works on fossils in a lab, carefully removing them from the rocks where they've lived for thousands of years. But she also goes on digs, which means she gets to be part of those moments when someone finds something important. She says it's like Christmas morning, except maybe ten times more exciting. I always found it hard to believe that anything could be more exciting than Christmas morning. But in my bedroom that night, I held the photograph and imagined that this was what it felt like.

I looked around the room, thinking of where I could hide the photo for safekeeping. A cork bulletin board hung on the wall over my desk. The surface was covered with keepsakes. There were photos and a tumbleweed snowman postcard Mom gave me and a ticket stub from the Atlantic Wrestling Federation's Fourth of July Destruction in the Desert that I'd gone to with Alex last summer. There were science fair ribbons and Mom and Alex's wedding announcement from a few years ago—a photo of us dressed as Fred, Wilma, and Pebbles Flintstone taken at the museum. But even with so much pinned to the board,

I knew there was a good chance Mom would notice the photograph.

I scanned the bookshelf lined with paperbacks and graphic novels and Alex's old childhood encyclopedia set and some of Mom's plastic dinosaurs and geodes. Hiding it inside a book might work. But I imagined accidentally giving it away and decided against that.

I recalled Cy's toilet tank hiding place and shuddered. And then I remembered being in Mom's room and thought of the perfect hiding spot.

I opened the closet door and pushed aside dresses and shirts and jackets like I was drawing apart curtains. It was only September, but this year's Christmas sweater already hung in the middle. Mom liked to buy our sweaters when all the Christmas stuff went on sale. She said if it was still on the rack after Christmas that meant that it was really ugly, which got bonus points from her.

She always bought a sweater for me, one for her, one for Alex, and one for Marlene. Sometimes she even bought extras. I thought she was just being weird when she'd come home with more sweaters than we needed, most of which, apparently, ended up in the trunk in her room. But Mom was a "just-in-caser" and a "you-never-knower."

"If you or Addie invite someone else to join us in the photo, they can wear their own sweater," Alex insisted. "You don't have to control everything."

But like with the framed tumbleweed snowman photos

on our wall, if Mom could control, she would. And that meant everyone wore the same sweater even if it was too big or too tight. Mom said she wasn't a control freak. She liked things "just so."

This year's sweater was red, with a cactus covered in LED lights. At the top, inside a hole in the cactus, was a star that lit up too. In a metallic-gold cursive font that looked like a lasso was the message MERRY SOUTHWEST CHRISTMAS, PARDNER! It wasn't the ugliest sweater Mom had ever found, but it was the brightest.

I flicked the tiny switch on the battery box, then grabbed a roll of tape from my desk. I tore off a small piece, pulled the photo out of my pocket, and secured it to the wall at the back of the closet.

I moved a few shoes and sat down just inside the doorway. The Christmas lights flashed on the sweater, red, blue, green, one by one, to the yellow star at the top, reflecting on the shiny surface of the photograph.

When I was younger, Mom would make up stories whenever I asked about my father. "I found you in a cholla," she would say. "Like a little wren." When she was being even sillier, she'd tell me I was an alien baby she picked up on a trip to Roswell. I used to hope that one was true.

But since the adoption came up, not knowing who my father was had become like an itch I couldn't scratch.

When we were learning about genetics, Ms. Gaudet told

us about a study done on mice. It found that their brains were more like their fathers' brains than their mothers'. In the same study, scientists discovered that more than half the genes of mice were copied from the father. The researchers thought this might be the case for people too. If that was true, it meant that I was more than 50 percent like some guy I didn't even know.

Which of my traits did I get from my biological father? Was he tall like me? Did he have big feet like I did? Were his arms hairy too? Was he picky about who he was friends with? Did he hate being late?

I had learned early on that bringing up this unnamed ghost was something that put Mom in a strange mood. I didn't like seeing her that way. She'd pretend everything was normal, but she'd get quiet and distracted and irritated if I mentioned him. Mom's silence taught me that I wasn't supposed to ask questions, at least not about him.

Still, I had questions. Why didn't he want to know me? Why was it so upsetting for Mom to talk about him?

Sometimes when I looked at myself in the mirror, I felt like there was a stranger looking back at me. I had a face that was half someone I had never met. These were things I couldn't say to Mom.

"Adelita," Alex's voice called from the other side of my bedroom door. A knock followed.

"What is it?" I said, scrambling to my feet. I switched off the sweater lights.

“Can I come in?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said. I closed the closet door and threw myself on my bed. I grabbed a library book from my bedside table and opened it to a random page just as Alex walked in carrying a tall glass.

“No homework?”

I shook my head.

“I need your tastebuds, then,” he said and wiggled his eyebrows conspiratorially.

“You can’t have them.” I slapped my hands over my mouth.

“Fine,” Alex said, holding out the glass. “Keep them but try this. Thinking of adding it to the menu.”

Alex took over the diner when his grandfather retired. He’d pretty much grown up there and knew everything there was to know about the place. Mom worked there, too, waiting tables while in college. That’s how she and Alex met. They were friends for a long time before they got married. Alex was a little older than Mom, but Mom said she liked that he was mature. I think she meant mature in age, because he acted like a kid sometimes. When Mom was in grad school, after Nana died, I spent a lot of time at the diner, since Mom had no one to leave me with. You could say I’d pretty much grown up there too.

“What is it?” I asked, sniffing.

“What does it taste like?”

I took a sip.

“There’s cinnamon,” I said, closing my eyes and savoring the familiar flavors.

“That’s right,” Alex confirmed.

“It tastes like Christmas,” I said, realizing what the shake reminded me of. “Like biscochitos. I can taste the anise.”

“Ding! Ding! Ding!” Alex said. “You got it. That’s why I come to you first. You’re a supertaster.”

“Not really,” I said. “A supertaster is someone with a lot of taste buds. They’re sensitive to flavors. We did an experiment in science class, and I’m just an average taster.”

“Okay, then,” Alex said, dropping into the furry beanbag chair that was propped against a corner. “You’re just super.”

I shook my head but smiled.

“I’m thinking of calling it the Posadas Shake,” he said.

“And maybe you can serve it with a cookie on the side too.”

“Good idea,” Alex said. “I’ll surprise your mom. You know how she loves Christmas.”

He folded his hands behind his head. He did that whenever he had something on his mind. I waited.

“I didn’t just come to have you taste the new shake,” he finally said.

“I didn’t think so.” I took another sip.

“I wanted to talk to you about the adoption.”

“What about it?”

“I just want you to know that you can ask me anything about the whole process, okay?” Alex offered. “We're in this together.”

“Anything?” I said, raising an eyebrow.

“Of course.”

If Mom wouldn't talk to me about my father, maybe Alex would.

“What do you know about my father?”

“Your father?” Alex asked. His eyes widened.

“You said I could ask you *anything*.”

“I did,” Alex confirmed. “But you know that's a topic that only your mom can address.”

“She never wants to talk about him,” I said. “You must know something. Tell me. Please? Is he even alive?”

I imagined that maybe he had been an astronaut who went up into space and never returned. Or maybe he had died saving children and puppies from a burning building. Maybe it was too hard and too sad for Mom to tell me these stories. The father in my imagination was always a hero who wasn't with me because he couldn't be, not because he didn't want to be. But now I panicked at the realization that he might not be alive. What if I never got to know him? What would that mean for me? I felt like I'd been dropped in the middle of an ocean with nothing under my feet but the darkness below.

Everyone around me seemed to have some idea of where they came from. Alex's family had been in Thorne for generations, long before it was Thorne. Like a lot of people in the area, he was a mix of Mexican and the Navajo who had lived on the land forever and the Spanish who colonized it. Cy called herself Blaxican because her mom was Black from Philadelphia and her dad was Mexican American from Albuquerque. I wanted to know, too—more about my mom and something, anything, about my father.

"I'm sorry, Addie," Alex said, shaking his head. "I wish I could."

"Does he know Mom wants you to adopt me?" I asked. I was hoping to trick Alex with a yes or a no that might give me some information.

"This wasn't your mom's idea," Alex said, avoiding the question. "I didn't mean to put either of you in an uncomfortable position."

"It's not fair," I said. "None of this is fair."

"Yeah, I suppose it isn't," Alex agreed and leaned back into the beanbag, staring up at the ceiling from under the bill of his baseball cap. "Your mom might be more willing to share now, so talk to her."

"Why now?" I asked.

"Well, with the adoption," he said, "she has to."

"She has to," I repeated. "What do you mean?"

“Just . . . just talk to her,” Alex said.

“Why can’t she talk to me?” I asked, anger bubbling inside me. “She’s the grown-up.”

“I think . . . I think this is hard for her too,” Alex said, running his hand along the beanbag’s surface. “Maybe she’s a little scared.”

“Grown-ups don’t get scared.” I frowned.

“You’d be surprised,” Alex said. “I’ll tell you one thing I’m scared of. Being stuck in this thing forever. I’ll trade you another milkshake for help getting out of this chair.”

He held up his arms, wiggling his fingers, and reached out to me. He looked so ridiculous that even though I was angry, I had to laugh.

After I helped Alex up and he left the room, I opened the closet door again and grabbed the photo from where I’d taped it. I didn’t believe that Mom would tell me anything. Not if she could help it. I was going to have to find information about the boy in the photo on my own.

Tumble

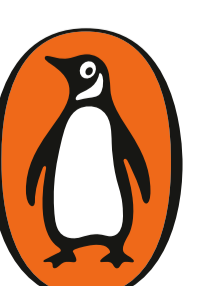
by Celia C. Pérez



What did you think after reading a few pages?

What did you think of the cover?

Would you share this book with your students? Why or why not?





ELEVEN-YEAR-OLD MACY WEAVER KNOWS RELATIONSHIPS ARE COMPLICATED. Fresh off her latest friendship breakup, she's spent most of her summer break on her own. So when Macy's mother decides to go back to college three states away, Macy jumps on the chance to move—anything for a fresh start. But Macy's new home isn't exactly what she expected. Her mother's never around and her dad's always working. Lonelier than ever, Macy sets her sights on finding a new best friend. When she meets Brynn, who's smart and kind and already seems to have her whole life figured out—down to her future as a high fashion model—Macy knows she's it. The only problem is that Brynn already has a BFF and, as everyone knows, you can only have one.

Resorting to old habits, Macy turns one small lie into a whole new life—full of fantastic fashion and haute couture—but it isn't long before everything really falls apart. Ultimately, Macy must determine how to make things right and be true to herself rather than chasing after the person she thinks she's supposed to be.

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1

BEST FRIENDSHIPS WERE TRICKY. One day you were in. The next, you were out. At least, that was the case with Mia. And Darby. And Payton. Macy Weaver avoided looking over at any of *those* flakes as her teacher wrapped up the last few seconds of fifth grade.

“Remember to read at least one novel this summer to keep those brains ticking,” Ms. Parker said, fanning herself as she wandered around the warm room.

Outside, the groundskeeper hummed along atop his ride-on lawn mower. Inside, Mia and Darby whispered to each other, while Payton snuck her phone out to text under her desk.

Macy didn't pay attention to any of that. Instead,

she focused on drawing a large rainbow on her wrist. It wasn't exactly neat, and some of the colors ran together a little bit—but it was there.

As Ms. Parker finished speaking, Macy's eyes flicked over to the ticking long hand moving its way around the wall clock. Waiting. Waiting. Waiting, until—yes!—dismissal.

Jumping out of her seat, Macy smoothed down her six crooked braids, then she tapped the rainbow on her wrist for good luck and darted from the room.

All around her, hope bloomed. The days were warmer. Brighter. Girls huddled near water fountains, and boys shot fake hoops in the air. Lockers slammed extra loud. The last day of school had *finally* arrived.

It wasn't easy dodging through fifth graders in short-sleeved tees, high-top fades, and dingy house-key necklaces, but Macy made it work. She hopped over forgotten textbooks and ducked under falling banners that warned the students to always practice good citizenship—until finally—

“Matching tats!” Macy waved her arm in the face of her newest best friend, Josie Miller. Forget Mia. Forget Darby. And definitely *forget* Payton. Josie was the kind of girl who stuck around.

There were times, these last few weeks, that Macy didn't think she'd make it to this moment. But class

time was over, her final textbook was turned in, and Macy Weaver and Josie Miller were still best friends. This was a huge win. For the first time in all the years Macy had been in school, she'd finally get to spend her entire summer break with a best friend, doing whatever it was best friends did.

Josie swept her dark brown waist-length micro mini braids out of her face, revealing her glossy rainbow temporary wrist tattoo. "Oh—cool," she said, giving Macy a half smile.

Macy breathed a sigh of relief as they walked toward the big double doors. Josie hadn't said anything about Macy's matching hairstyle that morning. But good thing she'd thought of something else to impress her.

When Josie arrived toward the end of fifth grade, Macy, fresh off her latest bestie breakup, figured Josie would never see her as friendship material. She'd already blown through three best friends in one school year—which might sound like a disaster but for Macy was an improvement. Last school year, and all the years before that, Macy had no best friends at all.

Macy had no trouble using her eyes—but all the trouble in the world using her mouth, so for her, making friends was kind of *hard*. Struggling to figure out just the right words and just the right way to say things

made the creepy-crawlies show up—a tingling feeling that made Macy even more nervous. Her dad called it anxiety.

Macy’s anxious feelings usually made her shrink down further—and shy away more—until weeks, and months, and whole school years went by without finding that one kid to get close to.

Well. The creepy-crawlies—or any of the other anxious feelings—weren’t going to hold Macy back another year. She had spent the summer before this school year obsessively googling *best friends*. And this is what she learned: Best friends smile a lot. Best friends are always laughing. Best friends wear matching T-shirts sometimes. Best friends know everything about each other.

So, on the first day of fifth grade, Macy smiled brighter than the sun. She laughed at everyone’s jokes and lent out so many pencils, her dad thought she was running a school store.

But her hard work paid off. After laughing with Mia Brown one day, Mia turned to Macy and asked, “Want to become best friends?”

Macy quickly nodded yes and scooted a little closer to her new bestie at the lunch table. Her heart nearly burst open from her good fortune. And things were perfect. Macy wanted to keep things that way. So whenever she didn’t know what to do, she copied whatever

Mia said and did. If Mia wore purple, Macy wore purple the next day. And if Mia accidentally burped at lunchtime? Macy forced enough air up her throat to let out a tiny *urppp*, too. Until one day, Mia dumped her. Boom—just like that—crushing Macy’s heart like freshly fallen snow under a boot.

Macy wasn’t down for long, though. Because soon, she’d scored another best friend, Darby—a girl who loved animals and carried a picture of her dream horse taped to the front of her binder. Keeping Darby happy was simple. Whenever they walked together, Macy galloped a bit, to prove how much she, too, was obsessed with horses. And even though her hair wasn’t as long as a horse’s mane, she always made sure she swept her tight curls into a ponytail each morning so she could swish it around whenever Darby was nearby.

But Darby dumped her, too! And Payton? The curly-haired girl who raised her hand a lot in class and had the kind of laugh that was hard to copy? Same thing—dump, dump, dump!

And then Josie had shown up a month before the end of fifth grade. Lucky for Macy, by that time of the year, all the other fifth graders were already paired up. With no other options, Josie asked Macy to be best friends.

Macy and Josie’s friendship was fine at first. I mean,

it wasn't the *best*. They didn't share any secrets. They didn't laugh together much at all. They simply picked each other first for buddy reading and saved seats for each other at lunch.

But everyone knew they were besties. Having a best friend meant Macy wasn't so different from everyone else. Things were okay.

At lunch every day, Macy scooted so close to Josie their knees knocked under the table. Best friends were supposed to be *close*, you know? When one time Josie said, "Do you mind, Macy? I need a little elbow room to eat," Macy only inched back just a teeny-weeny bit. She didn't want to risk putting *too* much distance between them. Distance killed friendships.

Now, as she and Josie headed for the big double doors, Macy slowed down to pull something from her backpack. It was a small rectangular-shaped gift, wrapped in notebook paper and Scotch tape because she couldn't find any real wrapping paper around the house.

"Did you watch last night's episode?" Macy asked Josie.

"Last night's episode of what?"

Macy handed Josie her special surprise. "Of our favorite show, *Stitched*, of course."

"Of course. I've seen every episode." Josie slowly

unwrapped the notebook paper, took one look at Macy's surprise—and made a strange face. “Did *you* watch?”

Macy winced over Josie holding the corner of her gift between her pointer finger and thumb—like she was holding a smelly gym sock. But Macy pulled herself together quick, so Josie wouldn't detect her disappointment.

“Of *course*. You know *Stitched* is—like—our *thing*.” Macy was lying, obviously. But if she admitted she had never even seen the show, Josie would dump her in ten seconds flat. It's not that Macy hated *Stitched*. She just didn't have time for television these days. All of her time went to researching how to keep her best friend happy. But since Josie loved the fashion competition show, Macy pretended to adore it, too.

Josie tucked Macy's gift in her armpit so she could shove the big school doors open. “Oh yeah? What was your favorite part from last night's episode?”

Yikes. Macy hadn't thought this far. The creepy-crawlies began to tiptoe up her arms.

“Uh . . .” She thought quick. “All of them, really. Like, every single part was great. I mean, really, *really* epic.”

Josie's eyes narrowed. “Why do you think Bronner St. James chose those weird colors for his runway look?”

Just ahead of them were Jazmin and Jalaya, two

girls who *did* watch *Stitched*—and talked about the show often. Macy slowed down some so she and Josie wouldn't accidentally catch up to the other girls. She'd noticed Josie turning in their direction whenever they talked at lunchtime. No way would she give *those* two an opportunity to steal her best friend.

“Oh, um, I don't know—I wasn't really paying attention to that part.” And that was the truth. Macy had been too busy printing out a photo she'd taken of her and Josie on the fifth-grade field trip to the aquarium. After brain-freezing her way through eight ice pops, Macy glued the popsicle sticks around the photo to make a frame. She colored designs on the frame, using every color marker she owned, until it was perfect.

And now, Macy's perfect best-friendship picture frame was in an armpit chokehold.

“So, you caught when Christian Fendibottoms threw down his crooked patterns and stormed out of the sewing room?” Josie shielded her eyes from the sun with her hand and squinted into the distance. Was she looking at Jalaya and Jazmin?

Macy tried her best to distract Josie with a fake laugh. “That was my favorite part.” She let out another, much louder laugh, just in case Josie didn't hear the first one.

Josie stopped walking. “Liar.”

“What?” Macy said, feeling the tingling in her arms get worse.

“I said—*liar*.” Josie looked mad—the angriest she’d been their entire four-week friendship. “That part never happened. Christian Fendibottoms was a celebrity *guest judge*—*last season*.”

Josie sighed. “Just tell the truth, Macy. You didn’t watch last night’s episode of *Stitched*. You don’t watch any of them.”

Macy’s neck began to burn. Why were friendships so *hard*? She spent two hours last night braiding and rebraiding her hair, just so they could have matching hairstyles. She spent almost a whole week coming up with this picture frame idea. Couldn’t Josie see how much she was trying?

Josie’s *feet* might have been sharing a sidewalk square with Macy, but her eyes were all the way up the block with Jalaya and Josie when she said, “You *know* you don’t have to watch *Stitched* just because I watch. If you’re not into that sort of thing, just say so.”

The creepy-crawlies were all over Macy now. What should she say? Words jumped out of her mouth. “I *do* watch *Stitched*. It’s my favorite show.”

Three short blocks home and Macy would officially have a summer-break bestie for the first time ever. Why was Josie making this so *difficult*?

“Seriously?”

Macy nodded. “Seriously—I swear.”

Josie let out a loud sigh. “I’m sorry, Macy, but—we can’t be best friends anymore.” Josie pulled Macy’s picture frame from her armpit and shoved it into Macy’s hands. Then without even a wave goodbye, Josie ran ahead to walk with the other girls.

Macy watched in disbelief as Josie fell into perfect giggle harmony with them. She tried to tell herself that what the creepy-crawlies were telling her was untrue. Maybe Josie just had a quick question to ask Jazmin and Jalaya. Or maybe Josie’s phone died, and she needed to borrow one of theirs.

Josie would be back. She *had* to come back. She wasn’t like Mia. Or Darby. Or Payton. Josie was the friend who stuck around—no matter what.

But Josie didn’t even look to see if Macy was okay walking all alone.

So on the last day of fifth grade, Macy Weaver walked home from school alone. Twice, she thought she might throw up listening to all that harmonious giggling over silly jokes ahead of her. But she couldn’t bring herself to stop listening.

From half a block up, Macy overheard Josie ask, “Remember what Bronner said when Dot Zippens booted him?”

“‘One day you’re in,’” Jazmin and Jalaya answered in unison. “‘And the next you’re out.’”

“More like, everyone else is in,” Macy mumbled to herself. “And I’m always out.”

When Macy reached the corner, there were only two ways she could go. She balanced her sneakers on the curb for a second, hoping that maybe one of the girls would notice her standing there and call her over. But when the three girls kept walking, without even *thinking* of inviting her along, Macy grew so angry she slammed Josie’s gift in a nearby trash can.

Dumped again.

Then she turned to the left and headed home.



2

MACY USED THE MICKEY MOUSE KEY her father had made special for her to let herself in to her family's split-level townhouse. She slid off her shoes, leaving them on the floor of the foyer so that she could step onto the plushy cream living room carpet without her mom screwing her face up or pulling out her phone to calculate out loud how much steam cleaning the carpet would cost if she tracked in the slightest bit of outside dirt.

Macy passed through the living room with Brand-New Couch 2.0, which was only here because six months after Mom purchased the first one, she fell out of love with it. Macy passed through the dining room that housed the giant oaken table that looked exactly

like the picture Mom saw online, but that they never actually used because the fancy dishes were arranged too nicely. And then she passed the freshly painted walls, the retiled guest bathroom, and everything else her mom replaced to get to her bedroom. Macy didn't bother looking for anyone to tell how her last day of school turned out, because Dad was still at work and Mom was most likely still working on her next *Gotta get this house together* project.

After locking her bedroom door, Macy tossed her backpack into her closet and walked over to the long mirror standing up in the corner of her room. She looked over every inch of herself. Why didn't Josie like her? Was it her wide eyes? Her nose? Her lips? Macy opened her mouth and inspected each tooth. No cavities, and only one tooth crooked on the bottom row, but no one ever really saw it because she made sure she always covered her mouth with her hand when she laughed.

Was her laugh too loud? Did she not laugh enough? Macy didn't get it. She tried so hard to make Josie like her. And she still got dumped.

Macy sighed and changed out of her school clothes and into a pair of gray sweats and her dad's old college T-shirt. She snuggled up in the crook of her new bedroom lounge chair, which was really Mom's abandoned

Ab Blaster, slipped in her earbuds, and clicked on the latest episode of *Stitched* on her laptop.

Macy tried to understand what was going on. She really did. But—she just didn't get it. Why did the girl with the flaming-red hair and the guy with the weird jeans hate each other? Why did everyone have a horrified look on their faces over that simple black dress on the runway? “Au revoir”? Macy didn't even know what *language* Dot Zippens used at the end of his show.

Macy slammed her laptop shut. There was no getting around it. She didn't like *Stitched*. And Josie did. Their best friendship would never survive.

Macy pulled out her phone. It wouldn't be long before everyone discovered what happened between her and Josie. It was probably best to get ahead of the gossip.

Macy used one of those filter apps to place a giant fractured heart over a picture of her and her ex-best friend. She uploaded the picture to InstaSlam and captioned it: “It is with a heavy heart that I announce the friendship breakup of Josie Miller and Macy Weaver. The split was amicable. Please respect our privacy at this time.” She hit Send and waited for the condolences to roll in.

Three minutes went by.

Then seven.

Then twelve.

No one liked her photo. No one commented. Macy went to Josie's page to see if everyone was busy offering sympathy and well-wishes there. But there was no mention of a breakup. There were no broken hearts or captions of loss and regret.

Instead, something much more devastating caught Macy's eye.

Happiness and new beginnings illuminated Josie's page. A new bio splashed across Josie's profile in a swirly custom font: The Three Js: Josie, Jalaya, and Jazmin. BFFs FOREVA! ❤️ ❤️ ❤️ 🦄 😊 😊 danced across the next line, showing just how thrilled Josie was over the news.

And then there was a new photo . . . a wide-angle shot of the three friends practically sitting on top of each other, laughing hysterically and eating spoonfuls of frozen yogurt with gummy-bear toppings at the sweetFrog down at the Towne Center. Though her stomach turned, Macy liked the photo, adding the side-eye emoji in the comments section, just in case her "like" got lost among the seventeen others.

Macy clicked through to Jalaya's and Jazmin's pages. New bios. New photos, too.

Giving best friend vibes, for sure.

Why was Macy always left out?

Macy took a deep breath and clicked back over to Josie's page. Then she scrolled back for the two photos Josie posted of her and Macy over the last few weeks.

She unliked, then liked those photos again, to remind Josie she didn't need to join anyone else's best friendship. She could fix the one she already had.

Macy waited a few minutes to see if maybe those photos might pull on Josie's heart a little. Maybe Josie would remember that Macy took that first photo in the aquarium's gift shop, a week after they became friends. That she'd used the last of her allowance to buy them matching BFF whale necklaces.

And how, in the second photo, she'd risked getting in trouble to run across the classroom and snap a bestie selfie while their teacher was next door borrowing Wite-Out.

Macy stared at the silly face Jalaya made in the new photo. She studied each barrette placed carefully on the side of Jazmin's hairdo. What was it about those two that made them better than her? Why wasn't Macy good enough?

Macy clicked back to the photos of her and Josie. She thought for a second, then posted the emojis of two girls holding hands, a heart, and a sun in the comments section of both pictures before logging off.

Just in case.



3

MACY STEWED OVER EVERYTHING that happened until her father walked in the door from his job at the post office delivering mail, and her mother called everyone down to the living room for dinner.

“If we moved all those fancy glasses and plates, we could eat at the dinner table for once,” Macy’s dad complained, twisting a piece of his hair with his fingers. He had just recently grown his hair long enough to begin the locking process, so he was always messing with it—sometimes checking for the slightest hint of new growth, other times just admiring the texture.

“And mess up the decor I carefully put together? Yeah, right.” Mom—who never put her fingers in her hair unless she was on her way to her next hair-salon

appointment—checked her perfectly manicured nails, then set her plate of spaghetti down on her fold-up dinner tray.

For a few minutes, the Weavers sat behind their fold-up trays, eating their spaghetti dinners quietly. Dad checked sports stats on his phone. And Mom flipped through show options on Netflix.

Macy was just about to leave another comment under Josie’s sweetFrog photo when her mom broke the silence. “I wonder if I’ll be working at the bank for the rest of my life.”

Dad shoveled another forkful of spaghetti into his mouth. “What’s wrong with working at a bank?”

“Nothing, really.” Mom said. “But—I don’t know. It’s just so *boring*. Everything about South Carolina is boring.”

Macy didn’t know if she necessarily thought South Carolina was boring. Although the houses *were* kind of spread apart. And there was only one library within driving distance. But Macy had lived here all her life—so she didn’t have much to compare it with.

“Is this *it* for me?” Mom wondered. “Working at the bank in the daytime and being a mom in the evenings—no offense, Macy.”

Macy’s mom scooted closer to her on the couch. “Haven’t you ever felt like something was missing—

that if you just had that one thing—you'd finally be completely happy?"

Macy thought about Josie and Darby, Payton and Mia. "Yeah . . . I guess so."

Mom took Macy's shoulder shrug and ran with it. "See? Even *Macy* thinks I deserve a better life."

Macy went back to searching InstaSlam while her mom complained. Josie, Jalaya, and Jazmin had posted again.

"Wash the clothes, check the homework, cook the food. But look at what happens when I cook—Macy's barely eating any of her food."

"Aw, come on, Alice . . ." Macy's dad said. He reached over Macy to rub her mom's shoulders.

Macy tuned out the conversation. She knew how this would end anyway. Her mother would continue to complain. Her dad would keep trying to calm things down. And neither of them would look very happy doing it. It happened all the time these days.

So, instead, Macy focused on the other thing she didn't know how to fix. Like picking and repicking an old scab, Macy looked at each newly posted pic, revealing the three friends hanging out on the Towne Center benches, shopping for candy, or taking selfies with the caption "#OfficiallySummerVacation." Macy's heart squeezed just a little bit more, until finally she

dragged her finger down on the screen to refresh the page for just one more look, two more likes, three more comments, four more emojis and—

User Not Found flashed under a profile box showcasing a lifeless gray avatar. All Josie's pictures had mysteriously disappeared in seconds.

Macy's chest tightened as she dragged her finger up and down her phone screen. Refresh—refresh. *Refresh.*
Blocked.



4

THE NEXT MORNING was the official first day of summer vacation. Freedom was in the air. Dirty sneakers with frayed laces. Cutoffs. Accidental Pop-sicle stains on skin. Flip-flops. Chalk murals.

For every other kid in South Carolina, summer vacation meant the beginning of fun. For Macy, it marked the start of summertime loneliness—which was worse than schooltime loneliness because there was no homework to distract her.

Macy couldn't stop thinking about how Josie blocked her. *Blocked* her—because of a few likes and emojis? Macy replayed what-ifs in her head all morning and all afternoon. She tried to pinpoint what exactly made Josie cut her completely off like that. Macy tried to think of ways to make things right with Josie—to

convince her that Macy didn't deserve to be blocked—and that if she just gave Macy a chance . . .

At exactly 6:00 p.m., Mom walked through the front door and immediately began complaining. “Guess I should go make dinner . . .” making that one tiny sentence sound like the air being let out of a tire.

Macy sat on the top step while her mom threw her heels in the shoe basket. Then she followed behind as her mom shuffled to the kitchen.

The fridge door slammed, and a half-empty jar of mayo rattled as Mom threw together a quick meal.

Mom had just grabbed bags of chips from the pantry when Dad came walking into the house, complaining about the heat and suggesting movie night in the living room.

He walked into the kitchen, wiped his brow, and said, “Turkey sandwiches—for dinner?”

Mom glared at him and shoved a paper plate into his hands. “You could eat nothing at all.”

“I'm not complaining—I'm just saying.” He kissed his wife on the cheek and winked in Macy's direction. “Aw, don't be mad, honey. Why don't you pick the movie tonight?”

Mom beckoned for Macy and her dad to grab their plates and follow her into the living room. “Let's watch *Legally Blonde!* What's not to like about a movie that

proves a person can be more than just their looks? I certainly want people to see me as more than just a mom and more than just a bank teller.”

Macy wished people would see *her* as more than just a classmate.

Dad sat down on the couch. “Yeah, but we’ve seen it twice already this month.”

It was true. Ever since her mom had put the final college application in the mail last January, she and her dad had been forced to watch loads of her mom’s favorite college movies. *Pitch Perfect*, *Drumline*, and her mom’s personal favorite, *Legally Blonde*.

“*Legally Blonde* is one of my faves,” she told Macy. “Isn’t that how you and your friends say it? ‘Faves’?”

Macy bristled at the word *friends*. “Yeah, I guess,” she said. If her mom heard her respond, she didn’t act like it. She was too busy clicking on Netflix.

Before long, Macy’s dad was leaning back, snoring loudly. Macy glanced at her mom, expecting to laugh together like they usually did when Dad fell asleep. But something in her mom’s eyes stopped her. They darted from Macy to her dad. Her fingers drummed her thigh. Finally, Mom reached for the remote and paused the movie.

“Guess what?” she asked, nudging Macy’s dad in the ribs.

While her mother pulled a folded-up envelope out of her pants pocket, Macy's dad's eyes snapped open mid-snore. Macy giggled as her dad smoothed his hands over his postal uniform pants, pretending he'd been awake for the entire movie.

Unfolding the paper, Mom took another breath, glanced at Macy and then her husband. Then she announced, "I got accepted into college—"

Macy's father's face broke out in a huge grin. He pulled her mother into a giant bear hug. "That's great, honey. I'm so proud of you."

"—in Maryland," her mom finished.

Dad let go of his wife's arm and frowned.

Macy's heart sank down into her chest. *Maryland?*

Macy's heart thumped when her dad stood up and folded his arms. "I thought you applied to a state college, here in South Carolina."

A guilty look appeared on Mom's face. "Well—I did. But—but—there's a big difference between attending a college anyone can get into, and going away to a big, prestigious college like University of *Maryland*."

Macy stuck her nose in her phone so her parents wouldn't remember she was there. She wanted to hear what was happening—and not get sent to her room so they could have "grown-up talk."

Her mother's voice shrank smaller. "This is the

college I really *want* to go to.” She handed the acceptance letter—which looked a little worn—to Macy’s dad.

Her father’s eyes retraced their path back up to the beginning of the letter. “This says the school mailed this out two months ago!”

Macy rarely heard her father yell—usually her parents kept their bickering at a lukewarm temperature. But when he did—the entire room filled with invisible steam, making it hard to breathe.

Her mother looked down at her fingers, which she only did when she knew she was in trouble. Macy didn’t think it was possible for a mom to get in trouble. But if they could—this was what it looked like.

Then her father’s voice softened. “Well, did you at least get into the state college here?”

“Yeah, but—”

Macy’s father clapped his hands together. “Well, there you go—argument avoided.” Dad shrugged his shoulders. “I think it’s nice that you got into one of your dream schools. But your home is here, so—”

“But *I* want to go to University of Maryland.”

“For what?” Macy bristled as her father’s voice sizzled again. Then her stomach began to twist into knots. She hated when her parents argued. She *hated* it.

Dad raked his baby locs off his forehead, then

caught Macy's eye. His face softened. "Macy-girl, hang in your room for a while, okay?"

"But—"

"Go, Macy," her mom said, sending her dad an icy stare.

Macy followed her parents' orders. But no one said a thing about shutting her bedroom door, so Macy sat on the floor near her doorway, with her back pressed against the wall.

"University of Maryland isn't even an Ivy League school. You're acting like Harvard called and begged you to—" she heard her dad say.

"*That's* what you say to your wife after she just got into the college of her dreams?"

"I'm not trying to be unsupportive. It's just going to cost a lot to move you all the way up north for—"

"Money, money, money!" Mom snapped. "That's all you ever think about."

While her parents bickered, Macy thought hard. To be honest, moving to Maryland didn't seem half bad. Especially, now that her own bestie blocked her on InstaSlam.

The University of Maryland was three whole states away. No one knew her there. No one knew any of them.

Suddenly an idea came to Macy. If there were ever a chance to start over—

Macy took a deep breath, then walked back to the living room. The words were already out before Macy realized they were coming from her mouth. “We could *all* move to Maryland.”

Her father crinkled his nose. Macy watched him rub his beard as he did whenever he was in deep thought. “Grown-ups don’t make huge decisions very quickly, Macy. Something like that would take—”

Before Macy could pretend she was just kidding—that she would never say something so silly, her mother let out a tiny little squeal.

“Why *couldn’t* we all move?” Her mom grabbed her dad’s hand. “Post offices are everywhere. You could put in for a transfer.”

Her mother sat up straighter on the couch. “And I won’t be working while I’m in school, so I won’t have to worry about my job at the bank. Counting money all day isn’t as fun as I thought it would be.”

“Yeah, but what about the cost of living up there? And with only one income coming in, and the school bills—”

“I can take out a loan,” Mom said quickly. “I can sell my car. The furniture! We can downsize to an apartment. I mean, those small details can be worked out.”

Macy’s mom waved her over to sit next to her again. “The biggest challenge would be uprooting Macy, and

she *wants* to move.” Mom reached over and squeezed Macy tight.

Dad rubbed and rubbed at his beard. Finally, he reached over to grab his wife’s hand and sighed. “Let me think about this, okay?”

Macy’s mom clapped her hands. “Yay!”

Maryland, Macy thought. Maybe being the new kid wouldn’t be so bad. After all, Josie had a new friend two seconds after she got to South Carolina. And now she was a part of the three Js. Maybe Macy would have the same luck.

That evening, before she drifted off to sleep, Macy heard her mom through the vents in her bedroom, still working on her dad—convincing him that he would just *love* living in Maryland.



The next morning, when Macy came downstairs for breakfast, her mother was waiting for her, standing next to her very nervous-looking dad.

“Guess what?” Her mother beamed. “We’re moving to Maryland.”

Macy wasn’t surprised. Her dad always gave in—eventually.



5

THE WEAVERS SPENT ALL OF JULY and half of August packing boxes for their move. Everything was working out perfectly—Macy’s dad had gotten his transfer acceptance letter. Her mom had just picked out the perfect case for her brand-new laptop. The creepy-crawlies hadn’t visited Macy in weeks.

Until today.

They were a whole hour into their drive to Maryland, and Mom and Dad were *still* arguing.

“I was waiting for the perfect time to tell you, Malcolm. Was I supposed to stop packing boxes to tell you the college offered me free housing?”

“Yes, Alice—that’s info I should’ve known.”

The red-and-white cooler, packed to the brim with

ice and drinks, sat on the last row of the family SUV. Macy grabbed a Capri Sun, took a nice long sip, and tried to tune everything else out. But her parents' raised voices made it nearly impossible.

“I’m going to have to break the lease I just signed on our new apartment. You didn’t think Macy and I would need time to get used to the idea of living on campus with a bunch of twenty-year-old college kids?”

“Well, actually, they only had a single dorm available.”

Her dad’s SUV suddenly lurched forward, sending Macy’s sip of juice down the wrong pipe. As she choked and sputtered, her parents continued to argue.

“Alice!”

“Come on, Malcolm. A college campus isn’t exactly appropriate for an eleven-year-old anyway.”

Macy swallowed hard.

“It won’t be so bad, Malcolm, you’ll see,” her mom said, pulling another juice from her cupholder. “You two will have school and work to keep you busy during the week. And I’ll be home every weekend.”

Mom passed the juice pouch to Macy. “Here, baby, drink another one. It’ll help.”

Macy heard her dad mumble from all the way in the driver’s seat: “Yeah, because that’s just what we do with problems—add more on.”



The moment Macy and her family crossed the WELCOME TO MARYLAND sign, everything began squishing together. The houses. The stores. Even the cars were squeezed so close together on the road, they barely had room to move an inch forward.

Two more weeks. And Macy would be back in school and up to her eyeballs in best friend options.

Macy marveled at her very first traffic jam. Back in South Carolina, open space was everywhere. You could run out your front door and have to stop to catch your breath on the way to the mailbox. Here, in Maryland, there was so much of everything that you could spin in place and bump into two houses, three cars, and six people.

Macy smiled as her dad checked his GPS and then checked again, making sure they were headed the right way toward their new home. Macy didn't need a navigation system to tell her that moving to Bowie, Maryland, was the right way to go if you were looking to meet new kids.

Her dad drove past tall colonial homes with huge windows and kids playing in plushy green grass before making a left toward the bunched-together buildings sitting in a row, back behind barely there little plots of grass. Woodland Terrace, Macy's new home, held only four apartments.

“Home sweet home.” Dad faked a smile as he parked his used Ford Explorer on the street and pulled up the emergency brake. Macy peered out at the cracked pavement in front of the building, the leaning fence, the elderly lady wearing a sun hat and ruby-red lipstick sitting in her window, staring.

Macy’s excitement about moving to Bowie, Maryland, wobbled and deflated. *Who would invite new friends over to this dump?* Nothing about her new home appeared sweet. Macy made a sour face as she unbuckled her seat belt and eased out of the SUV.



Dad gave a few directions to the movers, then led his family up the sidewalk toward their apartment door.

Dad handed Macy her own little silver key. “I can have one made with Mickey Mouse ears if you want,” he said, sticking his own key into the lock.

Macy smiled. Maybe.

But then they stepped into the apartment, and Macy’s stomach sank. The inside looked worse than the outside. “I thought apartments were supposed to look bigger without furniture?” she asked, peering at the gray walls, dull wooden floors, and foggy windows. It took her all of three seconds to take in the entire apartment from where she was standing.

Mom set a box down on the floor. “*Ugh*. This place is ugly,” she said, making Macy sorry she’d griped about the size of the apartment.

Mom turned to her husband. “You couldn’t find a nicer place?”

Dad twisted one of his baby locs with his fingers and tried to hide an embarrassed smile. “You know, my job didn’t *have* to help me find this place. The US Postal Service delivers mail, not apartments.”

Sensing the tiny apartment already beginning to heat up from a fresh new argument, Macy faked a smile and tried to sprinkle a little positivity around the room. “Maybe if we get a yellow rug and scrub the windows, it’ll brighten the living room up a bit,” she said.

Dad broke into a wide smile. “Leave it to my Macy-girl to make her pops feel better about a crummy apartment.”

It was so easy to make her dad happy. But her mom was a challenge. Macy snuck a glance at Mom. Maybe once she brightened the apartment up, her mom would consider visiting on more than just the weekends.

Be Real, Macy Weaver

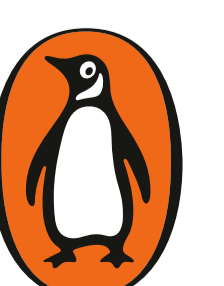
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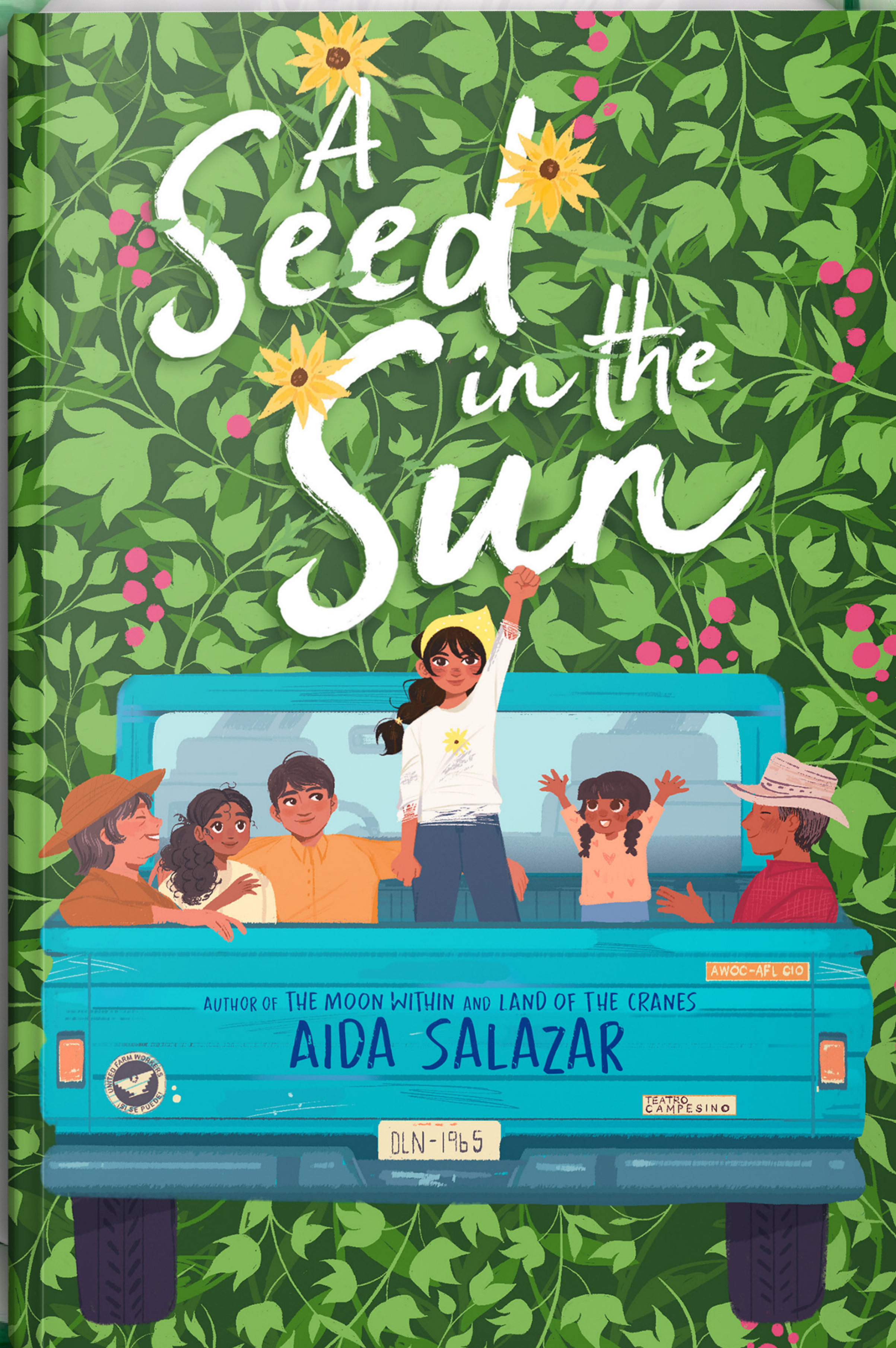


What did you think after reading a few pages?

What did you think of the cover?

Would you share this book with your students? Why or why not?





LULA VIRAMONTES DREAMS OF ONE DAY BECOMING SOMEONE whom no one can ignore: a daring ringleader in a Mexican traveling carpa, despite her father's traditional views of what girls should be. When her family arrives for the grape harvest in Delano, California, Lula meets activist Dolores Huerta and el Teatro Campesino (the official theater company of the United Farm Workers). She discovers an even more pressing reason to raise her voice: the upcoming farmworkers' strike, an event that will determine her family's future—for better or worse.

ISBN: 9780593406601

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A SEED IN THE SUN

Aida Salazar

SEMILLA

They tried to bury us but they didn't
know we were seeds.

–Mexican Proverb

Imperial Valley, California • March 1964

REMOLINO / A WHIR

I sometimes think about how
I lost my voice.

I could have buried it in the earth,
in a surco, a long row of dry dirt
where we planted onion bulbs last spring
while the heat of a too-hot California day
fell on our
arched
backs
like barrels
of sun.

It could have happened
when Papá screamed for me to work faster
just as I was singing along
to Mamá's song
louder than Papá's angry words
or the drone of planes spraying the fields
overhead.

It could have been taken
by the roaring remolino
who slammed into us
like the storm of Papá's belt when we upset him,
an out of nowhere tornado
ripping through the fields.

Delano, California • September 12, 1965

OPEN-SKY HAMMOCKS

We drown bedbugs
in a pail of water,
chinchés we pluck
from the mattresses
propped up outside
on rusty barrack walls.

The worst kind of chore
on our first day in Delano,
in another labor camp
as terrible as the last
and the one before that.

Concha and Rafa race to see
who can drown more bugs.
They beat me by a lot
because they're
five and four years older.

I ask Mamá if we can sleep
in our hammocks instead
but she doesn't turn her back.
She still can't hear the tiny hiss
that comes from me when I try to speak.

"Mamá!" I try to say louder.

She reads the question on my lips.

“Lula, the mattresses are better, so we are together
and not hanging like leaves from the trees.”

Me? I'd rather sleep outside
in a crest of oaks
at the edge of the grape fields
all around us
with surcos like long fingers
spread throughout the farm,
filled with thick vines
growing big across the wires.

I'd rather sleep beneath
a blue-black sky glistening
with bright stars.

A stage. A place to dream.

Where I can announce
a make-believe circus like a ringmaster
to an audience of hooting owls
hunting field mice in the night.

Outside under the dense dark sky
we can only see in the back roads of California
where we work and chase the harvests,
so different from the city where we hardly go
and where the glow of lights washes away the contrast.

Yes, it's colder in our hammocks
than in the one-room wooden barrack,
especially in the winter
but so much better
than getting eaten alive by chinchas.

“Pero Mamá, I wish we could . . .” I try to argue.

“No time for wishing now, Lula.”

Mamá leans on my shoulder
as she passes me holding a grass broom.

Her long black braid lays against her neck
as her body bends like a willow branch,
and she sighs,

“Vamos, Lula, Concha, Rafa. Let’s keep cleaning,
mis amores.”

LIGHT BLUE SCHOOLHOUSE

I watch water glisten as it splashes
 against the tin of the pail I fill
at the only tap at this new but familiar camp.
 I think of the light blue schoolhouse
 I saw while on the truck as we arrived
 and my panza flutters.

I wonder about the new school year
and if the school will have
a twelfth grade for Concha
and a seventh grade for me
because there's never a guarantee.

A school!
Where we'd be the new faces
along with other farmworker kids
whose families came like ours
for the grape harvest
and who also won't know
what they'll be learning
and will struggle to catch up.

An actual school!
Not housework,
not watching my baby siblings,
and not field work.

Back in Bakersfield
Rafa missed so many days
he was whittled down two whole grades.
 That's when he had it

and instead followed Papá and Mamá
into the fields each daybreak
to pick whichever crop was in season.
Truant officers didn't even blink
to see him in the fields
as dandelion tall as he is.

I'd taken what Concha
once told me to heart.
No matter how much we miss
no matter if teachers are mean,
no matter they sometimes punish us
for speaking Spanish,
and we can't keep friends,
school is ours.

“Lula, you're here to soak up anything you
can”—she tapped my head—“porque tomorrow, we'll
be on the road again and the only thing you can
take with you is up here.”

The best thing about Concha
is she loves school
as much as me.
Concha's soft brown eyes
are maps
when I can't find my way.

BABY WORK

Papá comes back
with work orders from the crew leader
and a face folded in worry.

He, Mamá, and Rafa
will pick grapes tomorrow morning.

Our baby sister, Gabriela,
and babiest brother, Martín,
will go with them
so Concha and I can get to school.

Mamá doesn't ask us to
work the fields to pick cotton,
potatoes, strawberries, or grapes
because that's when school's in session.

Mamá doesn't ask us to skip school
to watch the babies, either,
she likes what we learn
about the world outside the fields.
She loves to hear us translate for her
the stories in the books we get to read
where the English becomes familiar
to her and Papá in the Spanish words
they speak.

Threat of a truant officer
or no truant officer,
I don't think Mamá
would want it any other way.

I don't mind watching the babies,
Gabi and Martín are
two balls of sweet masa with legs.

Gabi's almost three and runs
like a cheetah on her bare feet
with one too many toes on each foot.
Mamá calls her "una hija de Dios"
and because she's a child of God,
she is perfect just as she is
with no need for shoes
we can't afford anyway.

Martín crawls like a lady bug
because being one year old is still pretty little.

He reaches up
with his
dimpled hands
whenever he wants
to be carried
and we always happily sweep him up.

It's not hard to do squishy baby work like that.

ESCABS

I overhear Papá tell Rafa,

“Caramba, we just walked into a strike. Men with picket signs and bullhorns were yelling at all of us not to work.”

“What do you think they’re fighting for, Apá?”

I get closer but he pulls Rafa inside,
and gives me a “what do you want, nosy”
kind of look but I can still hear him.

“Los Filipinos seem to have left the fields because they want higher wages. They’re en huelga, and they think we’re taking their jobs,” he says.

“Do you think there’ll be trouble, Apá?” Rafa asks.

“Pues, they were protesting and screaming ‘Don’t be a escab!’ at us while we were getting crew orders. Josesito said *escab* means traitor because we are crossing their picket line.”

Papá says the word *scab* like
his tongue is a skipped record
adding a syllable up front.

Mamá is sitting on the edge of the bed
holding her head between her hands
like she’s hurt, frowning into her closed eyes.

I want to see what's wrong with her
but I stay outside the barrack
so Papá doesn't know
I'm snooping.

Martín toddles up to Papá
reaches up to him.
Papá unfolds his brows and arms,
lifts him up and tosses him into
the air with an, "Ah, mi muchachito!"

Papá saves his sweetness for the babies.
As soon as we get older,
seeing his love for us
is a sight as rare as rain
falling on desert earth.

CARPA SMILES

I remember a time
before the whirlwind,
a time before Gabi and Martín were born
when we snuck into the circus.
Rafa and me.

Papá went without
his bottles of beer for once
to buy three tickets
for Mamá, Concha, and him.

Hidden behind crates,
Rafa held up the tent's wall
to keep me from getting scratched
like he did as he burrowed
beneath the canvas.

We emerged into a flurry of people
trying to get a seat to see La Carpa Vasquez,
the traveling Mexican circus.

We squirmed, pushed, and shoved
other kids to sit up front.
As the lights began to dim,
I searched and found
Concha, Mamá, and Papá
sitting still inside in a crowd
moving like ants around them.

Suddenly the lights, the music,
and a loud, booming voice
welcomed us.

“Señoras y señores, niños y niñas, welcome to the
world-famous La Carpa Vasquez!”

That’s when I saw it.

Papá’s smile,

with its missing right-side molar.

A smile so pretty and wide

it shined like a galaxy

in the center

of the deep brown night

of his face.

I don’t understand why

he never let us see it,

but seeing him smile

from the ringmaster’s smooth voice

opened up my own sonrisa

like a squash bloom

following

the light of day.

I swept my head around

and was pulled like never before

and never since

into the magic of la carpa.

The clown jugglers,

the comedians, the singers,

the dancing dog show,

the tight rope walkers,

and the flying trapeze.

Rafa and me clapped, hollered,
and fell on each other,
muriendo de risa!

When I took a breath,
a dream was etched in my heart,
to join the circus one day,
as ringmaster.

I think about the ringmaster
when I am still.

I think about how his voice
made the lights of Papá's face
come alive.

I want to be one of the reasons Papá smiles.

WILTED MAMÁ

Before the sun awakens
and roosters begin to sing
the next morning,
I hear a shuffling
but it isn't Mamá
getting breakfast ready
by the light of a lantern.
It's Rafa and Papá
stumbling and grumbling.

I lift my head to see
Mamá sleeping,
Gabi and Martín like two scorpions
clinging to her body.

I nudge Concha awake next to me
just as Papá nearly spits,
for us to get up
to make desayuno.

The coolness of the morning
warms quickly
with the approaching
late summer heat of Delano
when I step out
to start the fire
in the outdoor stove.

Concha follows me out
with a stack of tortillas.
The only food we have left.

Rafa lifts his eyebrows at us
because we've never seen Mamá
stay in bed like this.

Mamá is stronger than mesquite.
No torment, no weather, no drought
could down her.

She never misses work.
Not when she gave birth to us,
not when our other baby brother, Angel,
slipped away from dysentery.

She and Papá worked for weeks
with tears pouring
down their faces
along with their sweat.

Concha looks at me
takes a deep breath,
lays the tortillas on the comal.

She tells me I should go to school
alone so she can stay
to help Mamá.

I shake my head feverishly,
my bottom lip quivers.

School without Concha?
No. I can't do it.

"What if they don't hear me?"

"They'll hear you fine. Your voice is only raspy, Lula,
not gone. Just speak up and take your time."

Her face falls away in a distant sadness.

“Do it for Mamá.”

Mamá wakes then and calls out
our names in a chain,
“Concha, Rafa, Lula.”
Papá follows us in to see her.

Mamá nods slowly
as if she is wilted
a soft smile folds into her face.
She isn't feeling well enough
to go into the fields
but strong enough to stay home
with the babies without Concha.

“Will you be okay alone?” I ask.

“Yes, por supuesto, mi'ja. Both of you girls go. I will manage with the little ones just fine.”

When Concha and I
step through the doorway,
guilt pours over me because
I can't wait
to get to the light blue schoolhouse.
I turn back to see Mamá sitting up,
her pale face holds
a soft and sleepy expression
as the daytime
comes into the room.

SEEDS

Mamá once told me
about the magic of seeds.

Seeds hold power in their tiny bodies.
Each grain, each kernel, each bulb
is a miracle of life.

If given the right soil,
 enough water,
 enough light,
 though buried,
 it will rise
 with its growing limbs
 to touch the sun.

Mamá said
seeds hold the memory of others
that came before them,
a destiny to become something else
 larger, greater, and richer
 than they once were.

They are meant to give new seeds,
 carrying their miracle inside
 from beginning to end.

“Like you, mi Lulita,
and all of God’s children on earth,” Mamá said.

TO SCHOOL

We walk a path of
 wild grasses,
 wild sunflowers,
 weeds and seeds
to school.

Concha throws her arms into the air
 and dreams out loud.

“When I get to college there will be no stopping me.”

The skin of her cheeks is kissed by the morning sun.

“Stopping you from what?” I ask.

“From getting us away from field work. Away from all of this! See, after college, I can get a fancy job in a big city somewhere and I would support us.”

“But then you’ll come back, right?” I ask, afraid of the answer.

Concha laughs,
scoops me up from behind,
 and twirls me around laughing
 unbothered that she might mess up her blouse
 or that my too-big shoes
will flop off my feet,
 “Of course, silly!”

I squint my eyes at the horizon
as I hear a ruckus in the distance.

People have bullhorns, are shouting,
they sound excited, maybe angry.

I point out

 a red flag
 draped from a pickup truck.

It has a white circle

 in the center
 and inside the circle
 is a black silhouette of a bird.
 Is it an eagle?

Concha reads the letters
 sprawled on top,

 “NFWA” and another sign, “AWOC AFL-CIO.”

It’s all a broken puzzle
we don’t understand.

Worry burrows
into my head.

I want to ask Concha
if this means trouble for our family
because of what I overheard from Papá.

But I can’t form the question
and keep walking
with my unknowingness
toward school.

LEONOR

The pretty blue schoolhouse
is a trick of the mind

because when you get up close
it's as junked out and rusted
as an abandoned Chevy.

But I don't care because
I think I made a friend.

Leonor is in my grade,
a fast talker with a slight lisp.
She leaves almost no room
for the thin words
dangling
from my mouth.

I'm relieved to sit back and listen.

Leonor is Filipina and Mexican,
and her dad works here year-round,
which is sort of lucky because
she doesn't have to up and move
to follow the crops like us
though unlucky because
she lives in the chinche barracks too.

She knows everyone at school
and if she doesn't
she introduces herself
like she did with me.

At lunch, she tests her memory
by pointing at the kids
and where they are from
as they move across the yard.

She names

Filipino kids
Mexican kids
Negro kids
Puerto Rican kids
Arab kids
and Oakie kids.¹

A few I know because
we follow the fields together
but my shyness holds me back.

The wobble of my voice
straightens out with Leonor
when I get a few words in
to answer where I'm from.

“I'm Mexican but born in Salinas.”

She is sweet,
though she scrunches her face at me
when she can't make out what I say
as if that will help her hear me.

1 See author's note.

CHISME ENGINE

At the end of lunch time
a crowd of kids
surround Leonor
like she's a conductor
calling everyone aboard.

They're talking about the strike
and it feels like chisme
not everyone's supposed to know.

I come close enough to listen
to Leonor fit another piece
of the strike puzzle into place.

"My tito Larry started this strike just last week with
other Filipino workers. They're forcing the growers to
pay them better."

A curly haired Mexican boy
I've never seen speaks up,

"That's their business, not ours. My dad came to do
the work they don't want to do."

Leonor is quick,

"Yeah, if you are new, it probably means your family is
strikebreaking. Pass it on! Convince your dad to join
the strike, that way my Titos will get paid
better and so will he."

The boy argues,

“Those growers are too big and rich! They’ll never pay the workers more.”

Leonor is a locomotive
whose engine revs
as she holds her
fists at her hips
and says,

“Oh yeah, my titos already won a strike in Coachella earlier this year. Whatcha gotta say about that, Eliseo?”

I stare at Leonor.
I’ve never seen a strike before
though I think I did hear
about the one in Coachella.
I love to watch her take control,
moving us all with
a fast engine tongue
like hers.

MI VOZ

I try not to sink
 into the sadness
I feel to not have
 a voice like Leonor's.

I still don't know when it'll return.

Concha says it's like "laryngitis"
 that's stuck around
 for more than a year.

It embarrasses me
 for others to hear
 its thin sound
so, I speak only when I have to.

I wonder if my voice
 will change when puberty comes
like Rafa's did.

Concha says it's starting to happen.
She can tell by the pimples
 popping up
 across my forehead
and how my cheeks have lost
 their baby chub.

I wonder if puberty
 will also give me the courage
to speak up like Leonor
 even if my laryngitis
never goes away.

BEATING CRIES

When we get home
a pot of beans
is boiling over
on the outdoor stove.

We find Mamá
drenched in sweat,
shifting in her sleep.

Her face,
red with blemishes.

Gabi and Martín are on the ground
playing with a green beetle
and the smell of vomit
rises from a bedpan on the floor
near the head of the bed.

Gabi comes to me
and Concha grabs Martín.

We pat their backs
as they whimper.

They don't have full sentences
to tell us what they've seen.
Why Mamá is still in bed.

Concha softly shakes Mamá.

“We're home from school, Mamita,” she says.

Mamá mumbles and stirs.
Her eyes move restlessly
behind her closed lids.

I try, "Mamá. It's me, Lula."

I touch Mamá's forehead
like she does to us
when we aren't well.

The back of my hand
remains hot
when I remove it
from her feverish skin.

"What do we do, Concha?"

"I don't know," she says softly.

She leaves the room
with a loaded bedpan
in one hand
and Martín
straddled on her hip.

That's an answer
Concha has never given me.
She's always known.
Everything.

I hug Gabi tightly.
She buries her crying little face
into my shoulder.
Fear beats hard
inside my chest
until I cry too.

WHEN THE SUN COMES DOWN

I hear a soft roar of sounds.

Talking, laughter,
trucks arriving, people walking.

I stand at the doorway

see Papá and Rafa at the far end
of the row of barracks
coming home with other farmworkers.

They are baked and dusty

tumbleweeds,
their clothes dirty,
with big wet sweat patterns
circling their backs and armpits.

Scared rushes of blood rise

from my heart
to my throat.

I place Gabi on the ground

and can only think to
run to them for help.

Papá looks down at me with surprise.

“Que te pasa, Lula? What’s got into you?”

I want to tell him to hurry

because

Mamá looks really sick

and

Concha doesn’t know what to do

but

the stampeding beats of my heart

tear.
at.
my.
breath.

I grunt. A small, fragile, wordless punch.

I pull Papá's arm. "Ven!" I want to say
but
instead I point to our barrack.

"Muchacha terca, speak, for heaven's sake." He barks
and pulls his arm away from my grip.

"Ma . . . ma!" finally seeps out of me in fear-filled syllables.

Papá stops suddenly,
looks at my tormented face,
turns over to Rafa,
and they both take off running
toward our barrack.

"Vieja. Viejita, que te pasa?" Papá shakes her.

The rest of us are a flock of doves
crowded around Mamá and Papá.
Mamá opens her eyes slightly.
She looks at Papá for a second
before her eyes roll back
into her head.

Papá swiftly lifts her
into his arms
like a rag doll.

He doesn't look scared
but determined
like he does
when clearing a mess of weeds.

“Abran camino!” he shouts at us.

I tremble as we step back to let him pass.

“Where are you taking her, Papá?” Rafa asks.

“I'm going to ask Josesito to drive us to a doctor.”

Rafa stumbles
as he hurries
behind him.

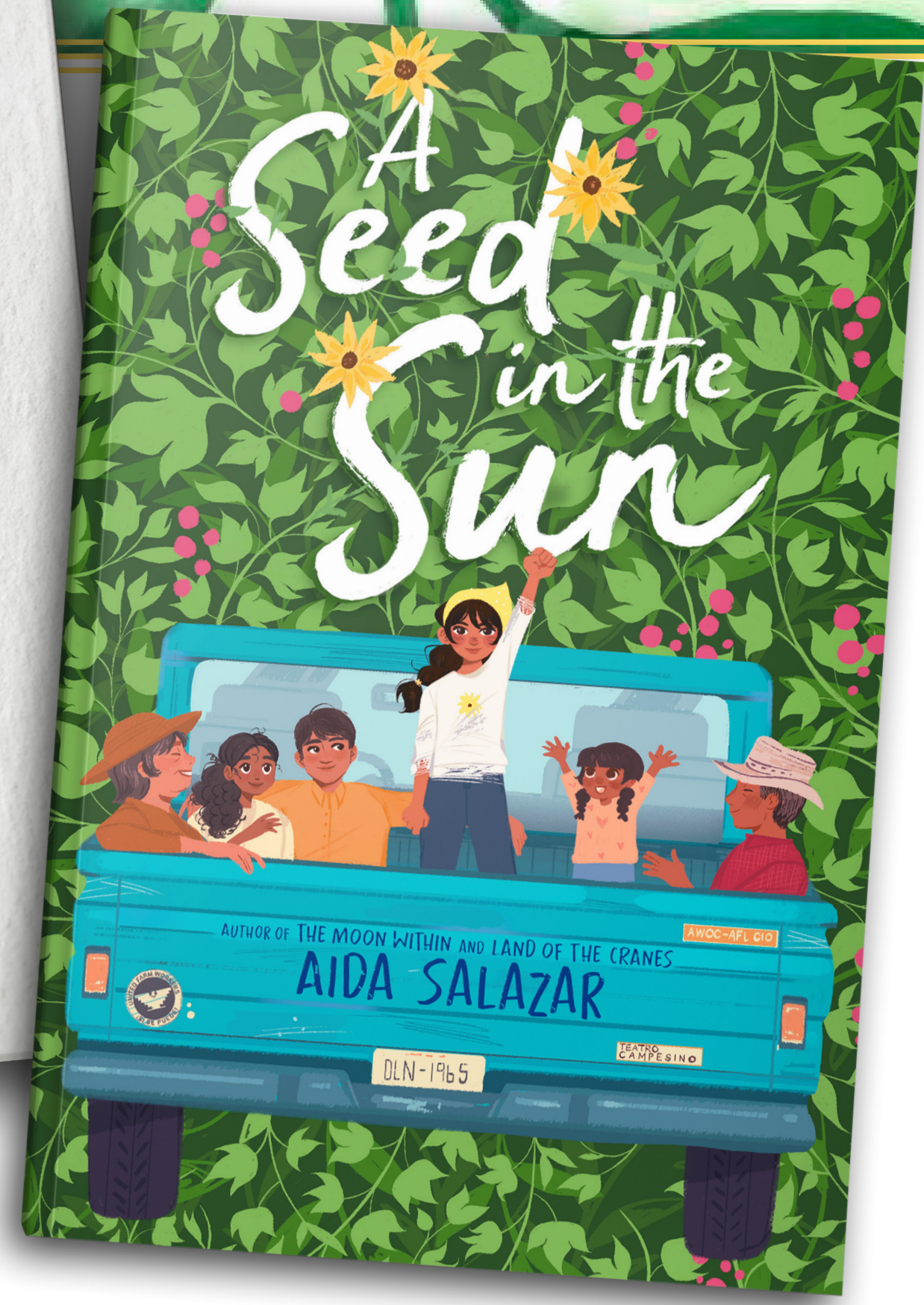
Papá doesn't look back to see
 how the rest of his children
 hold one another,

 how our tears stream down
 our frightened faces,

 how we are broken as branches
 fallen from a lightning-struck tree.

A Seed in the Sun

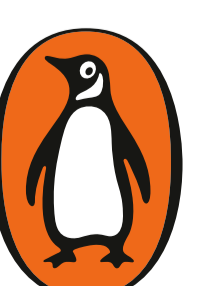
by Aida Salazar

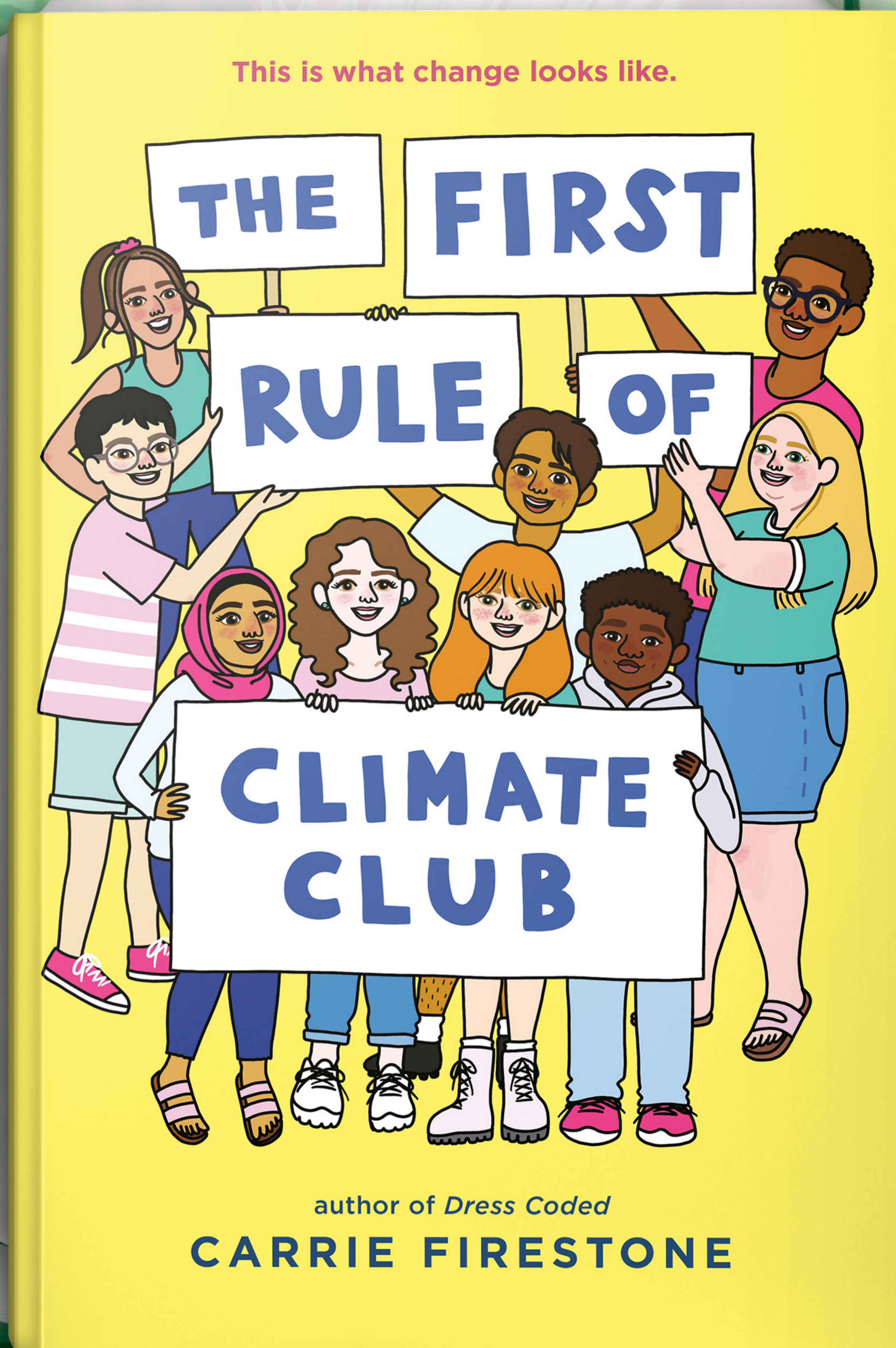


What did you think after reading a few pages?

What did you think of the cover?

Would you share this book with your students? Why or why not?





WHEN MARY KATE MURPHY JOINS A SPECIAL SCIENCE PILOT PROGRAM FOCUSED ON CLIMATE CHANGE, the class opens her eyes to lots of things she never noticed before about her small suburban town:

- Kids waste tons of food at school without a second thought.
- Parents leave their cars running in the pick-up lane all the time.
- People buy lots of clothes they don't really need.
- Some of her friends who live in the city and are bused to her school don't always feel included.
- And the mayor isn't willing to listen to new ideas for fixing it all.

Mary Kate and her friends have big plans to bring lasting change to their community and beyond. And now is the time for the young people to lead and the leaders to follow—or get out of the way.

ISBN: 9781984816467

THE LETTER THAT STARTS IT ALL

Dear Parent or Guardian,

I am pleased to announce that Fisher Middle School has received a generous grant to fund a climate science pilot program this year. The class will explore how and why climate change is happening and how we can use community-based projects to take action.

Out of over a hundred application essays students submitted in March, the following rising eighth graders have been selected to participate:

*Elijah Campbell
Shawn Hill
Benjamin Lettle
Andrew Limski
Jay Mendes
Rabia Mohammed
Mary Kate Murphy
Lucy Perlman
Rebecca Phelps
Hannah Small*

Warning! This class will be a lot of work. Please

talk to your child and make sure they're ready to commit. We will still cover standard eighth-grade science concepts, but this class is not going to be "traditional." If you and your child are on board, please sign and return the attached form. Congratulations to all the students!

I can't wait to get started.

*Scientifically yours,
Ed Lu*

THE FAIRY-HOUSE VILLAGE

My climate-class acceptance letter is stuck to the refrigerator door with an E magnet, next to a picture of my new baby niece, Penelope, and a Post-it reminding Dad to buy more back-pain cream.

All the inspirational E magnet words aren't working for me right now, because I'm not *eager* or *enthusiastic* or *excited* about school starting tomorrow. My best friend, Lucy, has been sick the whole summer, and nobody knows what's wrong with her. I would have been eager, enthusiastic, and excited to be in the climate class with Lucy. Instead, I'm going to be sitting with a group of kids I barely know.

I text Lucy: **Fairy village?** But she doesn't text back, which means she's sleeping, having a really sick day, or mad at me for even asking.

I'm almost thirteen years old, and I'm going to build a fairy house by myself. But Lucy and I promised each other we would do it every year the day before school starts, for good luck, and we really need the good luck right now. So I put on my shoes, call my dogs, Murphy and Claudia, to come with me, grab my backpack, and walk out the side door.

My backyard and Lucy's backyard are separated by a huge nature preserve, which was donated to our town by a family who must have had a crystal ball and seen that if you

don't specifically say *This piece of land can never be used for anything but enjoying nature*, it will eventually turn into a Dunkin' Donuts, a car dealership, or a nail salon.

Not many people visit the preserve, probably because there aren't really trails. It's one huge chunk of beautiful land, with a sledding hill, and a meadow, and a pond, and a vernal pool in spring, and crumbling old stone walls, and woods surrounding it all.

I walk around our barn, which is now a big garage with an upstairs room, follow the path through the woods to the top of the sledding hill, and cut through the sunflowers at the edge of the meadow.

Most people wouldn't notice the fairy village if they made their way into the woods. It looks like some creature randomly dropped piles of bark and twigs. But we know. Lucy and I and the fairies have a lot of secrets hidden here.

When we were younger, we spent entire days collecting pine cones, and lost feathers, and interesting stones, and acorns, and fallen flower petals. We built fancy fairy houses and did all kinds of fairy-summoning rituals I can't remember anymore. But I don't feel like doing any of that. Right now, I want to build a house, get the good luck, and go home.

I pick up a few sturdy sticks and lean them against a fallen trunk that's covered in moss. I leave a space for the fairies to come and go, and cover the little lean-to with soft pine needles. I drop stones around the house and scatter handfuls of leaves on the roof.

It's not our best house, but it's good enough.

Sleep well, fairies, I wish. And please bring us luck.

ON THE BUS

My neighbor Molly and I have been sitting together on the bus since I was in kindergarten and she was in first grade. We used to get harassed by Molly's older brother, Danny, who calls us Frog and Toad for some reason, but Danny is living with his grandma in New York, so Frog and Toad have a break this year.

"Do you like my tank top?" I ask, sliding into the seat across from my other neighbor Will.

"I *love* your tank top," Molly says. "It really emphasizes those shoulders."

"Thank you, my queen," I say, because I'm very grateful that Molly and her friends started a protest against our school's dress code this past June, which ended with the school district letting us wear pretty much whatever we want.

"Remember how scared you were when school started last year?" Molly says, eating a granola bar. "I thought you were going to throw up."

"I wasn't looking forward to seventh grade."

What Molly doesn't know is that I wasn't scared. I was annoyed. I didn't know how I was going to go from an entire summer of frogging and tree climbing to being pushed down a crowded hallway eight times a day.

“I’m going to miss seeing you,” Molly says. “Now I’m the one about to throw up. The high school has way too many people I don’t know. Say something to distract me.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Tell me about the podcast. Are you still going to do it?”

“I doubt it.”

“Why not? It was really good.”

I don’t feel like talking about *Bearsville* with Molly. It’s embarrassing.

Will shoves his phone in our faces to show us his summer-camp girlfriend, and Molly spends the rest of the bus ride asking him questions he doesn’t know the answers to.

“Do you think you’ll see her before next summer?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is she going to camp next summer?”

“I don’t know.”

The bus stops in front of the high school, and Molly makes an *ughhh* sound.

“You’ve got this, Molls,” I say. “You’re a queen, remember?”

Will and Molly jump off the bus, and Molly runs over to her friends Navya and Bea. I watch them go into the high school as the bus rolls out of the circle toward the first day of eighth grade.

FAILURE TO LAUNCH

I tried to start a podcast this summer. It was called *All's Well in Bearville*, but I changed it to *All's Well in Bearsville* after the first episode because there's a lot more than one bear in this town. It was supposed to be about why bear hunting in our state is inhumane, and how to deal with climate change, and interesting nature stories.

The *Bearsville* idea came from Molly, who used a podcast to start the dress-code protest, and then *Dress Coded: A Podcast* ended up inspiring people all over the country to fight their school dress codes.

Bearsville, on the other hand, never really went anywhere.

Maybe it was because the state had already passed a law banning bear hunting, or because the people I interviewed used a lot of science words. My cousin in Florida said the interview with the professor about climate change and frogs was “kind of boring.” My other cousin said the questions I asked the tree expert were “too smart.” Molly said, “It's really well done, Mary Kate, but people have a lot going on in the summer.”

One of my mom's regular customers at the bookstore looked at the *Bearsville* flyer on the bulletin board and said, “I'm more of a book person than a podcast person.”

The only people who actually listened to all three episodes were my ninety-one-year-old grandmother and her roommate, Linda, in Florida, and Lucy, who gave me a lot of content ideas.

Then Lucy got sick, I got distracted, and it was easy to let go of something that had only three listeners. It might have been different if I could have actually interviewed the bears, the frogs, and the trees.

Lucy texts right as the bus is turning down the long Fisher Middle School driveway: **On the way to another 'ologist. Come over after school. Good luck.**

LUCY AND THE 'OLOGISTS

Lucy started acting strange at the end of school last year.

At first, I thought she was mad at me. Every time I asked her to meet at the pond, she said she didn't feel good and needed to take a nap. Then I was afraid she was getting sick of me, or that she maybe wanted to go hang out with her basketball friends. But then I heard my mom on the phone with her mom.

“Have you tested her for anemia?”

“What about blood sugar issues?”

“I mean, narcolepsy, but the symptoms don't add up.”

“Why would she think her food was contaminated? That's so odd. You're right. It does sound like anxiety.”

It got worse. Every time I went to her house, all she wanted to do was sleep. Then she felt better for a while, at least good enough to go down to the pond one afternoon and wait for the bats to come out. Lucy is obsessed with bats. But even then, her legs hurt, and she had shooting pains in random places and squishy sounds in her ears and blurry vision and a burning tongue. And she was constantly worried about bugs getting in her mouth, so she didn't want to talk.

“I'm going home to sleep a little,” she said. “I'll be back for the bats.”

She was never back for the bats.

Lucy went to a psychiatrist (a mental health doctor) because she doesn't want to do anything or talk to anyone, and she's not herself *at all*. They gave her anxiety medicine that hasn't helped.

She went to a neurologist (a brain doctor) because she's forgetting words and now she has a thing where she jerks her arms and blinks her eyes over and over again.

Then a gastroenterologist (a stomach doctor) because onions and milk and a lot of other foods make her nauseated.

And a rheumatologist (a joint doctor) because her whole body hurts.

Nobody knows what's wrong with Lucy.

Today she's going to a urologist. She doesn't know that I know, but I overheard my mom talking to her mom again. It's scary and embarrassing, and I'll never tell anyone, but Lucy has been wetting the bed.

Before the last 'ologist appointment, Lucy said, "No matter what, Mare, I'm going to school. I'm not making you walk into that place alone."

That was a week ago. "No matter what" has come and gone.

THAT PLACE

“That place” is Fisher Middle School, which seems smaller today, for some reason.

The bus stops in front of the school, and I catch up with Talia, who is sitting a couple rows in front of me, before getting off. Then we follow everyone to the Kindness Garden, where Fisher students drop rocks with inspiring words painted on them before they start seventh grade. My word was so boring, I don’t even remember it.

The new superintendent, Dr. Eastman, bursts out of the office wearing a black jumpsuit and yellow high heels and carrying a **LET’S MAKE MAGIC THIS YEAR** sign. She has strong witch vibes, and I like it.

She introduces our new principal, Ms. Singh, who has smiled more in the past three minutes than our old principal did in a year.

“Dr. Eastman seems so nice,” Talia says. “I like her Southern accent.”

Talia was part of the dress-code protest last year, which a lot of people think was the thing that drove out the old principal and his sidekick, a woman we called Fingertip. I’m pretty sure they’re right.

“And this, friends, is Mr. Joe, our new dean of students,” the superintendent says, putting her hand on Mr.

Joe's shoulder. "Is somebody giving you a hard time? Are you having a tough interpersonal issue? If so, go to Joe."

I give Talia a good-luck hug, find my locker, then walk to gym, where we introduce ourselves and say one thing we did over the summer: "I'm Mary Kate Murphy, and I visited my sister, Sarah, in Boston and met my new baby niece, Penelope." In math, we throw a ball of yarn around the class and have to say a fun fact about ourselves when we catch it. Wow. Now I know Ben Lettle's favorite color is brown.

I'm on my way to English when I run into big block letters that say **CONGRATULATIONS TO OUR CLIMATE CLASS FOR THESE WINNING ESSAYS**. Somebody thought it would be a good idea to hang our climate-class application essays on a bulletin board. Now the whole school can read about my weirdness whenever they walk by.

CLIMATE CLASS APPLICATION ESSAY

MARY KATE MURPHY

We always hear about climate change and polar bears, and that's very upsetting and devastating because polar bears are starving to death and turning to cannibalism. But I want to talk about the bears that live in my backyard.

Most people don't realize how many bears live in the middle of Connecticut. Our town has more bears than nearly any other town. I observe them all the time, especially a few different families that have been coming around for a while.

When I was little, the bears would always feed in this area of the Honey Hill Preserve that had a lot of wild blackberry bushes. I'm only twelve, but just in my lifetime I've seen the bushes ripening earlier and earlier with fewer and fewer berries. The bears have to look for other sources of food, and that means they are going to garbage cans and ending up on Facebook posts with people complaining about how annoying the bears are, which makes people want to start shooting them.

If you do an online search of nearly any plant or animal on Earth and then "climate change impact," you'll see ways entire ecosystems are being disrupted by climate change. But I don't need to look it up because I see it with my own eyes, with blackberries, bears, salamanders and frogs, plants and bees and butterflies. I'm not exaggerating. It's all changing every year.

If you accept me into the climate class, I would like to learn more about the changes I'm seeing in my backyard and how to stop them before all the creatures I actually care about are gone, because I consider these creatures my friends.

THIRD PERIOD

I'm still trying to get used to having only eight students in English class. There was a problem with the schedule, and now the people in my English class third period are the same people in my climate class eighth period. There's supposed to be ten of us, but Lucy is sick and Andrew Limski was forced to drop out of the pilot program because, according to Jay, his parents didn't think the climate class sounded challenging enough.

I watch everyone come in and sit in the circle of desks.

Ben Lettle grew a half mustache over the summer. Maybe his parents don't think he's ready to handle a razor. I get it. The bathtub scene whenever I try to shave my legs looks like the time Dad tried to blend tomatoes and forgot to put the top on the blender.

Elijah Campbell is wearing a bumblebee bow tie.

Shawn Hill grew, like, a foot since seventh grade and got glasses.

Rabia Mohammed's wearing the shoes I wanted, but Dad said what he always says: "That's too steep for our budget."

Jay Mendes has a green bruise on his forehead from playing soccer. (That was his fun fact in math.)

Hannah Small and Rebecca Phelps are whispering. This is eighth-grade code for *We hung out together at the pool*

club over the summer, and now we have secrets.

Our English teacher, Ms. Lane, takes attendance. Ms. Lane has always been just Charlotte to me. She was one of the first people on earth I ever met. She and my sister, Sarah, who happens to be eighteen years older than me, have been best friends most of their lives, and Sarah brought Charlotte to the hospital after I was born to meet me.

“Today we begin our letter-writing project,” Ms. Lane says.

“Seriously? Pen pals again?” Elijah says. “They literally never write back.”

“No, not pen pals, Elijah.” She goes to her desk, pulls a folded piece of yellow lined paper from her bag, and starts to read:

Dear Charlotte,

I really miss summer vacation. Ms. Milholland is making us write letters to ourselves, which seems weird, but whatever. She says she’s not going to read the letters and they’re for us to keep and read when we grow up. I trust her. She’s pretty cool. I’m making an announcement that I haven’t even told Sarah. I think I’m in love with Greg Johnson. Like, he’s as perfect as a boy can be. He’s got dimples, and he’s taller than me. He’s kind of like Leonardo DiCaprio from Titanic, but hotter. Why does he have to be sixteen? Why is life so unfair? Bell ringing.

Love

Me

We stare at her.

“That, my friends, was classic Ms. Lane in eighth grade. And I’m sharing it with you because, as embarrassing as it is, I adore these letters. I should also point out there’s no comma between ‘Love’ and ‘Me,’ which is a good example of how a comma changes everything.”

“Oh, I get it,” Rebecca says, laughing.

“Ms. Milholland made us write a letter to ourselves every month the entire year, and, whoa—the drama, the failed romance, the puberty complaints. It was nice to get it all down on paper and let it go,” Ms. Lane says. “You’re next. You’re going to write a letter to yourselves at the beginning of every month for the whole school year. I’ll collect the letters, but I won’t read them. You have my word. I have enough drama in my life.”

Hannah raises her hand. “Where’s Greg Johnson now?”

Ms. Lane smiles. “I have no idea. I think that crush only lasted until the next letter. So, you have your homework assignment. Let’s move on to poetry. My favorite.”

“Ms. Lane, who are they going to get to replace you if you win the election?” Elijah asks. “It’s in November, right?”

Ms. Lane is also running for mayor of our town, against a guy named Brent Grimley, who has been the mayor my entire life—and, according to my parents, has accomplished absolutely nothing.

Ms. Lane laughs. “Yes, Election Day is always the first Tuesday in November. I appreciate all the interest around my campaign, including the suggestion from another class that we turn my classroom into my campaign headquarters,

but I'm making a firm rule: no discussing the campaign in school. I don't think it's appropriate."

She writes *No Election Talk!* in cursive on a giant hot-pink Post-it and sticks it to the board.

"They're going to get Mr. Linkler, the sub, aren't they?" Elijah says.

"Okay, last thing I'll say is that *if* I were to win, it's a part-time job. So I'll still be your devoted teacher."

"Oh, wow. Mayor is definitely not part-time in Hartford," Shawn says.

"That's because they have a lot of crime in Hartford," Ben says.

"Okay, Ben," Shawn says. "That's why."

"Well, isn't that why the Hartford kids want to go to school here?" Ben asks.

Shawn is one of the Hartford kids.

"You know better than to say something like that, Ben," Ms. Lane says.

"Like what?" Ben says.

"Let's move on," Ms. Lane says, shaking her head.

THE HARTFORD KIDS

I don't know much about the Hartford kids, other than that they live in Hartford, which is a city, like, twenty minutes away from Honey Hill. Their parents had the choice to send them to Hartford schools or bus them to schools in the suburbs, and they chose the suburbs. The Hartford kids pretty much hang out with each other, and eat lunch together, probably because they all ride the same bus to Hartford. Honey Hill is a very white town, so my parents always say, "It's nice we have a program that brings some people of color to the schools. We're big supporters of diversity."

AT LUNCH

With Lucy home sick, I don't even try to figure out who to sit with in the cafeteria. I go straight to the library.

"Hey, Murphy. How's the day going?" Mr. Beam, the librarian, says with his mouth full of cookie.

"Good."

Mr. Beam and I made an arrangement back in June when Lucy started missing school and I started eating in the library: thirty seconds of small talk, then I do homework and Mr. Beam scrolls through Twitter.

"Tell me one good thing and one lousy thing about your summer," Mr. Beam says.

"Um. The good thing is that my sister, Sarah, had a baby named Penelope, and they're coming here this weekend to get Penelope baptized, and I can't wait to see her. I only saw her when she was a few hours old, and she was sleeping the whole time."

"Congratulations. That's wonderful news."

"And the bad thing is that Lucy is still sick, obviously."

He gives me a pity look. "I'm sorry to hear that. I'll keep her in my thoughts."

"Thanks, Mr. Beam. What about you?"

"Well, let's see. The good thing is that I got to spend a couple weeks at the lake. The bad thing is that it poured the

whole time. But it wasn't that bad, because I read a ton of books."

"I should read books," I say. "I pretty much stopped reading in sixth grade."

"I'll get you reading, Murphy. You just need to find the right book."

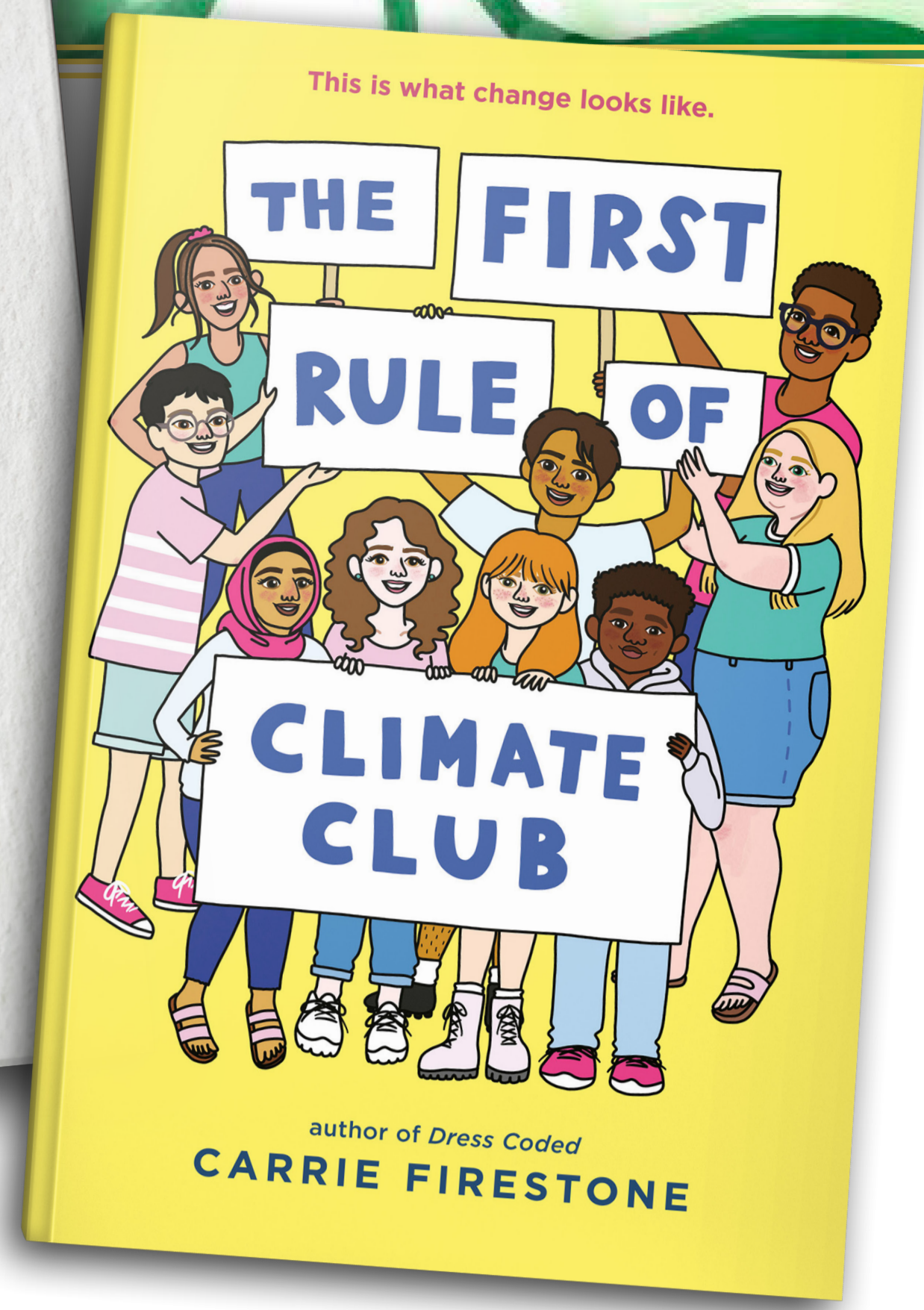
I take out my yogurt and spoon, open my English binder, and try to figure out how to write a letter to myself.

"We still doing the thirty-second small-talk rule?" Mr. Beam says.

"Yeah. I think that makes sense."

The First Rule of Climate Club

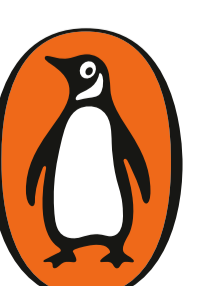
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